



Research Paper

## Azan Fakir's Life and Preachings: an Analysis

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**ABSTRACT:** Sufism, a branch of the mystic philosophy of Islam, came to India towards the closure of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and expanded in such a way that it took the shape of a popular movement, and drew people from all walks of life. Like the other parts of India, Assam has always been the meeting ground of different races and cultures and a fertile soil for the Sufis and preachers of different religions. It contributed a great deal to promoting communal harmony and inculcating high spiritual and moral values. The Sufi saint Azan Fakir entered the Ahom kingdom in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, who had a dream for constructing a peaceful society in the light of Islam. To preach Islam, he composed a number of zikirs in the same line of Vaisnava Kirtanas. Thus, the missionary activities of Azan Fakir created a congenial relationship between the society and the state which had gradually been developed over the time in the region.

**KEYWORDS:** Azan Fakir, Sufism, Zikirs, Composite Culture

Received 12 June, 2022; Revised 25 June, 2022; Accepted 27 June, 2022 © The author(s) 2022.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Sufism is one of the most important branches of religion which is associated with the mystic philosophy of Islam. In India, Sufism is the continuation of the system emanating from the *khanqahs* and *madrasas* of Samarqand and Bukhara of Middle East. The Muslim saints of unquestionable piety and miraculous power were sent from Baghdad to preach Islam at different Sufi centres of Northern India (1) towards the closure of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. These Sufi saints brought with them the fervour, devotion and piety begotten of long contact and discipleship with spiritual leaders in these lands (2). These missionary activities of Sufism was confined not only to Northern India, but also spread to other parts of the country, specially to the region of Assam, which has always been the meeting ground of different races and culture, and a fertile soil for the Sufis and preachers of different religions, and its valley is proved to be the appropriate place for their religious devotion, mystic practices and prayer (1). The Sufi thought especially brought in the land of Assam in the seventeenth century by Azan Fakir, who made significant changes in field of religion, society and culture. Hence, in this paper, an attempt has been made to trace the life and works of Azan Fakir and his contribution to society and culture of medieval Assam.

### II. AZAN FAKIR AND HIS LIFE

Azan Fakir, the most celebrated and reputed Sufi saint, poet and preacher of Islam, whose name is on the lip of every Assamese Muslim, entered the Ahom kingdom in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He was the chief source of the consolidation of Islam in the eastern region of Assam valley. His original name was Shah Milan or Shah Miran, came to be known as Azan Pir, as he used to call the people to offer prayer by calling Azan (prayer call) (1). People began to call him 'Fakir' as he got his livelihood by begging, having a bag in his shoulder, dressed of *shilikha* (*khirka* or a dress wear by *fakir-sannyasis*) and used to call himself 'Bhikhari Azan' in his *zikirs*:

*Bhikhari Azan ye koy aaho porodesh*

(Beggar Azan says o' foreign country) (3)

The controversy regarding Azan Fakir's life and his settlement in the Ahom territory arises as there is no authentic source to settle the year of his coming. This renowned Sufi saint came to this region with a view to enlighten the Assamese society, along with three other Sufi saints, namely, Khandakar Pir, Sawal Pir and Saleh Pir or Hazrat Nabi Pir. Legend is that he originally hailed from Baghdad and was a scion of the family of Prophet Mohammad himself and was the follower of the Chistiya line of Sufism (1) and (3).

It is also believed that he had entered Assam with the Mughal forces in 1635 A.D. during the reign of Pratap Singha (r. 1603-1641). Scholars based their assumption on *zikir* composed by Azan Fakir in this respect. It must be borne in mind that those *zikir* composed during Azan Fakir's time-bound to change its original form due to their oral format as there was no written record of these *zikirs*. In his book *Asomiya Zikir Aru Jari*, Syed Malik mentions that the *zikir* and *jaris* might have changed due to oral form.

(a) *Dah sho dukuri nabisin hijri*

*Aku paas bosore jay...*

*Shah Milan ye ai Zikir rosile*

*Qur'an kitab ot pai...*

(1045 Hizri (1634-35 A.D.)... Shah Milan composed this *zikir* from Qur'an)

(b) *Eghar sho dukuri nabisin hijri*

*Aku paas bosore jay...*

*Shah Milan ye ai Zikir rosile*

*Qur'an kitab ot pai... (3)*

(1145 Hizri (1738 A.D.)...Shah Milan composed this *zikir* from Qur'an)

In *zikir* (a), Syed Malik argued that Azan Fakir composed this *zikir* in 1045 or 1634-35 A.D. assumed that Azan Fakir must have come either during Pratap Singha's time (r. 1603-41) or Gadadhar Singha's time (r. 1681-96). On the other hand, based on *zikir* (b) S.K. Bhuyan argued that Azan Fakir composed this *zikir* in 1738 A.D. and connected his time with the Ahom King Siva Singha (r. 1714-44) (4). According to Mohini Saikia, Azan Fakir entered Assam with the Mughal forces as early as 1612-13 A.D. and stayed in Hajo in the Kamrup district until 1626 A.D. (5). Though his *zikir* indicates his staying in Hajo during the Ahom-Mughal war, but there is no contemporary record we find regarding Azan Fakir's year of coming. If Azan Fakir had come to Assam during Pratap Singha's time or after that, the contemporary Mughal chroniclers' Mirza Nathan in *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi* or Shihabuddin Talish in *Tarikh-i-Aasham* would have recorded about Azan Fakir. What Talish, in 1662-63, noticed the condition of Muslims who were only Muslim in name, Azan Fakir also faced the same situation. Talish did not find such *pir* during Mir Jimla's invasion to Assam. Even during Ram Singha's invasion, we find five *pir* accompanying him, but there is no information regarding Azan Fakir.

As we have no authentic source, based on the above discussion, we can assume that Azan Fakir might have entered Assam after Ram Singha's invasion, i.e., during the battle of Itakhuli in 1682 A.D. Later on, he settled at Garhgaon, the capital of Ahom Kingdom. It is recorded in *Buranji* that King Gadadhar Singha (r. 1681-96) donated land to Azan Fakir. Hence, we can safely connect Azan Fakir's time with the Ahom King Gadadhar Singha.

### III. AZAN FAKIR AND HIS PREACHINGS

The society of medieval Assam was full of chaos and disorder. The Sufi saints who made an inroad to Assam, did not receive the same reaction. In Assam, Neo-Vaisnavism had already paved its way into the society and influenced the Muslims, like Chandsai, Jayahari, and Haridas, who accepted Neo-Vaisnavism. In this situation, it was complicated for Azan Fakir to bring back the Muslims on the Islamic track and at the same time to attract the other caste Hindus to the fold of Islam. Azan Fakir could not achieve the targeted goal, mainly due to the wide propagation of the neo-Vaisnavite movement. Moreover, the restrictions imposed by the Ahom kings upon any act of alluring the people to change their cult even within Hinduism itself (6). Of course, there is no such instance of suppression of Muslims available by the Ahom King based on religion.

In those days, the Muslims preferred to listen to the tales than pray. Instead of attending prayer (*namaz*), they were busy performing *Oja-pali* and *marchia* or *jaarigeet* along with dance and occasional clapping. They treated these activities not as a religious discourse or pious act but as amusement. In this challenging situation, to preach Islam and to make the masses aware of the message of Qur'an and *Hadith*, Azan Fakir built a mosque at Sonpura, Garhgaon and to offer prayer arranged by calling *azan* in a sweet voice so that the people could easily be attracted to it. Shihabuddin Talish, in his account, describes that the Mohammadans had come from Islamic land to engage only in the performance of prayers and fastings but were forbidden to chant the call to prayers or publicly recite the words of God (7) and (8). We, however, don't know Azan Fakir's reaction to this law, whether it was existed at that time or not. If it were the law, he would not dare to call people by calling Azan, as the law of Ahoms was wholeheartedly followed by everyone, whether due to fear of punishment or banishment.

Azan Fakir could understand an inseparable relation between the Hindus and the Muslims in Assam. The prevailing faith and folk culture of Hindus are also vague in the Muslim society. Realizing this syncretic Assamese culture, he became well-versed in Assamese folk songs and other religious literature and composed about eight scores of devotional songs known as *zikirs* and *jaris* in Assamese. Through *zikirs* and *jaris*, he

preached the teachings of Islam, namely *Kalama, Namaz, Roza, Haj, Zakat*, and the principles of *Shariat* and *Tariqat*.

However, in preaching the message of Islam, Azan Fakir could not escape the opposition and hostility which fell to the lot of every reforming Prophet. His activities were misrepresented to King Gadadhar Singha (r. 1681-1696) by the Assamese Muslim officials, Rupai Dadhora, and his two eye-balls were extracted (3). Later on, after being convinced of his exceptional spiritual attainments, the same King duly patronized him by granting *pirpal* land (9). His *zikirs* also speak this:

*Dikhow noir kakhori Saraguri Chapori*

*Rojai bandhi diya moth...* (3) and (4)

(The islet Saraguri, where the King built up a shrine, stands on the riverside of the Dikhow)

Azan Fakir never called for an ascetic life or detachment from worldly life. Islam considers asceticism and detachment opposed to nature and is precepted to abstain from such methods and acts. Following this message of Islam, he married an Assamese girl, by whom he had three sons (3). He had settled at Saraguri Chapari of Sibsagar and continued to preach the message of Islam, being accompanied by his six scores of disciples up to 1738 (10). Their descendants are still found in Assam, and they have been known as *Saraguriya Dewans* or *Azanghoriyas*.

#### IV. AZAN FAKIR'S CONTRIBUTION TO COMPOSITE CULTURE:

The Sufi movement expanded to every nook and corner of the Brahmaputra and Barak valley, took the shape of a popular movement that drew people from all walks of life, particularly the lower classes, in large numbers. None can deny the contribution made by Azan Fakir to promote communal harmony. He taught high spiritual and moral values, which he considered were no less important than various religious practices like prayers, fasting, pilgrimage etc., in the line of Chistiya among the masses of Assam.

It is a fact that Azan Fakir had a dream of constructing a peaceful society in the light of Islam. Like the Vaisnava *kirtanas*, *zikirs* and *jaris* were also intended to glorify Allah and the Qur'an and establish harmony and brotherhood among each soul. To give a practical shape to this mission, he composed *zikirs* and *jaris*, which became an integral part of Assamese folk culture, highlighted the social belief and culture of Assam and played a more significant role in the evaluation of Assamese language and literature. These *zikirs* and *jaris* have a lot of similarities with the devotional songs of the Assamese Vaisnava saints in respect of diction as well as content (10), which were sung like *kirtanas* of Assamese Hindus accompanied by rhythmic clapping of palms. Singers repeated the refrain of each song while the leader initiated every line of the song (10) and (11). Later on, *zikirs* and *jaris* became the main instrument of communication, through which Arabic and Persian words found their way to the Assamese language.

Azan Fakir was the pioneer of communal harmony who adopted local customs and traditions. Even some Nagas were converted to Islam (4) along with the low-caste Hindus. These converted people brought their manners and customs with them, which led to the introduction of Hindu customs and manners into Muslim society. For instance, *Oja-pali, Huchuri, Bihu* dance etc. entered into the Assamese Muslim community and became inseparable from *zikir*, and the process is still on (3). With time, a few Hindu intellectuals associated themselves with the Muslim Sufis and adopted Sufi thought, behaviour and practice. Hence, Sufism had become an integral part of Islamic social life in Assam. Shihabuddin Talish was surprised to witness the assimilation of the Muslims with the indigenous inhabitants. Referring to the relation of Hindus and Muslims, Azan Fakir says in his *zikirs*-

*Santa mahanta awliya sokole eketi namote khat...*

(The saints of the Hindus and Muslims also supplicate to one name, the name of God.)

The *zikirs* of Azan Fakir highlighted the views of eternal truth enshrined in the Qur'an, *Purana*, and other scriptures as

*Qur'an ye Puran ye ekeke koise*

*Bujiba mohonto log...*

(Qur'an *Purana* says the same thing... understand the learned) (3)

It is needless to say that Azan Fakir's *dargah* has become one of the most famous shrines of Assam. Although the Muslims manage the *dargah*, the devotees are mostly Hindus who offer prayer in the Muslim way by bowing heads in a kneeling position and hands seeking blessings. For them, he is a *Pir*, a *Sadhu*, a *Baba*, and beyond religion (12). Also, for them, the *pir* become an intermediary between them and God, through which they could attain oneness with God. The heart touching *zikirs* of Azan Fakir is sung throughout the Brahmaputra Valley, and almost all his devotees sing *zikir* with devotion-

*Mor monot an bhab nai O' Allah*

*Hindu Musalman ek Allahar farman*

*Akherat ek Allahar nam*

*Hinduk jolabo, Momin ok garibo, khakor ton khakot milabo...* (3)

(There is no feeling of “difference” in my mind O’ Allah... Hindus and Muslims are the creation of the same God... Take the name of the same God... At the end of life, Hindus would be cremated, Muslims buried, and dust would merge with dust.)

## V. CONCLUSION

The simplicity and honesty made Azan Fakir a byword in every Assamese home. There was much similarity between the preaching of Sankaradeva and those with the *zikirs* of Azan Fakir. Both furnished the Oneness of God and complete surrender to the eternal power. For this reason, both the Hindus and Muslims adorned him and appreciated his efforts to uplift the downtrodden from the morass of degradation and moral turpitude (1). M. Parwez remarks, “Perhaps due to this (Azan Fakir’s contribution), Assam is free from bitter communal tension even today.” (13)

Thus, Azan Fakir played a tremendous role in the religious and cultural life of the people of Assam, attempting to build a connecting bridge between Hindus and Muslims that has not collapsed till now, and his *dargah* has become an epitome of communal harmony, universal love, and brotherhood.

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