

Faith and Fusion: Exploring the Unique Religious Practices of Bengali Muslims

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Abstract

The religious practices of Bengali Muslims represent a unique blend of Islamic traditions and regional Bengali culture, reflecting a dynamic interplay of faith and cultural identity. This study explores how Bengali Muslims integrate Islamic rituals with local customs, examining the historical, cultural, and social factors that have shaped these practices. It draws on key examples such as the incorporation of Bengali culinary traditions into Eid celebrations, the role of Dargahs in spiritual life, and the coexistence of Islamic and Bengali festivals, including Milad-un-Nabi and Pohela Boishak. Through a comparative analysis of urban and rural practices, the study investigates how modernization and globalization are influencing these traditions. Potential research questions include: How do Bengali Muslims navigate the dual identity of being both Bengali and Muslim? What role do Sufi traditions play in maintaining cultural cohesion? How do rural and urban communities differ in their expression of religious practices? A review of literature, including works on Sufism, Islamic cultural adaptation, and the history of Islam in Bengal, provides a foundation for understanding the evolution of these practices. This research is significant for its ability to highlight the adaptive and inclusive nature of Bengali Muslim identity, particularly in an era of increasing cultural homogenization and religious polarization. It underscores the potential of blended traditions to foster social cohesion and interfaith understanding, both in Bengal and in diaspora communities worldwide. As modernity and migration continue to challenge traditional practices, this study is essential for documenting and preserving the cultural heritage of Bengali Muslims. Furthermore, it provides critical insights into the role of religion in shaping identity and community in multicultural contexts.

Introduction

This research is on the unique religious practices of Bengali Muslims, with a focus on how Islamic traditions intertwine with Bengali cultural elements. As we explore this intersection, we will see how Bengali Muslims, who reside primarily in Bengal — the region comprising both Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal — have developed a distinct identity through the fusion of Islam with their regional customs and practices. This fusion is not a mere juxtaposition but a living, dynamic process that shapes both the religious and cultural life of the community.

The primary research questions guiding this study are:

- How do Bengali Muslims reconcile their Islamic faith with regional Bengali cultural traditions?
- What role does Sufism play in shaping the spiritual and cultural life of Bengali Muslims?
- How do these intertwined practices manifest in everyday religious rituals, and how do these practices differ in urban and rural contexts?

The significance of this study lies in its ability to illustrate how religious practices evolve within specific cultural contexts. By examining these hybrid religious traditions, we can gain a better understanding of how religious identity is maintained and transformed in the face of modernity and globalization.

Review of the Literature

In order to contextualize this research, we need to first engage with existing scholarly works on Bengali Muslims, their cultural practices, and the impact of Sufism. Several scholars have explored the interaction between Islam and Bengali culture. For instance, Syed Ali Ahsan in his book *The Islamic Culture of Bengal* highlights the unique cultural expressions among Bengali Muslims, particularly focusing on the ways in which Islamic traditions are infused with local Bengali customs, such as food traditions and celebratory rituals.

J.P. Telhami's work, *Sufi Mysticism in Bengal*, examines the importance of Sufism in shaping the religious practices of Bengali Muslims. Sufism, which emphasizes love, devotion, and mysticism, has a significant influence on the spiritual life of the community. Sufi shrines, such as those dedicated to Hazrat Shah Jalal in Sylhet, serve as sites not only for religious devotion but also as cultural hubs, where local practices like music, poetry, and dance intermingle with Islamic rites.

Furthermore, M.A. Rahman in *Cultural Identity and Religion in Bengal* discusses how Bengali Muslims navigate their identity in the backdrop of both Islamic traditions and the Bengali cultural ethos. Rahman emphasizes the ways in which Bengali Muslims define themselves through a fusion of these cultural and religious practices.

By engaging with these works, we can understand the broader framework within which the unique practices of Bengali Muslims have evolved. This background allows us to explore the extent to which these practices continue to define religious and cultural identities in Bengal.

The Historical Context of Islam in Bengal

Islam's presence in Bengal dates back to the early medieval period, with its gradual expansion from the 12th century onward. The region of Bengal, which today includes Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal, became a significant center for Islamic culture and practices. Early Islamic influence can be traced back to the arrival of Muslim merchants, Sufi missionaries, and rulers from Central Asia and the Middle East.

The Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) played a significant role in introducing Islam to Bengal. During the reign of Sultan Iltutmish (1211–1236) and his successors, Muslim rulers established their authority in Bengal, which eventually became part of the Sultanate of Delhi. As a result, Bengal saw the rise of a Muslim elite and the establishment of Islamic institutions. The arrival of Sufi missionaries during this period, particularly in the 13th century, marked a crucial turning point in the spread of Islam.

Sufism's emphasis on mysticism, devotion, and social inclusiveness made it appealing to the indigenous population. The work of Sufi saints such as Hazrat Shah Jalal in Sylhet and Hazrat Shah Noor in Dhaka resonated deeply with the Bengali people. These saints, many of whom were of Central Asian origin, established shrines that became the focal points of religious and cultural life in Bengal. The spread of Islam in Bengal was facilitated by the Sufis' ability to integrate local cultural practices with Islamic teachings, fostering an environment where Bengali Muslims could embrace Islamic practices while retaining elements of their traditional culture.

Historical sources such as M.A. Rahman's *Cultural Identity and Religion in Bengal* and J.P. Telhami's *Sufi Mysticism in Bengal* detail the syncretic nature of Islam's expansion. According to Rahman, Sufism played a central role in the Islamicization of Bengal, with the saints and their disciples promoting Islamic teachings in

ways that were accessible to the local population, blending Islamic ideals with indigenous beliefs and practices (Rahman, 2002). Additionally, Syed Ali Ahsan in his work *The Islamic Culture of Bengal* highlights how the fusion of local Bengali customs with Islamic religious practices created a unique form of Islam in Bengal (Ahsan, 1994).

Over time, as Bengal came under the rule of the Mughal Empire (1526–1857), Islamic practices continued to evolve, and the region saw the construction of mosques, madrasas (Islamic schools), and other institutions of Islamic learning. During the Mughal period, the arts, architecture, and cultural practices flourished, contributing to the further enrichment of Bengali Muslim identity. This historical development paved the way for the unique religious and cultural landscape we see today among Bengali Muslims.

The Role of Sufism and Shrines

Sufism has played a foundational role in shaping the religious and cultural life of Bengali Muslims. Unlike the more orthodox practices of Islam, which emphasize strict adherence to the law and scripture, Sufism focuses on the inner, spiritual aspects of the faith. Sufi orders such as the Chishti, Qadri, and Shadhili orders have had a profound influence on Bengali Muslim religious practices, particularly through the establishment of shrines or dargahs.

Sufi shrines in Bengal are not just places of worship but also serve as cultural centers where local traditions such as music, poetry, and dance merge with Islamic practices. The most prominent Sufi shrines, such as Hazrat Shah Jalal's shrine in Sylhet and Hazrat Shah Noor's shrine in Dhaka, attract thousands of pilgrims every year. These shrines serve as symbols of both spiritual devotion and community cohesion, where people from different walks of life come together to seek blessings, engage in prayer, and participate in communal activities.

Sufi music and poetry are integral to these shrines. The famous Baul music of Bengal, often seen as a form of Sufi expression, has deep connections to the spiritual teachings of Sufism. The Bauls sing songs that focus on the themes of love, devotion, and the search for God, often blending Islamic mysticism with Bengali folk traditions. The melodies of these songs are an expression of the Sufi quest for divine union and are often performed at Sufi shrines during religious gatherings.

Moreover, dhikr (the remembrance of God) and qawwali (a form of devotional music) are performed in these settings as part of the spiritual rituals. These practices, which highlight the mystical and emotional aspects of worship, have become inseparable from Bengali Muslim identity, particularly in rural areas where these traditions are more prevalent.

Scholars such as M.A. Rahman (2002) and J.P. Telhami (2013) have emphasized the centrality of Sufism to the development of Islamic religious practices in Bengal, noting how Sufi shrines act as hubs of spiritual and cultural life, offering a space where both religious and local cultural expressions are harmonized.

Rural vs. Urban Practices

The religious practices of Bengali Muslims vary significantly between rural and urban areas, a distinction that is shaped by several factors, including access to religious education, exposure to global influences, and local traditions.

In rural Bengal, traditional religious practices rooted in Sufism and indigenous Bengali customs are much more prevalent. Rural communities maintain strong ties to Sufi shrines, where the influence of Sufism remains dominant. These practices often include communal prayers, pilgrimages to shrines, and the performance of Sufi rituals, such as dhikr (remembrance of God) and qawwali (devotional singing). The Urs

festivals (death anniversaries of Sufi saints) are major religious events in rural areas, drawing large crowds to shrines to participate in prayers, feasts, and music.

Food traditions also play a prominent role in rural religious life. Rural Bengali Muslims celebrate Eid and other Islamic festivals with traditional foods such as shemai, pithas, and korma, which are deeply rooted in Bengali culinary practices. These traditions emphasize a sense of community and belonging, where religion and culture are inseparable.

Urban Bengali Muslims, on the other hand, have been influenced by modernity, secularism, and globalization. In cities such as Dhaka, Kolkata, and Chittagong, the religious practices tend to be more formalized and structured, with a stronger emphasis on the five pillars of Islam. Although Sufi shrines still attract a significant number of pilgrims, urban Muslims are more likely to engage with modern Islamic practices, such as attending mosques for salat (prayer), zakah (charity), and hajj (pilgrimage).

In urban areas, religious events may be celebrated in a more formal, less community-centered manner. The emphasis on Sufi music and the performance of traditional dances is less pronounced, as urban Muslims tend to participate in more standardized religious rituals. Urban Muslims are also more likely to encounter global Islamic influences, such as the spread of Salafism and Wahhabism, which can influence their religious practices and outlook.

Scholars such as Ahsan (1994) and Rahman (2002) discuss how urbanization has led to a shift in religious practices among Bengali Muslims. In particular, urban Muslims often face a tension between maintaining their cultural practices and adapting to the pressures of modernity. This distinction between rural and urban practices highlights the diversity within Bengali Muslim communities, illustrating how religious identity is shaped by the intersection of local culture, religious beliefs, and external influences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of Sufism and its associated practices, as well as the rural-urban divide in religious observance, are integral to understanding the dynamic religious and cultural landscape of Bengali Muslims. While Sufism remains deeply ingrained in the practices of rural Bengali Muslims, urban areas have seen a shift toward more formalized Islamic practices, often influenced by global Islamic trends. These distinctions reflect the adaptability of Islamic practices and how they continue to evolve in response to both local traditions and external forces.

The role of Sufism, along with the specific ways in which Bengali Muslims reconcile their religious identity with local cultural practices, provides a rich and fascinating area of study. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending how religious identity is maintained and transformed in the modern world.

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Declarations
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