

# Religious Pluralism among Muslims: The Case of Hussain Dighi of West Bengal, India

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**Abstract:** Religious Syncretism is a capsulated term, in which it has been observed blending traits of cultural beliefs and practices. The Hussain Dighi (pond) is located at Daspara Gram Pancayat under Uttar Dinajpur District of West Bengal, India. It has perceived by the locals that Huissain Dighi is considered as sacred. The Dighi is covered by the villages and faith by Islam. Since time immemorial, the oral history claimed that the villagers have converted into Nasya Sekh Muslims from Hindu Rajbansis by the hand of sacred man called Hussain. As it is view of the local people, they are decedents of tenth generation of Nasya Sekh Muslims. There are number of rituals and practices have been found in their activities centering on the sacred Dighi and have very much linked with local Rjbansi culture by and large. As a result it is undoubtedly says that Hussan Dighi has measured as productive center of religious syncretism, in which it is the main backbone the paper and has consulted with secondary as well as primary data.

**Keywords:** Hussan Dighi, religious syncretism, conversion, syncretic beliefs and practices

## Introduction

India is characterized by rich diversity. During the arrival of the Aryans, there was an interaction with conflict, cooperation and synthesis of different cultural/religious teams. While Brahminism imposed an exclusionist caste hierarchy on society, other streams like Jainism, Buddhism, Kabir, Nanak and multiple local sects like Jotiba, Khandoba, Tukaram, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Tantra, etc. contributed to the synthesizing of local cultures. While kings, zamindars and upper castes exploited, irrespective of their religion, the lower castes intermingled and led to the development of syncretic traditions. The term syncretism is associated with multi concepts but it has actual relevance with religion. It refers to the synthesis of different religious forms. It is a controversial and challenging term which has undergone many historical transformations in meaning.

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Syncretism is an important platform of multi-cultural streams, offers an opportunity to be strong cultural amalgam and multi-confessional harmony. The concept syncretism is covered by the cultural reciprocation (Das: 2003). Syncretism is also connected with the system of economy, diet, kinship and in politics (Levison: 1994). The term syncretism was originally used by Plutarch for 'fusion of religious cults' which occurred in the Graeco-Roman world, 300BC-200CE. Christianity, from its beginning, combined many religious ideas and rituals (Brandon: 1970). Syncretism is the fusion of different beliefs and practices. These colorful mixed kind beliefs are clearly seen in Christianity, Buddhism on one hand and manifestation of Sufism in Islam is running to strengthen the belief of monotheism on the other. Shaw and Stewart (1994) have viewed syncretism as being the "infiltration" of "incompatible traditions" seems to portray a clear reality of syncretism today.

The focus of this paper is on sociological discourse of religious conversion, practices in the religious shrine of Nasya Sekh Muslims in Bengal taking 'syncretism' in perspective. The paper is consulted with secondary as well as primary data that is qualitative in nature.

#### **Religious Approach to Syncretism:**

The sociological understanding is that religion is a universal phenomenon. Religion is a combination of different beliefs, practices, rituals, spiritualism and symbolic metaphors. Several recognition forms have been found in religious institution but three are commonly identified. First, Confucianism, Taoism Shintoism, and Buddhism are ethical religions. Second, Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hinduism are theistic religions. The followers of these religion worship one or many gods. Animism is the third, in which the followers believe that spirit can help or harm people (Thio: 1989). The sociologists open up their nervousness in connection with word religion simply because of its ambiguity. Nadel (1954) passed his view that however we define religion we still find uncertainty. Tylor (1903), comments that religion is a belief in spiritual being. This definition was subjected to challenge.

A critical review of early debate on religion shows that crucial problems centered on beliefs versus practices, religious entities or forces and the spiritual or supernatural realms. Even Durkheim's religious definition of sacred thing has been challenged, as the term coming from Western perspective are not applicable to non-western countries or societies. Weber has been studied the pre-literate and world religion to understand the relation between beliefs and practices and also their secular marker and his sociology of religion was the nature of human existence. He saw no future of religion but only its progressive rationalization and the decline of mystery, magic and rituals. Now the sociologists and social anthropologists sole task is to explore the religious syncretism which is found in our everyday life in a wide variety of settings.

Caste system is the most fundamental aspect of Indian society. It is a system in which social hierarchy is based on purity and pollution concept. A sect is a religious group and functions to satisfy a society's need. Reformist groups and sects have emerged on issue of equality. The reformist leader belongs to lower caste, Muslims and tribals and they also come from poor economic backgrounds.

In the isolated past intensive religious activity had taken place which were designed to overthrow the predominance of Buddhism and Jainism in India. In this phase we observed the breaking down of the barrier of caste system inherent in the Vedic religion by admitting devotees even from untouchable castes into the order of Bhaktas and thereby evolved Bhakti movement. During the mediaval (13<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> century) period Hinduism underwent drastic transformation and focused on one god. Ramanuja founded a religious sect. Ramananda (1400-70), follower of Ramanuja settled in Varanasi and established his own sect named Ramanandi. Ramananda was against and opposed the inequality of caste system and opened the door for all and included women out castes and even Muslims. The Ramanandis lined the way for later sects like the Sikhs and Kabirpanthi. Kabir (1440-1518) started out as believer of Ramananda but later developed his own characteristic eclecticism. Kabir viewed that only bhakti people could precede one to god. (Gnanambal, 1970 as found in Das, 2003).

According to Guru Nanak Hindu, Muslim and all religious sects are considered the children of the same god. He was influenced by the school of devotion (Bhakti) of Ramananda, Kabir and having assimilated the philosophy of Sufism and Islam he founded a syncretic form of his new religion, Sikhism.

Different studies have explored that the *Pir, Darbesh* in different periods played the positive role to bring about the synthesis between Hindu and Muslim culture. The Kashmiri Bhakti literature claims that at the folk level, there evolved various forms of syncretic blends in Islam with local cults, as reflected, for example, in the poetry of Sayyid Sultan of Bengal (16<sup>th</sup> Century). In his poem named in Nabi Bangsa, he treated major deities of Hindu religion like Rama and Krishna as successive prophets of god, followed in turn by Adam, Abraham, Mosas, Jesus and Mohammed ( S.W.S) (Das: 2003).

### **Historical Accounts of Conversion of Muslims in West Bengal:**

It is very difficult to go too far into the Muslim history of Bengal. Historical data in this regard are rather scarce. There is no proper documentary evidence as to when Muslims first entered this area. History reveals that the existence of various kingdoms was known to the Muslim world even in the remote past. The Bakthiar Khalji's invasion and the subsequent invasion of Ilyas Shah and the Mughals caused penetration of Muslim political forces in India in general and Bengal in particular.

Different scholarly writings have suggested that Islamic door was open in the province of Sindh in India during 715 C.E. It has been said that Islam is clearly visible in India in 1020 and 1194. The most authentic

and acceptable historicity in connection with the conversion of Muslims in India in general and in West Bengal in particular was narrated by R.M.Eton (1997) in his *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*. He claimed that four theories were associated with the conversion. The first of these, which he called the Immigration theory, it was not exactly the conversion but the Islamic diffusion of people. It is viewed, as a good number of India's Muslims has claimed, that they were the decedents of other Muslims, who had migrated from the Iranian plateau or sailed across the Arabian Sea.

The second theory of Islamization is "Religion of the Sword" thesis; it primarily emphasized on the military force for the diffusion of Islam in India and Bengal in particular but it is debated. Some scholars were strongly against it like Peter Hardy (1789) (as found in Eton: 1997) who has observed, those who argued that Indian Muslims were forcibly converted have generally failed to define either *force* or *conversion* leaving one to presume that a society can and will alter its religious identity simply because it has a sword at its neck. Precisely, how this mechanism worked, either in theoretical or in practical terms, has never, however, been satisfactorily explained. Moreover, proponents of this theory seem to have confused conversion to the Islamic religion with the extension of Turko-Iranian rule in North India between 1200 and 1760, a confusion probably originating in too literal a translation of primary Persian accounts narrating the "Islamic" conquest of India. The force theory of Islamization was not fit for all geographical area in Bengal in particular. Dacca was the residence of the Nawab for about a hundred years, but it contains a smaller proportion of Muslims than any of the surrounding districts, except Faridpur. Malda and Murshidabad contain the old capitals, which were the center of Musalman rule for nearly four and a half centuries, and yet the Muslims form a smaller proportion of the population than they do in the adjacent districts of Dinajpur, Rajshahi, and Nadia.

Religion of Patronage theory is the third theory of Islamization. This is the view that Indians of the pre-modern period converted to Islam in order to receive some non-religious favor from the ruling class—relief from taxes, promotion in the bureaucracy, and so forth. The last, which Eton has termed, Religion of Social Liberation thesis postulates the rigid and discriminatory nature of Hindu caste system against its lower caste order. When Islam arrived with egalitarian approach, which was spread by the Sufis, general masses converted to Islam.

During the late sixteenth century of Mughal period (1574), Muslims conversion was mainly from rural peasants and artisans of Bengal. These Muslim converts were drawn mainly from Rajbansi, Pod, Chandal, Koch, and other indigenous groups that had been only lightly exposed to Brahmanic culture.

In another context, it has been observed by Mukhopadhyay (2003), the lower grade of Koches in northern zone of Bengal had refused their respectful status in the Hindu fold and was attracted to egalitarian approach of Islam and thus they converted to Muslim (Nasya Sekh).

**Conversion by Sufi, Fakir and Darbesh:**

The fundamental meaning of Islam is Peace. This is a universal and organized religion of mankind which has attracted millions of people all over the world from various strata due to its egalitarian and indiscriminating approach. It primarily stands on five pillars of creed like as Kalma (Pledge), Salat or Namaz (Prayer), Roza (Fasting), giving alms to the poor Zakat (Tax) and pilgrimage to Macca (Haji). The Prophet Muhammed (S.W.S.) had spread this message. It is believed that in due course of time this gap was filled by the Sahaba (associates of Prophet) and Sufi saints, who followed the prophetic ideals and led a pious life.

In the beginning Sufism developed in Mesopotamia, Arabia, Iran and modern Afganistan. It was formalized by the end of 8<sup>th</sup> century (Farugui: 1984). The Sufis aim for a direct relationship with God and thus their basic features incorporate stands from various sources including Hinduism.

In the context of India, another name of Sufis is Fakir and Darbesh. The first Sufi religious order that came to India was that of Chista by the hand of Khawaja Garib Nawaz, during the era of Sultan in 12<sup>th</sup> century (Saheb: 2003).

**Myths Legends and Oral History of Hussain Dighi:**

The Hussain Dighi ( large pond) is located in Daspara Gram Panchayat of Uttar Dinajpur district of West Bengal, India. According to the record of BLRO (Block Land revenue officer, Chopra Circle) the total area occupied by the Dighi is near about of 25 bigas of land. There is no proper documentary source in relation to the depth or origin of the pond. According to field data, the pond is surrounded by the three villages which are Godugochh, Glantigarh and Tepagoan. The villagers are Muslims by faith.

From the Durkheimian perspective, it may be seen as sacred because it is set apart from other ponds and worshiped by the locals.

Our main task was to search for the actual history behind its name. The question was asked to the older generation and we received several answers from different people. The most acceptable answer are explored here.

It is believed by some that Hazrat Imam Hussain and Imam Hassan were the grandson of Prophet Muhammed and both are considered as martyrs for the hoisting of the Islamic flag and tried to carry on their forefather's tradition. They were hurtfully killed by the Yazid and were not even given to drink the water of Fraetkul (Euphretes) River. The water of Feratkul River has likeness to this pond and hence the locals named it as Hussain Dighi. Another section of older generation thought that the entire area was

under the kingship of Hussain Shah. During his monarchy a pond was dug for the sake of agricultural activity and from this perspective such a name was given to the pond.

Since time immemorial, in connection with the name of Hussain Dighi, another legend is that an unknown beggar (fakir) named Hussain had resided beside the Dighi. As per the views of the locals, he would always keep silent and devoted himself to God (Allah). He did not feel uneasy if anyone wanted to talk to him. Gradually the locals of neighboring villagers were able to make a rapport with this sacred man. The villagers generally rushed to him, when they felt any health problem and the fakir tried his level best to cure them. Hence, this oral history provides another myth behind the name.

History reveals that the northern part of Bengal (commonly known as North Bengal) was occupied by the people of Rajbangsis. As generation passed, the people of the pond area were converted to Islam by fakir Hussain. Now, they are tenth generation of converted Muslims and are known as Nasya Sekh. At present a person claims that his family is the direct descendent of Hussain fakir and he has been taking care of this sacred pond. He is also known as fakir to the locals.

#### **Religious Fair (Mela):**

The neighboring area population of Hussain Dighi is primarily dominated by Nasya Sekh Muslims but from macro perspective, the whole area is surrounded by the diverse religious faiths.

We know that ritual is a pertinent issue of religion and there are a number of rituals that are observed over the pond. In view of field the report a *mela* (fair), is celebrated around the Dighi on the first of the month of *Baisak* of the Bengali year (Bengali New Year).

However, preparation for this grand fair, that is providing the infrastructural facilities like construction of mela huts which will accommodate the pilgrims etc. is done under the supervision of present fakir and during the mela time he has the sole responsibility to set up a committee as well.

The huge gathering around the Dighi includes people of heterogeneous origin with respect of to caste, class, religion and sex. They usually come to the fakir for mannat (vow) following their own customs like Islam and Hinduism etc.

The observance of death anniversary of fakir Hussain is known as 'Urs'. This religious occasion is generally followed after the first of Baisak. At night, the mela committee organizes jolsa (religious discussion) in which the local non-muslims like the Rajbanshi and Santal people gladly participated on this holy occasion.

### Hussain Dighi: Different Method of Practices

It is already highlighted that the Hussain Dighi area is covered by different religious communities like Muslims and Rajbanshi and was noted that Muslims are converted from Rajbanshis. They are full of social and religious customs and practices similar to the Muslims which are noted during their visit to Hussain dighi. On the other hand the Nasya Sekh continue their worship of Satya Pir as Satya Narayan Deo and Bisahari Bibi as Bisahari Debi. The practice of offering banana with sindur (vermilion), khir (pies), nunia chal (nunina rice), murga (male chicken) etc. are further examples of fusion of Rajbanshi religious traits with Islamic ones and are all acceptable to the fakir of this sacred pond. Actually these are not allowed in Islam theoretically but here we observed these practices due to strong influence of the local Hindu Rajbanshi tradition.

### Conclusion:

From the above journey, it is to say that Hussain dighi has expressed broader vision of universal brotherhood among the local Nasya Sekh Muslims and Rajbanshis. The number of devotees has increased mainly due to the Dighi's supernatural power. The high admire for mystic power and veneration of the way of offering banana and murga etc. by the local people particularly Hindu Rajbanshi and their rationale by the Muslims illustrate the importance of this sacred pond as a great synthesizing shrine and it is also the symbol of communal harmony.

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