

The Origin, Ideals and the Socio-economic Status of Fakirs in Bengal

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Abstract

The Baul and Fakir communities are a unique asset of Bengal. This community is not found in any other part of India. Mainly through music these two communities express their philosophy and ideology. The difference between Baul and Fakir is only their origin, here I have also discussed the origin of Faqir community. The Bauls are not as respected and well-known Fakirs as they prefer to remain behind the scenes. As much practice or research has been done on Fakiri music, not as much has been done on their life style in this article, I have tried to shed light on the socio-economic status, food habits and their daily life, besides discussing about the basic ideas and philosophy of Fakirs. And while talking about the Fakirs of entire Bengal, I have mentioned the names of some popular Fakirs of these two districts, Nadia and Murshidabad.

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Introduction

Baul Fakirs are a distinctive group of mystic minstrels of Bengal, known for their unconventional spiritual philosophy and soulful music. Emerging from a synthesis of Vaishnavism, Sufism, Buddhism, and folk traditions, Baul Fakirs reject rigid religious practices and social hierarchies. They emphasize inner realization, love, and the search for the Moner Manush (the person of the heart). Living simple, itinerant lives, Baul Fakirs use songs as their primary medium to express spiritual ideas, humanism, and social harmony, making them an integral part of Bengal's cultural and religious heritage. The only difference between fakirs and bauls is their origin. Fakirs' pursuits and philosophies are very lofty but Bauls are not as respected as Fakirs by common people and researchers but rather neglected.

Discussion

Ideology of Fakirism

Fakirs do not follow traditional Islamic practices, they do not follow prayers, fasts, Shari'ah orders and religious leaders. This is why Fakirs are hated and persecuted in Muslim society. Fakirs oppose the outward practices of public religion

and prefer to remain self-absorbed and self-satisfied. Chanting, meditation, and breathing exercises are given special importance in the spiritual practice of the Fakirs, while body-centered meditations are also present, but they are given less importance than the Bauls. Saints of both the Baul and Fakir sects think that 'Jaha ache Deha Bhande taha ache Brahamadne'. They believe that Mecca-Madina, Temple-Mosque and God's abode are inside the body. Fakir Sadhana is basically based on relationship of Guru-Sishya, the profound teachings of this Sadhana are restricted to the Guru Shishya and its disclosure to any outsider is prohibited. This is why it is called 'Apan Sadhan katha na kahibe jatha tatha, apnate apni hoibe sabdhan'

The main stream of fakirism comes from Sufism, It can also be called the Subaltern version of Sufism. During the reign of the Tughluq Sultans, the Chishti Sufi order flourished in Bengal. In the writings of Lalon Fakir, the names of Naxbandi, Sohagi Sufi Silsilah and Mansoor Hallaj, Nizam Uddin Auliya and other Sufi saints are mentioned. From this period Sufism was gradually mixed with Buddhist Yogacharism, Sahajiism, Sahajiya Vaishnavism, Tantricism and rural ritual practices and sanskar. In spite of its many

admixtures, the main stream values humanism, communal harmony, social equality, morality, personal integrity above all else.

Origin of Fakiri cult in Bengal

The Fakir cult in Bengal has deep historical roots in Sufism and folk spirituality, blending Islamic mysticism with local devotional strands. When Sufi saints, pirs, and wandering dervishes entered Bengal from around the 11th–13th centuries, they spread Islamic ideas alongside existing rural traditions. These Sufi influences mingled with Hindu tantra, bhakti (devotional) movements, and local folk practices among peasants and lower classes, giving rise to syncretic spiritual sects that didn't strictly follow caste, temple rituals, or orthodox religion. In Bengal this blend emerged most visibly as Baul and Fakiri culture from the post-medieval period onward. Bauls (Hindu-influenced) and Fakirs (with a more Muslim background) both became wandering mystics and singers, using music (Baul Gaan or Fakiri Gaan) to express humanistic and devotional messages that transcended religion. Famous figures like Lalon Shah (Lalon Fakir) in the 18th–19th centuries popularized this syncretic philosophy of love, equality, and spiritual liberation. Over time, Bengali Fakirs became part of wider cultural life-performing at fairs, pilgrimages, and akhara gatherings-while keeping alive a tradition of mystic music, social inclusiveness, and inner spiritual quest.

Famous Fakirs in Nadia and Murshidabad

The presence of Fakirs in Nadia and Murshidabad districts is due to Islamic rule in Bengal. A variety can be observed among the fakirs living in there, Sadhaks or theoretic Fakirs do not expect name or wealth, and they want to be immersed in Sadhana, some of them who are Fakirs only in behavior and dress but not in thought. There has been a lot of study on the theory and music of Fakirs, but there is a lack of basic research on their lifestyle and socio-economic status. Through this article I have tried to show the overall lifestyle and condition of Fakirs of Nadia and Murshidabad districts. Culture and Fakirism of those districts influenced each other and in the overall practice, it has been seen that the expression of mysticism and humanism is very high among the Fakirs of those districts. At present, a large number of Fakir Saints live in Nadia and Murshidabad, maintaining their individuals, however, there are many examples of attacks on them.

Lalon Fakir has taken Nadia's Fakir Tradition to a higher level, as Sri Chaitanya gave another dimension to Vaishnavism. Among the fakirs of this era, the names of Mansoor Ali of Gorbhanga, Achimuddin Fakir of Paranpur, Amer Chand Fakir of Beghari, Jubbar Ali Khan of Iman Mandal Narayanpur, and famous Golam Fakir of Karimpur can be mentioned. Murshidabad district has the largest number of Muslim communities, so the number of Fakirs is naturally higher than other districts. Ali Bax Fakir of Harishpur Baruipara, Israfil Fakir of Kushaberia, Zahir Uddin Fakir of Kamal Sheikh Pathanpara of Muraripur, Shahzad Ali, Zulmat Fakir, Nazrul Fakir are particularly known among the fakirs of Murshidabad. All over Bengal there are many Fakirs who are not well known and financially sound but they are pure in theory and in their way of life.

Social Conditions

Most of the Fakirs of Nadia belonged to the lower caste Hindu community some years ago, so many Hindu customs and superstitions have remained among them. Panch Ullah

Fakir of Paranpur village of Karimpur Thana used to organize special conference of Baul Fakirs on Lakshmi Purnima Tithi. Most of the fakirs of Bengal, especially the fakirs of Nadia Murshidabad, are illiterate or can sign their names in some way, but they cannot be called uneducated because they are enlightened in the light of various life experiences and theories of life. Fakirs generally believe in social equality and humanism. Fakirs are hated by the majority of Muslim society because they do not follow orthodox Islamic ritual. Fakirs are mainly vegetarians, those who eat non-vegetarians do not eat meat, Non-vegetarian Fakirs eat fish like most Bengali communities. There is an instance of a Fakir's daughter married into a Sunni Muslim family returning home to her father after being tortured for refusing to eat beef and cook. Fakirs have always protested against caste discrimination, and class discrimination in Hindu and Muslim society. Lalan Fakir became an undisputed social leader during his time, he dreams–

'Amon samaj kobe go srijan hobe-
Jedin Hindu Musalman Bouddha Christian
Jati Gotra nahi rabe!'

(That is, when will a society be created where there will be no differences between Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians and caste)

'Dharma kul Gotra Jatir
Tulbe na go keha jigir
Krde bole Lalan Fakir'

(Lalan Fakir is shedding tears praying for a society where no one will ever provoke discrimination based on caste, class and communalism)

Economic Conditions

There are many Fakirs all over Bengal especially in Nadia and Murshidabad who earn a lot of money by performing music and also get calls for many programs throughout the year. Mansur Fakir, Golam Fakir from Nadia, a well-known name in the current Bengali culture, is also seen on the screen of doordarshan. Such established fakirs earn enough money and have fame but no pride, they drink tea and smoke with common people in the market. Most of the people in Fakir Society live in poverty, Fakirs lead a life associated with a variety of very simple occupations. A large section of Fakir Society is associated with village agriculture. Besides, their occupations include fishing, van driving, grocery stores, small businesses etc. Most of the fakirs live with their hard earned money, many of them are in debt. Although most of the Fakirs are poor, they have no sense of sorrow and live a simple and devoted life with poverty as their companion. As said in a Faqiri song---

'Amar ai peter chinte
Amon ar chinte kichu nai---
Chaul furalo dail furalo
Sadai Ginni bole tai!'

(It means, my only concern is food, there is no other concern, my wife always says that the rice and pulses is out of stock)

Materials and Methods

I have collected more information's from the secondary sources in writing this article. I also collected some

information from some of the primary sources like Patra-patrikas (Journals) and the District Gazetteers. The books that I have used are authentic. I have applied comparative methods to verify some informations. In some cases the field work and conversation has been effective. In most cases, I have followed this view 'History from Below' of the Subaltern Historiography.

Conclusion

Most of the Baul and Fakir Sadhak Gurus are belong to so-called lower castes of the society and illiterate, but the beauty and depth of their thoughts and expressions is surprising. A very ordinary standard of living, but a very lofty way of thinking and philosophy, this extraordinary meaning of fakirs really amazes us. That is why I am interested to know about their socio-economic status, food habits, daily life etc.

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