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Establishing Peace through a Mystic Journey towards *Fana*: An Ethnographic Study on the Sufi Culture of Maizbhandar in Chittagong, Bangladesh

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Abstract- This paper examined the Sufi culture of Maizbhandar. Sufism is the spiritual and mystical branch of Islam with a concrete system of belief, customs, and practices. It also focuses on the belief, traditions and practices of Maizbhandari Sufi culture. Maizbhandar has millions of followers who follow this Sufi culture. An ethnographic approach has been applied to conduct the study. The center of Maizbhandar (Fatikcchari, Chittagong) was the site (field) of the study. There were 30 in-depth interview respondents, 18 focus group discussion respondents, and 1 key informant of the research. All of them were selected through purposive sampling. Qualitative data were collected from the respondents, and a thematic analysis method was used for data analysis. The findings of the study include the beliefs, traditions, practices, major events, and the gender dimension of Maizbhandari Sufi culture in detail. The paper concludes that their culture is associated with love, peace, patience, and humanity, which can make a more peaceful and harmonious society.

I. Introduction

Sufism refers to the spiritual and mystical branch of Islam (Peeran, 2012) which is associated with the union with divine and unitary beloved (Peeran, 2015). According to Sabra, Sufism can also be considered a concrete system of belief, customs, and practices and can influence every aspect of our life (Sabra, 2021). Sufis have mystical knowledge about self, creation and universe (Ali, 2019). The Sufi saints were involved in the process of spreading Islam in Bengal. Through their religious and missionary zeal, exemplary character and humanitarian activities, they greatly influenced the mind of the masses and attracted them to the faith of Islam (Masud, 2017).

In Bangladesh, people came in contact with Islam through the contribution of Sufis who spread Islam in this region with love, affection, sacrifice and humanitarian activities. There are many Sufi tariqas such as Qadiriyya, Chisthiyya, Naqshbandiyya, Suhrawardiyya, Kubriya, and Shadhiliin Bangladesh (Numani & Chowdhury, 2021) most of which were imported from other regions. In contrast, Maizbhandari Sufi Tariqa, having a rich Sufi culture with its tradition, music, literature and practices, is the only one to have originated and established in Bangladesh. (Nabi, 2011) This tariqa has successfully influenced millions of followers all over the country positively. Sufism is associated with renunciation (zuhd), patience (sabr), sacrifice and love (Al Hujwiri, 1976; Al Qushayri, 1940; Ghazali, Year not found) and Maizbhandari Sufi culture also nurtures these characteristics. This paper explored the Sufi culture of Maizbhandar through an ethnographic approach.

The main objective of the study was to understand the Maizbhandari Sufi culture. There are some specific objectives as well and those are:

1. To explore the traditions and practices of Maizbhandari followers.
2. To know about the belief system of the Sufi Culture of Maizbhandar.
3. To find out the major events and festivals of the Sufi culture of Maizbhandar.
4. To understand the gender dimension of the Sufi culture of Maizbhandar.

Maizbhandri Sufi culture has such a great impact among the followers that it is essential to explore the culture.

II. Literature Review

Sufism refers to the spiritual and mystical branch of Islam (Peeran, 2012) which is associated with the union with divine and unitary beloved (Peeran, 2015). According to Sabra, Sufism can also be considered a concrete system of beliefs, customs and practices and can influence every aspect of our life (Sabra, 2021). Sufism tries to unite people on the basis of equality, brotherhood, and social justice (Yakhyaevich, 2020). It is the abandonment of the desire of *Nafs* (self) (Arifah, 2018). Sufis provide different mystical descriptions to the followers (Sidik, 2018). Sufism originated from Arab with the establishment of Islam and later spread all over the world (Yakhyaevich, 2020). The Sufi leaders discovered the subcontinental region through the help of the Muslim traders and they started to came here to spread Islam. (Syatori, 2019; Khan & Bano, 2020).

There are different explanations for the origin of the word Sufi. Most scholars accepted that the word Sufi originated from "Souf" which means woolen dress.

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(Al Hujwiri, 1976; Al Qushayri, 1940; Ghazali, n.d.). The Sufis used to wear "Souf " or woolen dress and that's why they were called Sufi. This dress is a symbol of self scolding (Coppens, 2018). However, many scholars demonstrated that the word Sufi came from the group of companions of the Holy Prophet (Shahabi) called Ashabi-Safa. In the Quran, Sufis are mentioned as Sabirin (patient men), Abrar (virtuous men), Zuhhad (pious men) (Melchert, 2016).

The main goal of every Sufi follower is to purify themselves (*nafs*). They are less concerned about the objective world and even most of the Sufis, especially in the classic period, did not own any property. Wealth, property, fame all are contrary to spiritual perfection. Those individuals (*nafs*) are lowest in quality that seeks wealth, property, and fame (Qudsi, 2021). Sufism is all about zuhd (renunciation), sabr (patience), sacrifice and love (Al Hujwiri, 1976; Al Qushayri, 1940; Ghazali, n.d.). Sufis do zikr (recite) with Sufi music to purify the soul (Schmeding, 2021). Thus, a Sufi follower reaches the destination of Fana where he has total control over himself and converts all of his wills with the divine will of almighty God (Al Hujwiri, 1976).

Islam was brought into South Asia by the merchants and warriors but it was the Sufis who played pivotal part in preaching and establishing the core teachings of Islam. Sufis interacted with the indigenous people and influenced their beliefs and thoughts. Thus, Islamization occurred in the south Asian region (Ujampady et al., 2020). Tasawwuf (Sufism) is not new in this country as it has a thousand year old history (Nabi, 2011). There are many Sufi Tariqas (Schools of practice) (Khumidovich et. al., 2021) like Qadiriyya, Chisthiyya, Naqshbandiyya, Suhrawardiyya, Kubriya, and Shadhili in Bangladesh (Numani & Chowdhury, 2021). It is not the sword that spread Islam instead, it is the Sufis of different tariqas who established Islam in Bangladesh (Haq, 2019) and during the 12th century, Sufism started to blossom as many people of Bangladesh accepted Islam (Ali, 1985). Sufis had attracted the people with their humble interaction and social justice and thus, Sufis were successful in creating a concrete brotherhood (Haq, 1975).

Tariqa e Qadiriyya is the biggest and most accepted tariqa in the world. This tariqa is founded by Sheikh Abdul Qadir Gilani who has the highest status of Sufis: Ghous ul Azam. He was from the progeny of the Holy Prophet (Peace be upon him). The Sufis of Qadiriyya tariqa came to many parts of the country (Ahsan, 1994). Tariqa e Maizbhandariyya has its root in Tariqa e Qadiriyya.

Tariqa e Maizbhandariyya is the only tariqa to have evolved and spread in Bangladesh. None of the tariqa was founded in Bangladesh including Qadiriyya, Chisthiyya, Naqshbandiyya, Suhrawardiyya, and Shadhili etc. This tariqa was founded by Huzur Ghous ul Azam Shah Ahmad Ullah Maizbhandari and carried out by his nephew Huzur Ghous ul Azam Shah Golam ur Rahman Maizbhandari, who is very famous by the name Baba Bhandari (Nabi, 2011).

Ghous ul Azam Maizbhandari is the direct (27th) descendant of the Holy Prophet (Peace be upon him). His progeny is linked with Shah Hamid Uddin Ghouri, who was from the descendants of Abdul Qadir Gilani. Shah Hamid Uddin Ghouri came to Bangladesh from Baghdad more than five hundred years ago. Later on, his grandsons were settled in Fatikchhari, Chittagong. The village was called Maizbhandar which is the root of name of Tariqa e Maizbhandariyya. (Nabi, 2011).

This Sufi institution has such a significant impact on the belief and practice system of the people of Bangladesh that one would hardly find a village in this country where there are no Maizbhandari followers (Nabi, 2011). Sufism can influence our psychology (Kim, 2020) and Maizbhandar has also done it. Maizbhandar has its own Sufi culture, literature, music, festivals, etc. which are attached to the life of the Maizbhandari followers (Nabi, 2011).

III. Methods

To reach the objectives of our study, we have used a qualitative method: ethnography. Ethnography is widely used to explore cultural phenomena in the research world. Our research objectives are based on the Sufi culture of Maizbhandar. That is why; we found ethnography the best suited approach to complete the study.

a) Setting the Research Area

This study was conducted in a village called Maizbhandar situated at Fatikchhari in Chittagong, Bangladesh. As we wanted to explore the Sufi culture of Maizbhandar, we selected the head center of the Sufi tariqa. We entered that place with the help of our gatekeeper, a Sufi master and the key informant of our study.

b) Study Population

We have taken 30 in-depth interviews of the Maizbhandari followers during our ethnographic fieldwork. We also conducted three focus group discussions of 6 respondents and 1 key informant interview (KII), a Maizbhandari Sufi master. We have collected only qualitative data from our respondents. The KII helped us to have a more concrete understanding about the Sufi culture of Maizbhandar.

c) Sampling Procedure

We used purposive sampling which is a non-probability sampling method. We selected our respondents purposively, based on their potential ability to provide a clear and detailed insight about the Sufi culture of Maizbhandar. All the respondents of our study were aged 30 or more because it would be difficult for

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the teenagers to provide us a proper insight of their culture.

d) Data Collection

We collected the data from 5 December 2021 to 30 December 2021. During this time, we stayed at our selected research site: Maizbhandar, Fatikchhari, Chittagong. We prepared an open ended questionnaire based on our research objectives. We entered there for our data collection with the help of our gatekeeper, who is a Sufi master, to whom we were previously known. We selected our respondents from his followers. Then we described to them the purpose of our study to build trust. At first, we arranged a time slot for our 30 respondents to take their in-depth interview and also fixed a slot and place for three focus group discussions of 18 respondents. We took the interview of the key informant in several slots whenever we got the opportunity to talk to him as we were staying in his place during our fieldwork.

All the interviews were conducted in Bengali. Later on, we translated them into English and tried to keep the data as authentic as possible while translating them. The duration of the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were around 1.5 hours. Besides taking field notes, we recorded all the interviews on a mobile phone with the consent of the respondents.

e) Data Analysis

We have used a qualitative thematic method to analyze the data that we got from the fieldwork. First of all, we made a transcript for each of the interviews. Then, we finalized the data by reading and re-reading. After that we started coding and categorizing our codes. Based on that, we made our themes for the data analysis. We managed and analyzed all the data manually.

f) Ethical Consideration

Ethical guidelines are a very crucial part of every academic research. We took the informed consent from each of the participants before data collection. We took their written consent about their participation in this study. Besides, we also ensured that every single unit of data would be secured and their name and identity would not be mentioned. We also requested them to give us permission to record their interviews and everyone agreed. We also assured that after the procedure is complete, we would destroy the recorded data and we must not disclose their name or identity in the transcript.

IV. Findings

The findings of the study include socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, the beliefs, traditions, practices and major events of Maizbhandari Sufi culture. The findings are written under the themes that were developed based on the data by coding and categorizing. Thematically, the findings are presented in this section.

a) Socio-Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic information of our total 49 respondents. Among them 29 were male and 20 were female. 14 of them aged from 30-40, while 15 of them aged from 40-50 and 20 were over 50. All the respondents of this study were married. 41 respondents were literate and 8 were illiterate. We have also presented the number of respondents in Pie Chart 1.

b) Belief System

Belief is considered the core of every religion. The belief of Maizbhandari followers is based on the principles of "Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat " and Hanafi school of jurisprudence (fiqh). They have proper submission to the major principles of Islam and they comply with all the beliefs and rituals that are legal in Islami Shariah. Shahzada Syed Saifuddin Ahmed al Hasani wal Husaini (31st descendent of Holy Prophet Slw) said: "Without following Shariah properly, no one can be a Sufi."

Like all other Sufi cultures, Maizbhandar tariqa also strictly emphasizes the proper submission of the followers to the Sufi Masters (Shaykh/Murshid). They believe that by surrendering to their master accordingly they can get the proximity (Qurbat) of Allah and his Holy Prophet (PBUH). One of our respondents of in-depth interview (IDI-3) reported:

> "We believe that our Murshid (Master) is Wali-Allah (Friends of Allah). On top of that, he is also the direct descendent of Holy Prophet (PBUH). Our priority is to achieve the stage of Fana- fis- Shaykh (by destroying his own will for the master) because without that we cannot get Allah. Allah said in the Quran that his mercy is near to the Muhsinin (Good doers). So, we show boundless and deep love for our Murshid and seek mercy."

Their notion of salvation is not about heaven; they are concerned about the union with the beloved (the creator). This optimistic journey of being united starts with Fana-Fis-Shaykh (Highest devotion for the master) through Fana-Fir-Rasuland (Highest devotion for the Holy Prophet) and ends with Fana-Fillah (Merging self with God). To achieve so they first follow all the orders and advice of their master. As the Sufi masters of Maizbhandar are from the progeny of the Holy Prophet, people try to show the highest respect for them. It is a non-separable part of Islamic belief to love each and every descendant of the Holy Prophet (PBUH).

They also believe that Ghous ul Azam Maizbhandari and Ghous ul Azam Bababhandari can help them with their spiritual power as they are the wali of Allah (Friends of Allah). I have observed during my fieldwork that they pray to Allah by the wasila (recommendation) of Ghous ul Azam Maizbhandari and

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their masters. Our 1st respondent of in-depth interview said:

> "My Ghous ul Azam Maizbhandari has the highest status for helping anyone in this universe. What I want from my heart he gives me. It is his Qaramot."

The Maizbhandari Sufi beliefs are based on love, peace, patience, sacrifice and humanity. There is no scope for fundamentalism or extremism in Maizbhandar. The Sufi masters teach them how to love people and not to hate, and how to sacrifice. Huzur Ghous ul Wara said, "We cannot hate anyone and every human being is like my own child" (I heard this speech in a video clip).

Maizbhandar Sharif is open to everyone- even for the followers of other religions. This is the symbol of being nonsectarian and liberal which is one of the main parts of their belief system.

c) Traditional Sufi Music (Sema) and Zikr

Maizbhandari Sufi culture is a traditional one which is more than two hundred years old. Their culture is associated with so many Sufi traditions. These traditions are carried and followed by the Maizbhandari followers.

Maizbhandari Song (Sema): Sema (Islamic song like Qwwali) is a tradition of Maizbhandar which is very popular in many parts of the country. Maizbhandar Sharif has a rich tradition of folk songs as well. One of our respondents (IDI-1) noted:

> "Sema is the word of soul which helps you transcend the mundane world. We have been doing it traditionally with the presence of our Sufi masters. Though the fundamentalists argue that music is prohibited in Islam, they are wrong as Holy Prophet also listened to Islamic songs with Daff (a special kind of drum which is open by one side). We have many Maizbhandari songwriters who are very popular in every part of Bangladesh. Among them Ramesh Shil and Gofur Hali are the most popular writers. For example, 'Ghous ul Azam Maizbhandari School Khuilase' is a very popular Maizbhandari song in our country. We do sema for purifying and perfecting our souls. Even scholars like Jalaluddin Rumi composed and performed Islamic music."

The Sema tradition of Maizbhandar is closely linked with the rural people of Bangladesh. The Maizbhandari followers enjoy it so much and perform it for the development of their souls. It is a vital part of the socio-cultural element of Maizbhandar.

Another thing is their Sufi zikr (loudly taking the name of Allah). Maizbhandari followers perform Zikr in a very unique and specific manner. They use musical instruments in their Zikr. It is similar to Sema music. With the tempo of the music they collectively pronounce the name of Allah. They also do Sufi dance with the Zikr. They jump while doing the Zikr with the tempo and this is the traditional Sufi dance of Maizbhandar. One of our FGD respondents said:

> "Performing Zikr and dancing together with sema is divine and transcendental. It takes me out of this ordinary tangible objective world. Losing myself in order to feel Allah's grace brings supernatural joy to my mind. An indescribable happiness works within me."

This Zikr is also done by them for their perfection of soul. During the festivals or occasions they specially perform this Zikr. There are some conditions for joining this zikr which are described by our FGD respondents and those are:

- Someone who does not say their prayers (Salah) cannot join;
- Someone who does not believe in Sufi zikr cannot join;
- Women must participate separately with other women; they are not allowed to attend the Sema with men;
- No older people (with potentiality of getting sick) can join;
- Someone who consumes any kind of drug cannot join;
- Someone who does not understand the eternal value of this Sufi zikr is not allowed to join;
- If one of the followers stands up while doing Zikr, everybody should stand up; and
- No child can join.

d) Major events and Festivals

There are a good number of programs that are celebrated by the Maizbhandari followers. They celebrate the birthday, which they call "Khosh Roj Shorif," of their Sufi masters. They also celebrate the day when their Sufi master passed away from this world which is called Urs (Union with the beloved Allah). People come from different parts of the country to join these events in order to celebrate. We have pointed out the major events of Maizbhandar based on our FGD respondents.

1. The Urs of Ghous ul Azam Shah Sufi Syed Ahmad Ullah Al Maizbhandari (10th of Magh).
2. The Urs of Ghosh ul Azam Shah Sufi Syed Golamur Rahman Baba vandari (22nd Chaitra).
3. Birthday (Khosh Roj Shorif) of Ghosh ul Azam Shah Sufi Syed Golamur Rahman Baba vandari (29th Ashwin).
4. Urs of Ghosh e Zaman Shah Sufi Syed Abul Bashar Maizbhandari and victory day of Bangladesh (16th December).
5. Birthday of Huzur Ghous ul Wara Shah Sufi Syed Mainuddin Ahmed Maizbhandari (27th Magh).
6. Urs of Huzur Ghous ul Wara Shah Sufi Syed Mainuddin Ahmed Maizbhandari (17 September).
7. Birthday of Huzur Shah Sufi Syed Saifuddin Ahmed Maizbhandari (12 Falgun).

Besides these events, Maizbhandari followers also celebrate the Mowlud un Nabi (Birthday of the Holy Prophet), Shab e Barat, Shab e Meraj, Shab e Qadar and many other events. One of the FGD respondents said:

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> "We, Maizbhandari darbar, have a lot of major events to follow. People from the whole country come here. Millions of people join the celebration. We give importance to these programs, especially, the Urs of our masters because we believe that celebrating Urs would help us to get the blessings of our beloved Sufis."

In these events people bring Cow, Buffalo, Goat, Sheep, and Camel as gifts (Nazrana). A special kind of rice is made of that meat which is called Tabarrukh. The Maizbhandari followers respect and love this food (Tabarrukh) so much.

Practices of Maizbhandari Culture

In Maizbhandar the day starts with the morning prayer- salat of Fajr. People go to Mosques in order to perform Salat al Fajr. After the salat they do Zikr for a while and start their day. Every Thursday they do a special practice as they do Sufi zikr, khatm e Ghousiyys Maizbhandariyya, sema. In the late night (during the time of Tahajjud), they perform Salat al Tahajjud by going to mosques. During any special events, which have been described in the *Major events and Festivals* part, the Sufi master with his followers go to the Rouza (Mazar) of Ghous ul Azam Maizbhandari and Ghous ul Azam Babavandari and other Maizbhandari legends chronologically. They do Ziyarat of the Sufi in the Rouza. They put new Ghilaf (the cloth which is kept over the Mazar) on the Mazar and provide the flower with due respect. One of our in-depth interview respondents described:

> "We go to the Rouza during special events and do Khas Ziyarat (special Ziyarat). We do it with our traditional Sufi music and dance in order to make it more fruitful."

Dars e Tasawwuf (classes for learning Sufism) is also arranged regularly by the Sufi masters. After meeting with their masters the Maizbhandari followers provide Nazrana to their master. It can be food, fruit, money or any other gift (which is an accepted sunnah of the holy prophet). There are some personal Sufi practices as well like Murakaba. It is a special kind of Sufi meditation done for the perfection of the soul. It can be done every day in a quiet place by following some guidelines provided by their Sufi masters.

e) Gender Dimension

The society is more generous compared to mainstream society in terms of gender equality. Both male and female participate in all practices in this culture. Women are allowed to perform all the rituals. One of our female respondents said that-

> "There is no discrimination against women in our Sufi culture. We go to the Mazar, attend all programs including Urs, Birthday Celebration, Sema (Sufi Musical Program)."

None of the female respondents reported that they faced domestic violence because the culture itself represents love, peace and patients, so it is improbable for the members of the society to be violent. The girls also receive religious education in the *madrasas*.

V. Discussion

The study identified several aspects of the Sufi culture of Maizbhandar. Their fundamental belief is identical to the belief of all other Muslims but they have some additional one, i.e. especially the love and belief for their masters. Their notion of salvation is a unique one. It is not to go to heaven but to get the proximity of the creator of heaven.

This study has found that they believe in love, peace, patience, sacrifice and humanity which are the most excellent characteristics of the Sufi culture of Maizbhandar. While many religious extremists are doing unethical activities in the name of Islam, the Maizbhandari Sufis are still spreading the message of love and humanity. The followers are also very much influenced by this notion of belief in their practical life. Even non-believers can come to Maizbhandar which is a remarkable contribution of Maizbhandari Sufi culture. This culture can contribute to establishing a harmonious society in Bangladesh.

The Maizbhandari Sufi music and dance are also very popular and rich. Even the non Maizbhandari followers listen to those songs as many of the Maizbhandari songs are remade in modern format. Their Sufi zikr is the way to get the light (nur) of Allah and it is a cultural practice as well.

This study found that most of their major events are associated with the birth and departure of their Sufi masters because the birth of a Sufi is a blessing for them; that is why, they celebrate their birthdays. The departure is also a blessing because the Sufi is getting united with the beloved Allah and that is why they also celebrate that. It is also associated with their development of soul as they are more potential to get blessings in those special events. They make Tabarrukh (food) distributed to all even the non Maizbhandari or non-believers. It is a great example of humanity and openness of Maizbhandari Sufis.

This study also examined some rituals and practices of Maizbhandari Sufi culture including special Thursday activities, zikr, ziyarat, providing flowers, providing nazrana, teaching the principle of Sufism, Murakaba (meditation) etc. The devotees of Maizbhandari tariqa do the practice with due respect.

VI. Conclusion

The Sufi culture of Maizbhandar has a great influence on the people, especially the followers. Their belief system, which makes them unique, does not allow religious fundamentalism or extremism. That is why; Maizbhandari Sufi culture can play a pivotal role in mitigating radical activities in the name of religion. The music of Maizbhandar also represents the folk culture of Bangladesh which widens the sphere of culture. This Sufi culture can establish a peaceful young generation with a developed soul which will ultimately result in a

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harmonious society. Further research can be done on Maizbhandari Sufi culture to explore other aspects and influences of the culture (i.e., its contribution to Bengali folk literature or how it can stop the extremism propounded by some people).

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