

CHAPTER- III

ISLAM AS PRACTISED BY NASHYA SHEIKHS OF NORTH BENGAL

In terms of the partition of India in 1947, what is meant by 'North Bengal' is 'Bengal' north of the Ganges. Malda, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and Cooch Behar are included in North Bengal. West Bengal is the name of an integral state; officially and politically, the name North Bengal is unimportant. Yet in human terms, the expression of human emotion is gradually being incorporated into government approval; As a result of which the North Bengal Development Board has been formed, North Bengal State Transport Corporation (N.B.S.T.C.) has been formed. Not the boundaries of a state, not the boundaries of a district, not the boundaries of a country; Outside of these boundaries, there is no doubt that those who seek to bind the northern part of small West Bengal to a new boundary will indirectly nurture separatism. Reviewing the history, it is clear that the Muslim population in India today is less than a thousand years old. The spread of Islam began with the advent of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in the Arabian Desert at the end of the 6th century AD and his subsequent prophet hood from the meditation of God. Although the advent of Islam in India was in the early eighth century, the spread of Islam in India and Bangladesh started from the first half of the thirteenth century AD. The dawn of Islamic rule and expansion of Islam in Bangladesh dawned in 1202 AD after the conquest of Bengal by Ikhtiyar Uddin Muhammad-bin Bakhtiyar Khalji.¹The first arrival of Islam in North Bengal took place in 1208 AD with the help of Ali Mech, a local resident, when Muhammad Bhaktiyar set out on an expedition to Tibet.

The Muslim population in North Bengal continued to grow steadily in the following centuries as a result of continuous Muslim invasions and internal racism since 1208 AD. However, historical analysis shows that the role of *Pir. Auliyas* in the spread of Islam in North Bengal was greater than that of Islamic invasions and campaigns. Thousands of men and women converted to Islam, believing in the '*Kudrat*' and '*Jawhud*' of the medieval *Pirs*. It is true that the physical constitution and caste of the Arab and Central Asian invaders do not match with the physical constitution and caste of the Muslims of North Bengal in most cases. On the other hand, after the partition of the country in 1947, the physical resemblance of the Muslims of North Bengal with the Hindu Bengalis who came from East Bengal was less, but no resemblance was found with the local dynastic community.

Meaning and Principles of Islam:

The word 'Islam' is derived from the Arabic root '*SLM*' that etymologically signifies 'security, peace, submission and obedience'. In the view of religion, the word Islam indicates submission to the will of '*Allah*'. (The Almighty, all knowing and the most powerful) and obedience to His laws with the end to establish peace through ensuring the right way of life) It is revealed in another notion that Islam, to begin with, was much more than a religion, a social revolution. It created, among the followers, what we call today social consciousness towards the weaker sections of the society and sensitized them towards their sufferings.

The word Islam means 'peace' and the word Muslim mean 'Surrender'. This surrender is not to any individual, not even to the Prophet Hazrat (sm), this surrender is only to the great God. One God, '*Allah*', one prophet 'Hazrat Muhammad (sm)', one scripture '*Koran*', one pilgrimage-place-Mecca, these are the main features of Islam. The five main pillars on which Islam stands are a) *Kalama* b) Prayers c) Fasting d) *Zakat* and e) *Hajj*. Above all, prayers have been described in the *Qur'an-Hadith* as the key to Islam. The brotherhood of Islam, founded on Semitic and modern religious theories, is very strong. In

order to keep this bond of brotherhood strong and intact, every Friday prayer has been described in Islam as 'obligatory' for every adult male. It is also mentioned in the *Hadith* that, "It is possible for the poor people for whom it is difficult to perform *Hajj* to earn the same virtue (religion) of *Hajj* through every Friday prayers.

The principal bases on which the Islamic system is founded are (1) a belief in the unity, immateriality, power, mercy and supreme love of the Creator; (2) charity and brotherhood among mankind; (3) subjugation of the passions; (4) the outpouring of a grateful heart to the Giver of all good; (5) accountability for human actions in another existence.²The cult in Islam is also very simple and established on five fundamental principles, viz (i) Professing of *Kalema* (faith) that there is no other God but Al(ii) Performance of *Salat or Namaz* (prayer),lah while Mohammad (PBUH) is His Prophet, (iii) Arduous accomplishment of *Siyam or Roza* (fasting) during the Arabic month of Ramadan, (iv) Payment of *Zakat* by the riches and (v) Celebration of *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Holy Macca) by them who are able to do So.³

The dogma of Islam also rests on seven basics convictions, viz (a) Belief in *Allah* (God), (b) Belief in *Farestas* (angels), (c) Belief in the Holy Books (scriptures appeared to the Prophets from Allah), (d) Belief in His *Paigambaras* (apostles), (e) Belief in *Kiamot* (destruction of the universe), (f) Belief in *Akhirat* (resurrection after death and the award of paradise or hell on the basis of last judgement), and (g) Belief in *Takdir* or luck that indicates good and evil occur as predestined by *Allah*.

According to the proclamation of Almighty *Allah*, Islam has been introduced as the only religion for the mankind since the beginning of human race in the world. But the preaching of Islam has been completely established through the ultimate Prophet *Hazrat Muhammad* (PBUH), to whom the holiest scripture '*Quran*' is appeared. The Holy *Quran* is considered as the ultimate guide to the believers for ensuring universal and eternal peace. The

essence of the ethical principles of Islam is summarized in it where Allah Himself declared, "there is no doubt in this book- a guidance to the pious who believe in the Unseen, observe the prayers, and distribute (charity) out of what We have bestowed on them; and who believe in that which We have commissioned thee with, and in that We commissioned others with before thee, and who have assurance in the life to come; - these have received the direction of their Lord".⁴

However, generally the followers of Islam are called Muslim, but in real implication Muslim is he who cordially believes the supreme authority of Allah, orally admits Him as the Only Creator and Master of the whole universe, completely surrenders to His will and also submits to His divine injections.

The ideal society in Islam is called *Umma* that inspires the follower of Islam to agglomerate universally in ensuring their common interests. The *Umma* is therefore, a society in which a number of individuals possessing a common faith and belief come together in harmony with the intention of advancing and moving towards common goal. Its social system is based on equality and justice. The great tradition of Islam is founded on a worldview that is apparently non-hierarchical and historical in ethos. Islam has oriented towards holistic principle of social order. Islamic holism is based on the equality of Muslim *Umma* i.e., the brotherhood and collectively among the believers. The unity transcends the boundaries of territory and nation. It advocates for one nation of the believers' i.e., the *Millat*. The holistic principle that is the core in the notion of *Umma* and *Millat* has a radical egalitarian connotation. Existence of caste and class and the domination of individual over society or vice versa are alien to the social life in Islam. Islam permits a constructive interaction between the individuals and the society on the basis of social solidarity and mutual responsibility. Islam admits for vast collective social life of man for constituting a society.⁵

Islam is not simply a religion but a complete code of life. It provides a framework for perfect way in every sphere of life and envisages a definite pattern of society that has its own mode of social interactions. As per Islamic notion the multitudes of people who collectively form a society are related to each other, at least in terms of belief and faith. Their equality by birth before God is palpably recognised by Islamic social norms.

Islam never recognizes any social division and distinction on the basis of ethnicity, lineage and occupation rather it regards all human beings to be equal and descendants of common ancestors. Thus, there is neither a difference of high and low nor of pure and impure. Islam follows the guideline that is proclaimed by Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) in his speech on farewell sermons:

"No Arab has any superiority over a non-Arab,
Nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab,
Nor a white man has any superiority over a black man,
Nor a black man has superiority over a white man,
All are children of Adam,
And Adam was created from clay".⁶

Islamic egalitarianism is based on brotherhood, unity, sympathy, sacrifice and cooperation. The Holy *Quran* declares, "Verily this Brotherhood of yours is a single brotherhood and Allah Himself is your Lord and Charioteer."⁷ In principle, Islamic society is egalitarian in orientation. It seeks to establish a kind of egalitarian and un-exploitative social order with remarkably tolerant attitude towards other faiths and knowledge in permissible areas. Morality and humanity are the main focus of Islam. It helps in integrating diverse social elements within a single whole for establishing a social system based on justice and setting conflicting groups on the path of competition for virtue. The virtuous living according to Islam includes alleviation of the suffering of others, rendering assistance to the needy,

good neighbourliness and maintenance of peace in the society. Hence it appears that Islam emphasizes the need of a universal social order based on collectively and interaction of all mankind through their interrelations and interactions for virtuous living.⁸

The structure of social life in Islam is lofty, sound and comprehensive. Its substantial elements comprise sincere love for human beings, respect for the elders, mercy for the younger, comfort and consolation for the distressed, feeling of brotherhood for the sake of social solidarity etc. According to Islam a Muslim must maintain the following civility in his society: (1) when he meets with another Muslim, he should salute him in prescribed manner i.e., by saying "*Aas-Salamo-Alaykum Aur Rahamatullah*" means "May the peace of God be upon you". Similarly in return of salute from another Muslim he should reply "*Oa-Alaykum-Assalam Aur Rahamatullah*" means "May the peace of God be upon you too", (2) when another Muslim desires help from him, he should assist; (3) when another Muslim seeks advice from him, he should give him advice; (4) when another Muslim falls seek, he should visit and enquire about him; (5) when another Muslim dies, he along with other Muslims should attend his funerals; and (6) when another Muslim sneezes and says, "*Alhamdu-lillah*" means "Praise is due to . *Allah*", he should follow the prayer and must say "*Yar-hamu-kallah*" means "Allah have mercy on you".⁹ Islam conceives universe as a single whole and not compartmentalized into the realms with divergent laws. The basic teaching of Islam is the unity of God and Universe. The unity of God symbolizes the uniformity of the laws in nature. The unity within the diversity is one of the most important goals of Islamic messages. Islam does not intend to impose uniformity of culture in all its details, nor does it seek to break the regional and local traditions as which are considered God's creation and eco-culturally determined. The customary practices are also recognized beyond obligatory performances and taboos as per Islamic dictations. This discussion includes rites and ceremonies practised by the *Nashya Sheikh* Muslim of North Bengal as a part of their culture. The great tradition of

Islam as well as little tradition of the *Nashya Sheikhs* where they are settling has been blended perfectly in their way of life. It is observed that life cycle rituals are performed at the household level whereas the Islamic religious practices are the joint responsibility of household and community. Islamic religion plays a vital role in every sphere of their life. Four distinct theological divisions are found in Islamic religion viz., *Hanafi*, *Safei*, *Maleki* and *Hambeli*. The *Nashya* are *Sunnis* and follow the tradition of *Hanafi* School. In social-religious matters they follow the guidelines of the *Barelvi* School (Madrasha) of thought. But in recent times the *Deobandi* School (Madrasha) of thought through Tableau activities has made a significant impact on them. The belief in *Pirism* is still a typical feature among them. Thus they are affiliated to the Muslim saints or Pirs. The *Nashyas* celebrate all the major Muslim festivals and perform the basic religious rites and ceremonies. But they tend to accept without much criticism the traditional social customs, which have passed to them from the previous generation. This continuity of little traditions facilitates them to integrate and assimilate the local society dominated by the Hindu Rajbansis. On the socio-religious level the *Nashya* cultivate the traits of Islamic great tradition to operate within the framework of wider Muslim society. The process of Islamization helped them in achieving a social position within the structure of a Muslim Society in Bengal. Local Moktabs, madrasas and masjids (mosques) which are either associated with the Barelvi or the Deobandi traditions play a very significant role in Islamizing the *Nashya* community. They try to maintain the principle of equality and justice as these are advocated by the prophet Muhammad. They do not believe in the intermediaries or pirs between the prophet and the common people. They are very particular in religious performances as prescribed in Islam. The most important religious activities of the *Nashya Sheikh* Community are noted below.¹⁰

Kalema:

Kalma, kalema means sentence, which is reliance (*astabakya*). The main sentence of Islam is mantra, which is not to become a Muslim without believing. The pen is the first of the five acts that are obligatory for Muslims in the Qur'an. The other four: prayers, fasting, *zakat*, and Hajj. These are obligatory for Muslims to practice, which is also a prerequisite for faith. The oneness of God and the belief in the prophet hood of Muhammad by reciting or reciting the Kalama is not just a belief; it is also a matter of practice. Kalma is to be recited in Arabic. Generally, it is the duty of every Muslim to learn the scriptures arranged in four or five stanzas. Kalma is the seed mantra of Islam: '*La ilahillallah Muhammadur Rasulallah*'. In English it is as follows: 'There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger.' Even if he does not know this very word, he cannot be called a Muslim. If someone wants to become a Muslim after converting to Islam, he has to read Islam.¹¹

Namaz:

Namaz means prayer to God or Allah. The *Nashya Sheikh* Muslim believes in single God. Prayer to God is made at various occasions. Depending upon the occasion and time, the name of *Namaz* varies. Daily prayer is performed five times a day. These are called *Fozor*, *Johor*, *Ashar*, *Magrib* and *Esha* and performed in the early morning, noon, afternoon, evening and night respectively.

Table 3.1

Religious calendar of the Nashya Sheikh is shown hereunder:

Activity	Name	Periodicity	Time	Place of Performance
Prayer	FozorNamaz	Daily	Morning	Home, open area and Mosque
„	Johor Namaz	Daily	Noon	Home, open area and Mosque
„	AsharNamaz	Daily	Afternoon	Home, open area and Mosque
„	MagribNamaz	Daily	Evening	Home, open area and Mosque
„	Esha Namaz	Daily	Night	Home, open area and Mosque
„	Jumma Namaz	Weekly (Friday)	Noon	Mosque
„	Eid Namaz (d-ui-Fitar)	Annual	Morning	Id-gaha
„	Eid Namaz (Eid-ud-Zoha)	Annual	Morning	Id-gaha
Purification	Ojhu	Before performing prayer	-	-
Fasting	Raja	Annual	Day Long	-
Pilgrimage	Haj	Once in a life time		Mecca

Monotheism and performance of *Namaz* are also found among the followers of Islam. But a distinction is made between the *Nashya Sheikh* and other Muslims of their locality. The other Muslims loudly pronounce "*Amin*" whereas the *Nashya Sheikh* Muslims speak "*Amin*"

not so loudly. Nevertheless, the *Nashya Sheikh* Muslim places their hands-on belly whereas other Muslims do it on the chest.¹²

Apart from daily *Namaz* they perform a weekly prayer called *Jumma Namaz*. It is held on *Jumma* day or Friday. On other festivals like *Eid-ul-fetar* and *Eid-ud-zoha* they also conduct special prayers or annual prayers. On the death of any person of their community they perform the funeral prayer of *Janaza Namaz*. The male members participate in the prayer outside as well as inside the house whereas the females perform only at home except on id days. *Imam* or *Maulabi* or the religious head of the mosque or of a particular community supervised the weekly and annual as well as farewell *Namaz*. Daily prayer is done by the individuals themselves.

Ohju:

Ohju is a ritual purification of the body. According to the Islamic *Shariat*, Purification of Hand, Leg and Mouthpiece are Called *Ohju*. Normally it is done before prayer or *Namaz* by the followers of Islam. There are four obligatory acts of *Ohju*: washing the face with clean water, washing both hands up to the elbows, wiping a quarter of the head with wet hands and washing both feet including the ankles. *Qur'anic* instruction (Sura *Mayida* 5:6) on *Ohju*: O you who believe! When you stand up for prayer, wash your face and hands up to your elbows, turn your hands over your head, and wash your feet up to the ankles. If you are unclean, you will be especially clean. If you are ill or on a journey or one of you comes out of the bathroom or are accompanied by his wife and do not get water, then *Tayyum* will cover it with clean soil and turn it over with his face and hands. The *Shari'ah* has provided for the use of soil or sand if there is no water for ablution anywhere.¹³ Not only in mosques, but also in offices, courts, schools, colleges, universities, and even on trains - wherever there is a separate place of prayer, there is an arrangement for performing *ohju*. In case of *Nashya Sheikh* Muslims it is observed that after urination *ohju* is done. Even a highly educated (M.

A. and teacher of a college) person of *Nashya Sheikh* Community taking a mug of water while he goes to the urinal, at least when at home.

Roja:

Roja or fasting is considered by the members of *Nashya Sheikh* Community as an aspect of religious devotion. Attachment with the religion of Islam is tightening through the observance of *Roja*. It is not binding to each and every member of their community. Those who can stay on fasting the whole day performed *Roja*. *Roja* is observed in the month of *Ramjan* or the ninth month of Islamic calendar. Fasting this month is one of the five basic principles in Islam. Throughout the month of Ramadan, fasting is observed from morning to evening. In Arabic it is called fasting or fasting. The word fasting means abstinence. You have to eat some food before sunrise. He is called *Sehri*. *Sehri* should be completed before the obligatory or morning prayers. At one time, people in small groups shouted and told the neighbours that it was time to eat *Sehri*. He ran out of necessities after Mike sat down in the mosque. But even a few years ago, this scene could be seen in the villages of North Bengal. Now it is time to eat *Sehri* from the microphone of the mosque. Fasting is obligatory for all physically able Muslims. Fasting is not obligatory for children, the sick, menstruating women and breastfeeding women. However, it is obligatory to make up for it by fasting at any time later. Then fast silently all day. There are no rules for swallowing. After hearing the *Maghrib* Azan in the afternoon, one has to break the fast by breaking the fast. The rule of eating a glass of water or sherbet and dates or any other food to break the fast. The name of the episode of breaking the fast is *Iftar*. Then *Maghrib* prayers. After a while, *Tarabi* prayers are to be recited along with *Esha* prayers. At that time the rules of reciting some *surahs* from of the *Qur'an*. During the month of Ramadan, many people finish reading the entire *Qur'an*. Rules of eating full after *Tarabi* prayers. Not only at home, during the month of *Ramadan*, special *Iftar* meals are prepared in food shops or restaurants in Muslim-inhabited areas.

Delicious *Halim* is available in Muslim food shops in North Bengal for one month of Ramadan. The Qur'an (Surabakara 2:185) says: "Whoever finds you in this month let him fast in it." The Qur'an (2:187) gives a clear indication of when and how to have intercourse with a woman during the month of *Ramadan*: 'It is lawful for you to have intercourse with a woman on the night of *Ramadan*.' In the same verse, there is an instruction on how long to eat and drink in *Ramadan*: 'And eat and drink until the white line of dawn appears to you from the black line of night. Then complete the fast till nightfall. 'Ramadan was also a holy month for pre-Islamic Arabs. Fighting was forbidden during the month of Ramadan. Fasting was introduced long before the advent of Islam in Arabia. Pre-Islamic pagans also fasted in various rituals. Even long before Islam, Jews were allowed to fast one day a week. The first verse of the Qur'an was revealed in the month of *Ramadan*.¹⁴

Hajj:

Hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam. The literal meaning of *Hajj* is to wish to go somewhere, to make a decision, to go around in a circle. Hajj is a must-do for Muslims. Every able-bodied Muslim is told in the Qur'an to go to Macca for *Hajj* at least once in his life. The Qur'an itself gives detailed instructions on what to do for *Hajj*. All the rituals of *Hajj* have to be completed between the 8th and 12th of the month of *Jelahojja* in the year *Hijri*. Pilgrims are required to take off their clothes and wear two seamless garments as they enter Mecca. The name of this ceremony of changing clothes is *Ehram*. Hajj begins with this ceremony. Then go to the Masjid-al-Haram in Makkah and kiss the black stone '*Hajre Aswad*' on the wall of the *Kaaba* and go around the *Kaaba* seven times. At the end of the circumference, you have to kiss the black stone again. This ritual is called *Tawaf*. About half a mile from *Kaaba*, one has to go to *Safa* hill and start walking up to *Marwa* hill. *Marwa* hill is 100 yards away from *Kaaba*. The distance from *Safa* to *Marwar* is about 450 meters. One has to run seven times between the two hills, which mean a pilgrim has to run about 3.15 km.

It is believed that Ibrahim's wife and son were deported there. This ritual is performed in their memory. Surrounding the *Safa* and *Marwa* hills and the middle road, the camp has now been taken to the Masjid-ul-Haram. Even elevators have been installed to ease the hassle of Hajj pilgrims climbing mountains. After reaching Arafat, they had to spend the night on the ground. Muslims believe that when Abraham was about to sacrifice his son, Satan appeared to deceive them. Millions of Muslims still throw stones every year during the Hajj for the purpose of that devil. *Hajj* is also to be sacrificed in *Mina*. After the sacrifice, the *Hajj* ends with the shaving of the head. *Hajj* pilgrims have to spend a total of three nights in *Mina*. *Hajj* is basically a pre-Islamic religion. People still used to go for Hajj from far and wide. There were 360 idols around the *Kaaba* till Hazrat Muhammad conquered Mecca and established Islam there. They used to worship those idols as they walked around the *Kaaba*. Even then their main deity was Allah. His idol was also there. After the conquest of Mecca, the statues were smashed at the behest of Muhammad, and all other murals, including Mary and Jesus, were removed. Muhammad then made a code of conduct for the Muslims to perform the *Hajj*. That is how *Hajj* is still celebrated. There is a provision of Hajj for the elderly or infirm, physically handicapped or prisoners in Islam. Call him *Hajj*. Even if someone dies wishing to go for *Hajj* or start organizing, someone can perform *Hajj* instead of him.¹⁵

Zakat:

Zakat is a compulsory religious gift. *Zakat* is derived from the rule of donating one year's accumulated wealth or part of the profits earned in Islam. *Zakat* is one of the five obligatory acts of Islam. The rule is that one-fortieth of the accumulated wealth must be donated. Muslims believe that *Zakat* frees people's minds from greed, covetousness and miserliness towards wealth. *Zakat* is instructed in many places in the Qur'an. The Qur'an (*Surat al-Baqarah* 2:43) instructs:¹⁶ 'the amount of wealth that is left over is considered obligatory to pay *Zakat*, in Islamic terminology it is called' *Nisab*'. The *Nisab* of gold and

silver is determined by weight. And the calculation of grain or product is based on its price. It is prescribed in the Qur'an to pay *Zakat* for certain earnings and wealth. If a person has additional wealth for at least one year (354 days), one-fourth of that wealth has to be donated as *Zakat*. The rule of paying *Zakat* at the rate of Rs Two and Half percentage. In the past, the Islamic State used to collect *Zakat* in Baitul Maal or government treasury. Now it is distributed among the poor. Many people also pay *Zakat* for the development of educational institutions or public welfare.

Maktab and Madrasa:

These are the institutions where Knowledge on religious and secular life of the Muslims is acquired by the children. In the beginning the children were acquainted with Urdu language. Then they are trained to read the holy book Quran written in Arabic language.¹⁷ Techniques of *Sijdah* (bowing down during *Namaz*) are also learnt by the children from the *Maktab*s situated in all the *Nashya Sheikh* settlements under study. *Maktab* literally means school. *Maktab* is the name given to the schools that teach the basics of Islam to the children. Madrasa education started after finishing *Maktab* lessons. In the villages of North Bengal, there are still many *maktab*s in the courtyard of the mosque. The imam of the mosque gives the basic lessons of Islam to the children of the village. Sometimes there is *Maktab* with any Madrasa. Although the West Bengal government approves Madrasa education, there is no such approval in the case of *maktab*s. *Maktab* has become *Maktab* in common Bengali. There are four levels in the Arab education system: *Maktab*, Madrasa, *Alia*, and *Milia*. In Madrasas languages, 'mathematics and science are taught formally. The degrees such as, *Hafej*, *Kari*, *Aleem*, *Fazel* etc. are conferred from the Madrasa Board.

Madrasa is a religious school for Muslims. Origin of the word madrasa from the Arabic word *dars*. *Dars* means teaching. Madrasa is where teaching is done. At one time there was a system of teaching in the reserved part of the mosque. At one time a group of

devoted Companions lived there and listened to the words of Hazrat Muhammad. Later more mosques were built and mosque-centric Madrasas were built. Madrasas were established in this country after the advent of Islam. Even in the heyday of modern education, the importance of Madrasa education in Muslim society has not diminished. Rather increased in many cases. Still new Madrasas were built in the villages of Bengal. The first government-funded madrasa in the country was in Calcutta in 1781. The first educational institution set up by the British government was 'Calcutta Alia Madrasa College'. There is a syllabus for BA and MA in Islamic theology. Calcutta Madrasa has been upgraded to a Muslim University and renamed as Alia University. The largest and most respected madrasas in the state are: FurfuraFatehiya Senior Madrasah in Hooghly district, Beldanga Senior Madrasah in Murshidabad district and Batna Senior Madrasa in Malda district. The number of Madrasas in this state is about 15 thousand. Of these, 500 are high Madrasas and 105 are senior Madrasas.

Khariji or *Nizamiya* Madrasas are run entirely on private initiative and with the money of religious donations of the common people. In most of these madrasas there is no specific syllabus. It goes without saying that nothing but religious education is taught. Bengali language is not taught in many places. These Madrasas are mainly for boys. But the days are changing. Some *Kharijis* now include science, even computer learning, in addition to English and Bengali. These Madrasas are usually residential. Accommodation and tuition of students are all free. As a result, boys from poor families are sent there. Financially, one or two *Khariji* Madrasa fees are closed every year. And there is *Korania* Madrasa. Many also call it *Forkania* Madrasa. Since another name in the Qur'an is *Forkan*. These Madrasas are usually built on the premises of a mosque. Only the Qur'an is memorized there. Students memorize the entire Qur'an for three, five, seven or ten years, depending on their memory. He who memorizes the whole Qur'an is called Hafez in the Qur'an. They can often only memorize, remain ignorant of the meaning or interpretation of the Qur'an.

Masjid:

The mosque is a place of worship for Muslims. Literally means place of prostration. The pagans of the pre-Islamic era also called the place of worship a mosque. In the Qur'an, the word mosque is used to mean the *mosque-ul-haram* of Mecca. *Masjid-ul-Haram* is the mosque in the courtyard of which is the *Kaaba*. Muslims believe that *Masjid-ul-Haram* was built by the first man, the first prophet Adam. That shrine in Mecca was the holy temple of the pagan Arabs. After the conquest of Mecca, Muhammad occupied it and destroyed the idols of all the gods and goddesses there, deleting the images and declaring it the holiest mosque for the Muslims. It is said in Islam that every place is equal to Allah. Prayers can be offered anywhere. The Prophet says that the whole world has been given to him as a mosque. Yet Muhammad himself built the first mosque for Muslims in Medina. That is *Masjidunnabi*. Since then, huge mosques have been built in different countries of the world. In this country too, the Mughal emperors built many huge mosques and showed more splendour and power than they did in relying on Islam. Those mosques now stand as the finest examples of Mughal architecture in the country. It is also the pride of Indian culture.¹⁸

Very common houses of mosques can be seen in the villages of Bengal. The straw rice mosque is also in sight. However, all mosques have a minaret. Until a few days ago, the muezzin used to climb the minaret and call for prayers. Now all mosques have mics installed in the minarets. As a result, the muezzin no longer has to climb the minaret and call for prayers. On the west wall of the mosque is a semi-circular secluded place. It is called '*Mehrab*'. You have to pray facing the arch. The arch is always to the west, that is, to the Kaaba. All mosques have water for ablution. The mosque is arranged according to its capacity. Ponds, wells, tube wells or any kind of water source are kept. There must be an Imam in the mosque to conduct the prayers. Praying in a mosque is always considered more virtuous than praying alone in one's own house. If it is not possible every day, then at least

the *Jumma* (Friday) bar prayer must be performed in the mosque and standing in the queue. That is what is considered virtue.¹⁹ Islam and the mosque are inextricably linked, as if two backs of the same coin. Therefore, before discussing the mosques of North Bengal, it is advisable to gain knowledge about the rise of Islam in North Bengal.

Whatever the religious reasons, judging from the modern scientific point of view, the importance of Friday prayers is immense in strengthening the bonds of brotherhood and social bonds. People who have been running for personal needs for a week get a chance to take a break and exchange ideas with each other through the weekly *Jumma*. So, the importance of Friday *Jumma* cannot be denied in any way.

Whatever the scientific point of view, it is well known that mosques were created for religious reasons. It is pertinent to note that with the establishment of Islamic rule in Bengal in the thirteenth century AD, the spread of Islam in North Bengal began in earnest during the Husainshahi and Ilias Shahi independent Bengali rulers of Bangladesh towards the end of the Sultanate period. The afternoon of this Islamic expansion was the reign of ‘*Zindapir*’ Aurangzeb’s Subadar-Shaista Khan and Mir Jumla Khan. Later, even during the independent Nawabi period, this trend was flowing at a slower pace, which continues to this day.

Although the first mosque in North Bengal was not built by historical sources, it is well known that the first mosque in the world was the Kurapara Mosque in Medina; which was built on 23rd September 622 AD. Although no significant information has been found as to where the first mosque was built in North Bengal, the archaeological significance of the thousands of mosques that exist today throughout North Bengal is immense.

One of the mosques of North Bengal which is of immense archaeological importance is the Barasona Mosque at Gaur which was built by Sultan Nasrat Shah in 1526 AD. The Sheikh Khairullah Mosque, built in 1812 AD, is considered as one of the monumental

architectures of North Bengal. The Kuttitola Mosque, built by the virtuous Mahiyasi Nari Shoara Bewa in Maldah, is one of the oldest mosques in the city. The other mosques in the Maldah district are the Chika Mosque, which stands a little southwest of Kadam Rasmal and stands intact, like the one hundred thousand mausoleums in Pandua. However, many are reluctant to accept this monument as a mosque. Other important mosques in Malda include Lotan Mosque, Gunwant Mosque, Lalbazar Dargah Mosque Today, there are several thousand mosques in the Muslim-majority Malda. Notable among these mosques that still stand as historical witnesses today are the small Dargah or Hazari Dargah Mosque, Qutubshahi Mosque, Eklakhi Samadhi Monument, Futi Mosque, Shank Mohan Mosque, Old Maldah Jame Mosque etc.²⁰

The Adina Mosque is one of the historic mosques of Malda district which is still considered as a witness of history as an immortal memorial. 36 domed mosques made of brick and stone. This huge quadrangular monument with 36 domes made of brick and stone was built by Sultan Sikandar Shah in 1369 AD.

Although there are not many historical mosques like Malda in North and South Dinajpur, there are numerous specimens of mosques in these two districts which were built during the Sultanate or Mughal period. Although the mosques at Balurghat, Raiganj, Islampur, etc. are not very old, their craftsmanship cannot be ignored.

Of the six districts in North Bengal, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri have the lowest number of mosques. Although the number of mosques is small in the area adjacent to Alipurduar in Jalpaiguri district, a large number of mosques can be seen in Jalpaiguri, Dhupguri, Mainaguri, Batabari etc. The number of mosques in Darjeeling district is unusual compared to other districts in North Bengal. Although there are several mosques in Darjeeling and Siliguri, their historical significance is not so significant. The construction of mosques has

been in the forefront since the reign of the king of Cooch Behar, a marginal district of North Bengal; so today there are more than one and a half thousand mosques in this small district.

Although the history of expansion and construction of Islam and mosques in Cooch Bihar district is seven to eight hundred years old, for various reasons, no ancient mosque has been found here. A survey here found no mosque more than 450 years old. The reasons behind this may be: (a) financial crisis, (b) mosques may or may not have been built on a solid foundation in the beginning.

The custodians (Muslim emirs) of Cooch Bihar district have recently divided the entire Cooch Bihar district into a total of 48 *Halkas* (mosque-based areas). Sub divisional details of these lights are given in the table below.²¹

Subdivision name	Halkar name	number of mosques	Total
Cooch Bihar	1. Haribhanga	32	288
	2. Boragari	20	
	3. Coochbihar	30	
	4. PatlaKhawa	80	
	5. Patchara	27	
	6. Rajpur	09	
	7. Dewanhat	20	
	8. Shukatabari	70	
Dinhata	9. Peolaguri	31	
	10. Okrabari	27	
	11. Gitaldaha	12	
	12. Ratinandan	10	
	13. Natabari	23	
	14. Chowdhurir Hat	48	

	15. Nayarhat	20	
	16. Fakirtari	32	
	17. Petla	16	
	18. Batrigach	17	
	19. Paharganj	24	
	20. Vetaguri	18	
	21. Kharuvanja	47	
	22. Nazirhat	36	
	23. Garaljhora	12	446
	24. Maheshwar	14	
	25. Sitai	29	
	26. Giridhari	31	
Mathabhanga	27. Nishiganj	17	
	28. Kalpani	16	
	29. Sonarchalu	29	
	30. Bamuniya	32	
	31. Mathabhanga	70	297
	32. Baramaricha	90	
	33. Golenaohati	14	
	34. Ghoksadanga	26	
Tufanganj	35. Balrampur	20	
	36. Natabari	22	
	37. Kaljani	12	
	38. Chilakhana	26	
	39. Mansai	26	
	40. Tufanganj	06	

	41. Takuamari	20	297
	42. Dipurpar	39	
	43. Balabhut	17	
	44. Deocharai	20	
	45. Chotoguma	29	
	46. Dhalpal	60	
Mekhliganj	47. Panishala	70	
<hr/>			
	Total		1397

The total number of mosques in 46 *halqas* out of five subdivisions of Cooch Behar district is 1396. The following is a description of some of the traditional mosques mentioned in it.

Sonar ChalunPaglu Bosuniya Mosque:

Jatamari is 7.5 km away from Mathabhanga town along the South Sitalkuchi road. The oldest mosque in the Mathabhanga subdivision is located on the left side of the road, 6 km west of Jatamari along the Sangarbari road. According to the inscription of the mosque and the description of Nurul Islam Bosunia, a descendant of Paglu Bosunia, this mosque, which is more than a century old, is contemporary with the reign of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. The mosque was built by Pagal Basuniya, son of Ganta Basuniya, a resident of Sonar Chalun village, in the late seventeenth century. Built on a land of four *bighas* on about 15 acres of land, this ancient monument has a unique combination of Indo-Persian style of construction. Dome and arch art has been used in the construction of this monument. The ancient mosque, built of terracotta and *chunsurki*, stands out in a dazzling appearance as a marvel of ancient art. The present mosque has about 500 families. Out of these 500 families, a 30-member steering committee has been formed in a democratic manner. Md. Mozammel

Hossain and Abul Kalam Azad Mahasaya are the president and vice-president of this steering committee respectively. Mohammad Anwar Husain Ahmed is the secretary of the steering committee. Talking to the editor, we came to know that they have taken far-reaching and costly steps to maintain the existence of this ancient monument by collecting donations and not any government grant.²²

Mosque of Nalatu Pramanik in Sitai:

It is known from the inscriptions on the walls of the mosque that this is the oldest religious institution in Cooch Behar district which was built 420 years ago with the music and charity of Nalatu Pramanik. According to mosque sources and Abdullah Pramanik, a descendant of Nalatu Pramanik, the four-century-old mosque was built on five acres of land at one end of a 14-bigha property donated by Nalatu Pramanik. Three large domes and four smaller domes built on the top of the mosque have enlivened the architectural style of the monument. The arched structure of the front door of the mosque adds to the historical significance of its architectural style. The Indo-Persian style of construction is evident in the construction style of the mosque, which is made of ancient bricks and limestone.²³

Mathabhanga Jame Mosque (Town Mosque):

The Mathabhanga Jame Mosque is located in the centre of the town of Mathabhanga, just opposite the Madan Mohan Temple built 115 years ago by the generosity of Chowdhury Pasar Mohammad; this monument still stands intact as a shining symbol of holiness. Standing on a 15-acre plot of land on two *bighas* of land, the century-old structure is more striking in its architectural style than in the medieval style. Although one of the features of Islamic art can be seen in the construction of the dome and arch monument, the structure of Bhanna Sadh has given uniqueness in its variety. Adjacent to the south wall of the mosque are two successive burial grounds to the south of the small azan room, about 10 feet high. It is learned

that in one of them Chowdhury Pasar Mohammad has been buried and in the other his wife Unnesa has been buried. Although 10/15 urban families are associated with the mosque, hundreds of devout Muslims perform daily prayers at the mosque, including on Fridays. Although there are few families with the mosque, there is a committee of 10 democratically elected members to maintain and manage the mosque. Mohammad Hanif Miah and Bapi Siddique are the chairmen and secretaries of the committee respectively. Proceeds from stalls and messes built on the land of the mosque are spent on the repair and maintenance of the mosque. Thanks to the generosity of the mosque committee, about 7/8 poor students can study in the mess at low cost which is considered as a part of public welfare.²⁴

Dankoba Waqf State Sheikh Amulya Wholesaler's Mosque:

The century-old traditional mosque is located in the village of Dankoba, about three km west of the town of Mathabhanga and about one km south of the Madrasa Chowpatty. The foundation stone of this mosque was laid by the local zamindar Sheikh Amulya Paikar on Friday 1st *Agrahayan* 1329 BS. It is said that Amulya, the owner of 600 bighas (233 acres) of property, built the mosque with 75 *bighas* of land (25 acres) in the name of the mosque. Indo-Islamic artefacts can be found in this ancient monument built on eight hundred acres of land. On the roof of the monument are three large domes, which are a reflection of Islamic craftsmanship. The front door of the monument, built of terracotta (light brick) and *chunsurki*, is in the shape of an arch. The architectural style of this century-old monument is truly captivating and dazzling. Unfortunately, the mosque is still in a state of disrepair due to lack of proper maintenance and repairs, even though about 400 families still perform prayers under the mosque. Locals allege that the mosque is in a state of disrepair due to the weakness and neglect of his daughter's descendants after the death of his son Sheikh Amulya. The mosque is currently overseen by Golzar Hossain Miah, son of Abdul Majid Miah (Amulya's grandson) and local Fazle Karim Miah (Sardar). Besides, there is no committee to run the big

society, there is no democratic system. No tribute is collected from any worshiper. There is no government grant. Descendants of the local Adiyar and Amulya wholesalers are embezzling 75 *bighas* of property in the name of the mosque. According to sources, some descendants of Inam and Amulya wholesalers of the mosque are still getting an allowance of 4.25 per month from the *Waqf* Board. It is pertinent to note that the lion's share of the 600 *bighas* of Amulya Mian's property has become vest and the descendants are now living below the poverty line.²⁵

Nagar Gopalganj Kadar Uddin Waqf State Mosque:

From Mathabhanga town, take the Shitalkhuchi road and proceed 9 km south to the Post Office Bazaar. Nagar Gopalganj village is located 4 km east of the post office market. This mosque, which is almost a century old, was established in this village in 1335 BS with the generosity of 13th Chaitra zamindar Kadaruddin Mian. Zamindar Kadaruddin, who was reportedly rescued, had more than 1,200 *bighas* (400 acres) of property. Among them, he donated 351 *bighas* of property in the name of the mosque as *waqf* property. Later, when most of the land of Zamindar Kadar Uddin Sahib became *khas*, all the lands except 45 *bighas* of the mosque became *khas*. In the present situation, there is no cultivable land left under the mosque, all the lands have been evicted by Adiyar. Built on about 12 acres of land, including the veranda, the architectural style of this century-old monument is also unique. The architectural craftsmanship of the mosque is characteristic of the mixed art style. 130 families are socially associated with this ancient mosque. There is a nine-member committee, including Editor Nurul Haque, to manage the mosque. Through the efforts of the committee, this century-old mosque has been able to retain its intact heritage even today.²⁶

Bara Maricha Khan Chowdhury Amantullah Ahmed's Mosque:

This ancient mosque, one of the most famous in the Mathabhanga subdivision, was built about a century ago by Amirullah Patwari, the father of Dewan Khan Chowdhury Amanatullah Ahmed, the king of Cooch Behar. The monument is located about 27 km from Mathabhanga, 1 km south of Baramaricha Bazar on the Mathabhanga-Sitai road. The construction style of this monument is a wonderful blend of Indo-Islamic art. Built of terracotta and limestone, the monument's numerous domes and pillars and arched front doors add to its historical significance. Mr. Chowdhury's 18-room house, which is 50 meters south of the mosque, is still standing as a witness of history. There is a huge pond 100 meters to the east of the mosque. According to legend, the area from the pond to the mosque is an excellent example. Although guest houses are wiped out today. According to local sources, the mosque had 32 *bighas* of land in its name but was evicted today. In the absence of the Chowdhury, this ancient mosque is in a dilapidated condition due to financial difficulties and lack of renovation. A committee of 22 democratically elected members is in charge of overseeing the mosque. Md. Badruddin Miah and Bamizuddin Miah are the president and secretary of the mosque respectively. Md. Nur Islam Miah is in charge of the mosque. All the work of the mosque is done from the donations of about 350 families associated with the mosque.²⁷

Research and reviews of mosques in North Bengal have shown that there are no clear signs of a mosque being demolished for any reason, as in other parts of India. On the other hand, the mosques that have been built or are being built all over India, even during the Sultanate and Mughal periods, have inevitably been able to give birth to a fertile and mixed art form, known as Indo-Islamic art. The role of the mosques that have been or are being built in North Bengal from the thirteenth century to the middle of the eighteenth century, even in the present century, are by no means insignificant.

Tablig Jamat:

Tabligh Jamaat means preaching, that is, preaching of Religion. *Tabligh* is to convey the message of Islam to the people. Muslims believe that God sent prophets to earth at different times to preach. In their absence, the followers of the Prophet will continue to preach. To this end, an organization called *Tabligh Jamaat* was formed in Delhi in 1920 on the initiative of Maulana Mohammad Elias.²⁸ At present, *Tabligh Jamaat* has become an international propaganda movement across the borders of this subcontinent. *Tabligh Jamaat* has been working all over the world to make Muslims firmly believe in Islam and to inculcate and adhere to the precepts of the religion. The activities of *Tabligh Jamaat* are limited to the Muslim community. Attracting non-worshippers to prayers is also their big job. The world centre of *Tabligh Jamaat* is in Delhi. *Tabligh Jamaat* has offices in all the districts of all the states of India. In many places, their organization is spread at sub-divisional, block and village level. The work of the preachers is centered on the mosque. The preachers call that mosque *Markaz*. Their daily routine is designed in such a way that the preachers can keep in touch with the marquee every day. In this way the work of *Tabligh Jamaat* is conducted by keeping in touch between the regional or local marquees and the central marquees. The preachers think that it is the duty of every Muslim to serve and protect Islam. And this work can be done best through preaching. This work is done in two ways: *Mokami* (regionally or locally) or preaching tour. Preaching can be done in the mosques of a particular area by forming *Mokami Jamaat* with a few people from any region. And one day a week (usually Thursday night) to go to the mosque in your area or the surrounding area and invite Muslims to join in the preaching. In addition, the preachers travel far and wide to preach, even in other states or countries. *Tabligh Jamaat* is also very strong in West Bengal. In addition to making illiterate Muslims in remote villages more devout Muslims, they also teach the lesson of Islamic brotherhood.²⁹ But this movement is anti-propaganda. The preaching work and the

preaching work go on in such a way that it attracts no attention. As a result, many have no idea about the scope and size of *Tabligh Jamaat*.

Tabligh Jamaat has been expanding its offices in every district of North Bengal in this way. And the illiterate Nashya Sheikh of the remote village has been influencing the Muslims since the establishment of *Tabligh Jamaat*. The main centers of *Tabligh Jamaat* in North Bengal are Suktabari in Cooch Behar district and Shishubari in Jalpaiguri district. From here the work of *Tabligh Jamaat* in North Bengal is controlled. In this way the work of preaching through every mosque in North Bengal is done. Every week, every month and once a year, *Tabligh Jamaat* gathers at Suktabari and Shishu Bari, the headquarters of North Bengal. Here, for three days a week, a few people form a congregation and go out to visit the local area. During these three days, they went from house to house preaching in the area of three mosques in accordance with the teachings of Muhammad. In this way, for ten days in a month, one month in three months, two months in six months and up to four months in a year, the work of *Tabligh Jamaat* is done.

Pir, Ghazi and Darbesh and the Nashya Sheikh Community of North Bengal:

The role of Sufism is significant in the context of the conversion of the *Nashya Sheikh* community, the son of the original land of North Bengal. In this context, the current practice of Sufi *Pir*, *ghazis* and *Darbesh* is the main topic of discussion for the *Nashya Sheikh* community. Extreme devotion to the *Pir*, *Ghazi* and *Darbesh* of the *Nashya Sheikh* community can be seen in the various parts of North Bengal. The location of these Sufi shrines of *Ghazi* and *Darvesh* in different parts of North Bengal is still prominent today. The *Nashya Sheikh* Muslim community of Islam also has an extreme devotion to these mystical fraternal Sufi saints, *ghazis* and *Darbesh*, along with the basic precepts, *kalema*, prayers, fasting, *Hajj* and *zakat*. The entry of this Sufi philosophy is not just for the Sheikh

community. People of Muslim-Hindu community as well as people of all other communities pay equal homage to *Pir, Darvesh* of North Bengal.

There was a time when the common people believed that the saints of *Pir Darvesh* had miraculous powers. That belief is not something that has been destroyed in the mind-sets of the people. People from both the Muslim and Hindu communities still know the possibility of these miracles and still seek their help and intervention. They look up to these saints with the strong hope and belief that the *Pirs* can save the people from their hardships and troubles if they wish to, and can also raise the dead. Such is the faith that they bestow upon these *Pirs*.

However, in the light of the main discussion, it can be said that there are various folk tales and legends about the famous and infamous *Pir Fakir* Saints of Bengal and a wide area of North Bengal. Memories of their great and noble fame can be found between the dilapidated, half-broken, extinct, half-secret shrines, *Dargah, Chilla* and their inscriptions. Satyapir, Tenapir, Ghorpir, Dhaelapir, Dariyapir, Kalipir, Manikpir, Madaripir (fishes and tortoises) were present here besides Mowajpir, Jaethapir, Dhakarpir, Laengrapir, Chelpir, Sekendarpir, Mokdumpir, Mushkilasaanpir, Akinpir, Shahpir, PirAtaullah etc. People still gather at the shrines or graveyards of various saints, fakirs, saints, irrespective of caste or creed. This reunion took place while they were still alive and their memories are still fresh in our minds. They were respected by Hindus and Muslims. Ekramul Haque (Rh:), the most popular Sufi saint of Haldibari in Cooch Behar district of North Bengal, was the recipient of such homage. His life philosophy and influence remained described.

The famous '*Huzur Sahib*' of Haldibari, Shah Sufi Sayyid Muhammad Ekramul Haq (RA) was one such Sufi saint. He was born in 1851 in the house of Hekim in Jhaljhalia state of Koch Bihar state. Jhaljhalia is located six kilometers south of Tufanganj town. His grandfather was a hakim in the Maharaja's State of Kochbihar State. His father's name was Shahsufi Sayyid Muhammad Ibrahim (Rh), mother Sayyida Hajera Bibi (Rh), and

Grandfather Muhammad Azizar Rahman (Rh). His ancestors are known to have Arab blood.³⁰

The reason for their arrival in Koch Bihar is known to be that Mohammad Azizar Rahman (RA) was a resident of Talippur village in Murshidabad district. He came to this kingdom as Raj Hekim. He has lived here since 1839. From an incident of that time, we can know about his expertise in *Hekimi*. During the reign of Maharaja Shivendra Narayan, construction work was going on in the palace. Two masons fell to the ground from above and lost consciousness. The king's doctor examined them and declared them dead. But Muhammad Azizar Rahman (RA) saw them and declared them alive. But where the king's doctors say dead, this sage says alive! As a result, it is necessary to give proof. He covered the bodies of the two men with two bottles of medicine and blankets. After covering them for an hour, he removed the blankets from their bodies and found them alive. He was honoured by the royal government of Koch Bihar and donated more than 500 acres of land as *Lakheraj*.³¹

There are many miraculous stories about the life of Huzur Sahib in the mouths of the people of Haldibari. From there it is difficult to tell the story of his life separately. After spending some time at his grandfather's house, he had to go to his father's house. His father's house was in Punashi village of Murshidabad district. His interest in spiritual matters can be seen in him from an early age. He came in contact with the saints and fakirs in his childhood. As a child, he wore *pajamas-Punjabi* and a hat and prayed five times. He also had the habit of reading other scriptures including the Koran.³²

A training teacher was arranged for his teaching at an early age. From him he learned to recite Nuh-Saraf, Tafsir, Hadith, Fiqh-Usul, Hikmat-Mantik etc. and gained origin of them. Not only that, he also mastered the French language. For higher education he studied at the Government College, Bahrapur. There he studied poetry, physics, chemistry, etc. He was

well versed in *Hakimi* medicine and Sufi philosophy. He was proficient in Persian as well as Bengali and English. His memory was strong. So he received modern education as well as spiritual knowledge. One day in college, a student disrespected his hat. That makes him dissatisfied. He dropped out of college in this incident. He then devoted himself to spiritual pursuits.³³

His '*Pir*' or guru was Hazrat Sayyid Murshid Al Qadri (RA). From there he returned to his village. Then he came in contact with various Sufi saints. They are: Shah Sufi Sayyed Abdul Aziz Qudsi (Rh), Shajsufi Sayyidfateh Ali Waisi (Rh) and others. From them he gained various spiritual knowledge.³⁴

Huzur Sahib then went to *Beaban* forest and started meditating. Sayyid Fateh Ali Waisi (RA) ordered him to meditate on this. He started his pursuit under a mango tree at Sapnikala in Ramganj in Dinajpur district. When his fame spread there, he left the place. He wants to hide himself in the pursuit of God. As a result, he moved to Cooch Behar again. But why would people leave? Here, too, people come to *Jummabar* with their problems and get solutions. But the crowd continues to grow in his reputation. As a result, he had to move again. He devoted himself to the pursuit of the forests, hills, and mountains of *Dwars* and Assam. During this time some other devotees and saints met him. As a result, his storehouse of spiritual knowledge became full. After attaining spiritual pursuits, he returned to Punashi's house.³⁵

Huzur Sahib started the spiritual preaching with the permission of Shajsufi Muhammad Fateh Ali Waisi. He preached in a wide area of *Dwars* and Assam. At that time there were no roads or vehicles like today. Naturally, he had to preach on foot, in ox-carts, and on horseback. When he was older, his disciples carried him on their beds. Not only in *Dwars*, Assam or North Bengal, he was also a novice in spiritual preaching in 24 Parganas, Nadia, Burdwan, Medinipur, Hughli, Birbhum, Howrah, Bankura, Murshidabad districts.

Moreover, he was tireless in travelling and learning. He visited the shrines of famous Sufi saints in India. He is known to have performed many miraculous abilities in his travels. Many people in different places accepted his discipleship. He has organized many *thawabs*, *dharmasabhas* etc. in Isal. He gave religious explanations there and also took measures to spread modern education in those places.³⁶

At the age of 36, the married life of the lord began. His wife is Sayyida Maryam Nesar. His marriage was consummated through a special event. His father-in-law was Muhammad Sultan, the zamindar of Bamundi village in Burdwan. He holds his daughter, Mary Nesser, in '*Gene*'. He is not well in any treatment. Hearing the fame of the lord, the zamindar took refuge in him. Sir made him well. The zamindar proposed marriage of his daughter to the lord. But will the daughter marry a fakir? This marriage function organised except the relatives of the zamindar. But this marriage is done by the will of the *zamindar babu*.³⁷

As mentioned earlier, living a monastic life was not necessary in Sufi practice. Spiritual pursuit can be done beyond the worldly desires even from within the world. So many Sufi saints got married and lived a family life. The same happened in the case of Huzur Sahib. He has five sons and a daughter. The sons are: Shahsufi Sayyid Muhammad MahibdulHaq (Rh.), Shahsufi Sayyid Alhaj Muhammad Mahbul Haque, Shahsufi Sayyid Muhammad, Malubul Haq, Shahsufi Sayyid Alhaj Muhammad Sirajul Haq and Shahsufi Sayyid. The daughters are HazratSayyida Musa: Jamila Khatun, HazratSayyida Musa: Rahela Khatun, Hazrat Sayyida Musa: Rabia Khatun, Hazrat Sayyida Mahmuda Khatun and Hazrat Sayyida Damusa: Shams Bajega. As a father, he was responsible for his sons and daughters. Again, his sympathy for the inconvenience of the neighbours was equally showered. His characteristic was full of holiness. He has preached the word of God. He has preached

among many devotees. But he had the same vision towards people of all religions irrespective of race or religion.

He explained religion in the light of the Qur'an. "There is no coercion in religion," it said. He preached this message. He is the famous saying of Hazrat Muhammad that if a person tries to harm others, Allah will harm him. Whoever tries to narrow the life of others, Allah will narrow his life. 'In his advice, he also said, "Unite in religion and break unity in unrighteousness.' That is, he advised to follow the path of *Naid*. Another of his advice is particularly noteworthy, the heart is a transparent lake, it has four channels — eyes, ears, mouth, wings, hands and feet.³⁸ If we use the canals properly, the waves will play in that lake, the merriment will rise; but if we don't do that, that is, if we don't close those drains, it will make the lake worse. He himself was pure in heart and advised his disciples to be pure in heart. He expresses his focus on God in his poems,

*“Khodabhinnonahionyojagatersar,
Tahardhiyanemognothakoanibar.
Tri jagatpratinidhihridoyanchale,
Ashile korban karo hridoykomole.”³⁹*

Wherever he has gone, people have found guidance in his message for humanity. Dedication to God is the best way to salvation. Only he who has the qualities of humanity in his heart can dedicate himself to Allah. He has brought man from the complex cycle of darkness to the path of light. People believe that he had the miraculous power to do good to the sick and helpless people.

Mr. Jagatber Sira Hujar of Nilphamari district of present-day Bangladesh has been invited. Huzur Saheb the residents of the area have invited Huzur Saheb to go there just in time. No one is accepting his discipleship even though he is invited to accept it. One of them went to Mr. John Hujar and told him that two tigers were coming from the forest and were

harming cows, goats etc. As a result, people here are very frustrated. If the lord calls the two tigers and asks them to do harm, then they are much benefited. The master replied, wild tiger, will they hear the call of the people? But why would the fans leave him? They believe that only Mr. Huzur can save them from tiger attack and all losses. Huzur could not help but respond to the words of the fans. So, he asked them to call the two tigers in the afternoon. He asked them to slaughter two Khasi for the two tigers. The devotees did as he was told. He then asked to keep the meat in two separate containers. Meanwhile, word spread in the villages that Huzur Sahib would bring the two tigers to the house of the devotee in the afternoon and forbid them to do any more harm. As a result, many people gathered. At the right time, the master called the two tigers. Two tigers came at his call. The people in the crowd started screaming in fear. The master forbade everyone to shout. The two tigers came slowly and started licking his legs. He turned his hand on the heads of the two tigers and said, "Do not harm the village cows, goats or anything else." It is seen that the tiger ate the meat of the two pots and went back to the forest. After that day, the two tigers did no more harm to the people of the area. Seeing this miraculous power of Mr. Hujar, the locals also started accepting his discipleship.⁴⁰

In this way, the people of different parts of Bengal and Assam have been blessed with his blessings in their helpless condition throughout their lives. He has been a disciple of people from different places and has joined *Isals Swab* in different for many years of his life. While doing all this, he fell ill. So, he came to Nizamuddin Pradhan's house in Jalpaiguri for treatment. Nizamuddin Pradhan spent a lot of money on his treatment but instead of improving his condition continued to deteriorate. Thus, three months passed. He heard the last call. It was time for him to leave. He began to prepare for it. For this Khadim asked Mizuddin to inform his two sons Maksudul and Sirajul to come. The next day he repeatedly asked Tamizuddin if his sons had come. Repeatedly, Tamizuddin opened the door and saw

the two of them coming. Another son Mahbul was with Huzur Sahib. He called his sons and gave them honest advice and later consulted with the devotees. In the end, he said, he should be buried in Haldibari. He had bought 116 bighas of land there. Huzur Sahib took his mortal body to take the name of Allah. He died at the age of 93 on 13th Bhadra (1944 AD) of Bengal in 1351 AD. Then the time is 8 o'clock in the morning. The sky was overcast that day. Among them the people of Bengal and Assam lost their beloved Huzur Sahib.⁴¹

His body was brought from Jalpaiguri to Haldibari by his innumerable devotees in special beds. There he was kept in the house of a devotee in the village of Baladanga. The final journey from there all day is to the present *Isal Swab* field. He was buried in that field according to his wishes. It was raining heavily at that time. While lying in the grave, the rain stopped completely. Thousands of fans paid their last respects to him with tears in their eyes.⁴²

Devotionals and Sufism played an important role in keeping the social order in India in the Sultanate era. The Sufis resorted to generosity and tolerance in preaching like them. The preachers of devotion and Sufism did not look at the race, caste or religion of the people. So, all the Hindus and Muslims were respected by them. As a result, people from all walks of life were inspired by these two ideals and were taught social equality and tolerance. As a result, religious tensions abated. The influence of Sufism is also found in the writings of Ibn Battuta. He writes that Sufi Sheikh Jalaluddin received many donations from his Hindu devotees. Sufis were also particularly interested in Hindu yoga. Their unpretentious, simple life, love of God brought an end to the bitterness and mutual distrust of the twelfth century. It had an impact on education, literature, and culture. The achievements of the Sufis in the spread of Hindustani music are undeniable. The flow of two different doctrines was actually intertwined. And this created a mixed culture in India. The '*Khanqah*' became centres of knowledge and learning. Sufis used to explain the religion and its creation to the people

gathered in different congregations in a life-giving and miraculous way. This facilitates the mental development of the fans. So, it can be said in the words of historians, "Sufism developed broad-mindedness and catholicity of the socio-cultural leadership of both the communities and fostered the feelings of religious tolerance and hastened the process of synthesis between their socio-cultural traits." In fact, there is no doubt that in the Middle Ages devotionals and Sufism dominated society. Later, standing on it, it seems that Akbar was able to plan 'Din-i-Ilahi'.⁴³

This trend of Sufism was also present in Huzur Sahib. He influenced the Muslim society of North Bengal. The Muslim community of Assam was no exception. In fact, he has contributed to the progress of Muslim society in the region. He is equally revered by the people of Hinduism. That is why everyone, irrespective of religion, is ready to pay their respects at his *Isal Swaab* ceremony.

Mazar Sharif is built around the tomb of Huzur Sahib. A high memorial has been erected on his tomb. There is a dome decorated with handicrafts. The main memorial is surrounded by four pillars. Next to it is the tomb of his daughter. Adjacent to the shrine is the Jame Mosque and *Musafirkhana*. The office room, the kitchen, on the other side is the residence of his descendants, the charity. Next to it is the tomb of his grandson Khoka Huzur. There is a stage of *wazmahfil* in the wide field. Every year during the annual ceremony, devotees listen to the Koran and other scriptures under the tin roof. It is here that eminent academics and theologians give their speeches. Ekramia Madrasa is in this hurry. The road has gone through. The field on the east and west sides of the road was filled with the noise of people during the fair. Recently a large gate has been constructed in these premises.⁴⁴

Isal Swab or *Dharmasabha* is organized every year on 5th and 6th Falgun in the memory of Huzur Sahib. The fair was centred on this *Dharmasabha*. At first, two or four shops were set up for the needs of the people of *Dharmasabha*. Gradually that number

continues to grow and gradually takes on the appearance of a fair. Now this fair occupies half the space of Haldibari town. These two days everyone comes here on foot. The sounds of the footsteps are hearing both day and night. The fair is only for two days. But his preparations have been going on almost throughout the year. Camel traders came from far away deserts of Rajasthan. The camels are tied up a short distance from the main square of the fair. On the day before the fair, there was a commotion all around. There is some food store in one and some sports and entertainment shop on the other side. There is some Book stall in the middle of the fair. On the day of the fair, Haldibari became the destination of all vehicles from Jalpaiguri. On this day all the roads of Haldibari come and merge at the *Dargah*. In the food stalls of the fair food stalls, there is a huge stock of Quran Sharifs printed in different countries, religious books of different sizes, big and small, biography of Huzur Sahib and other books in the size of Huzur Sahib, biography of Huzur Sahib and other books. There are shops for wooden household goods, blacksmith shops, *bati, jati* etc. However, sword, *tangi, kukri, ramada*, road and other weapons shops are also sitting in the fair. The stock of these weapons did not please the writer at the fair held in memory of the man who sacrificed his life for peace. Household items made of bamboo are also traded. In fact, almost all the necessary items are available at the fair. However, circus, merry-go-round or any such entertainment is not allowed as a remembrance festival.⁴⁵

From the morning of the 5th of *Falgun*, the name of the benefactor is *Dhal*. The flow of people overflows throughout the night. There is no pause until the end of the next day. This writer himself has seen in the stream of people just rows of black moving heads. From the morning of the first day, people started coming to Qatar by route cars, reserve cars, trains. Even on the roof there is no place to store sesame seeds. When there was no barbed wire fence on the Bangladesh-India border, people from the other side used to come here in groups. Now of course it takes a visa. This is really the sea of great reunion.⁴⁶

Millions of incense sticks were lit around the shrine. Hindus and Muslims alike participate in it. Along with lollipops and sweets are also offered. Incense sticks have now been introduced to prevent fires from occurring. Instead of incense sticks, roses were also offered. This is followed by the vow and the vow of defending the previous vow. Donation items like chicken, rice, pulses, money etc. are stored in the donation box adjacent to the shrine; the two-day fair grounds are decorated with various garlands of lights. Discussions on Islam and Sufi philosophy continued. Many disabled people prayed for help at the fair and fakirs and saints came.⁴⁷

While walking in the fair, I saw that there was no sign of unrest anywhere. However, there are police measures to be taken in advance. Close circuit TVs have also been installed for several years. Security is being tightened here. On the second day of the fair, special prayers were held under the tin shed in front of the *Mahfil* stage at noon.

Not only the fair, but the whole year the devotees come here and pray for the blessings of the Lord. They believe that amulets and charms are beneficial for their disease. There is a common saying at the root of spiritual faith objects that match faith, far from argument. With that faith, a group of countless fans are expecting *Tarkaruna*.

Funeral:

Of all the rituals in the life cycle, *Nashya Sheikh* Muslims especially extol their funeral rites as very distinctive and sophisticated. They maintain that they are very dissimilar to the Hindu and tribal in treating their dead. They wash the body of the dead person with perfumed soap, taking special care to wash the mouth, clean the teeth, nostrils and lower parts of the body, dress it in new clothes, smear scented oil (*atar*) on it and then, instead of burning the body as most Hindu do, put it in a grave. Close relatives of the dead person perform the

task of washing and dressing the body. Villagers co-operate with the relatives in washing or *gosol*. There are always a few persons in the village especially skilled in such jobs.⁴⁸

They take special care in digging the grave, so as to keep the walls inside smooth. In fact, there are always certain experts among the villagers whose help is sought for this kind of work. The grave has to be deep enough that one can comfortably sit upright inside. They believe that after the grave is filled in and the mourners have left the cemetery, an angel of God awakens the dead person and makes him sit up in his grave. One of the reasons for washing and perfuming the dead body is to ensure that the angel may not abominate the dead person seeing dirt on his body. The corpse is carried on a bier to the graveyard by pallbearers who have to bathe before touching it. Before entering the dead all the assembled Muslims say *janajanamaz* for the dead person, facing westward. The body is placed inside the grave with its head to the north and feet to the south, its feet turned towards the west. All *Nashya Sheikhs* Muslims, irrespective of any social and class status, come and join *Janaja* and throw fistfuls of earth on the grave. Even *Nashya Sheikh* passing by on such occasions are supposed to join in the *janaja* and throw earth on the grave. This is considered a meritorious act. Before putting earth on the grave, they make a flattened roof of bamboo and boundless of paddy stalks, the object being to leave sufficient space within for the dead to sit up. The roof is constructed level with the ground. On this roof or platform, they put earth and raise a mud plastered tomb in the shape of a triangular prism. Women never accompany a dead body to the graveyard.⁴⁹

Nashya Sheikh keeps a dead body for twelve or thirteen hours before burying it. It takes a long time to arrange all the paraphernalia connected with burial-digging a grave, washing and dressing the corpse and so on. Moreover, they often wait for the relatives, who are immediately informed of the death, to come and pay their last respects. Villagers and relatives of the dead within the village go to other villages where close kin of the deceased

live to inform them of the death. Hindu low caste villagers often act as messengers for their *Nashya Sheikh* co-villagers, conveying such news.⁵⁰

The death of rich persons brings together many more relatives and neighbours than the death of poor individuals. Neighbours are not always given news of the death if they are not kin, but they come on hearing the news from others. Female relatives who come to see the dead person for the last time and people who come to throw earth on the grave are often fed after the internment by the family of the deceased. Villagers and close relatives are very helpful at such times in arranging the refreshments. They chop wood, fetch water, cook and serve food and water to the guests. However, I observed that although all the villagers participated in *janaja* and in putting earth on the grave, only the members of the factional group to which the deceased belonged took part in arranging and partaking of the food. On the seventh day after the death of a person, his family, if it can afford to, arrange *milad* and give alms (*khairat*) to beggars.⁵¹

Nashya Sheikhs Muslims frequently argued with me that the Hindu funeral system was indecent. It did not adequately maintain the privacy of the deceased, as the cloth wrapped around the dead body was usually burnt first leaving the body. Through a number of informal talks with my *Nashya Sheikhs* Muslim respondents I felt that they were greatly convinced of the solemnity and superiority of their funeral system. They quite often asked me whether I liked their funeral and did so with a very self-assured air, expecting an affirmative answer. The *Nashya Sheikh* Muslim believed that their tradition is inherently excellent.⁵²

Circumcision:

No Muslim should omit the ceremony of circumcision (*i.e.*, *khatna or sunnaot*) and every *Nashya Sheikh* Muslim male child is circumcised within the seven year of his life. During the ceremony the maternal uncle of the boy is usually present. Circumcision is always

done by a special Muslim barber locally known as *hajam*. However, the barbers themselves dislike the term and call themselves *khalifa*. In every year on the nineteenth of Bengali month *Chaitra* (corresponding to April) there were as many as thirty-two small boys circumcised on one single day. Circumcision is done in the early morning before sunrise. Two barbers come. One holds back the muscular portion with a forked bamboo piece and lets the skin hang loose while the other cuts the skin with a sharp razor. They get one to ten rupees for the operation, according to the means of the child's family. For a few days before circumcision, women of the family, especially the young and fun loving, beat drums (*dhol*) and sing songs till late in the evening. This they also do before a marriage ceremony. They say that this sort of merry making is something beyond or rather against their *shariat* or tradition. However, young women and men maintain that it is a local tradition and they like indulging in it. Most women try to conceal the fact and say they never indulge in such merry-making. However, before any *sunnat* or marriage the village is filled with the sound of singing and beating of drums till late at night⁵³. Some *Nashya Sheikh* Muslims rationalize this singing and drum beating by saying that the women are illiterate and therefore and they know no better than to go against *shariat*.

The birth of the first child is normally greeted with the warmest demonstration of unaffected joy in the homes of the parents of both wife and husband. The birth of the first child usually takes place in the house of the wife's parents. A *Nashya Sheikh* Muslim sends his expectant wife to her parent's home when her time approaches. This is a local custom. This custom is also prevalent among the Hindu. The wife is not sent to her parent's home for subsequent births; but some parents who can afford to, and live either within the village or nearby, bring their expectant daughters' home to all such locations.⁵⁴ At childbirth, women of a particular Hindu caste are called to attend as midwives. In general, no women of any other caste or community work as midwives in the areas. The wife of the head of the Hindu family

at Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar, together with her son's wife, serves as mid wife to the Muslim villagers of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar and adjoining villagers.⁵⁵

When a male child is born, and especially when the child is the first issue, there is often much clamorous rejoicing. According to the Islamic custom, *azan* (summon to prayer) is called aloud by a male, not for prayer but to proclaim the birth of the child. This is done at *Nashya Sheikh* only the occasion of the birth of a male child. The child father or grandfather usually does the proclaiming. Some devout Muslims well versed in Islamic rules read *Takbir* (i.e the creed) in the left ear of the new-born.⁵⁶

After parturition the mother observes 'pollution' for seven days. For these seven days she does not over regular prayers (*namaz*). On the seven day after the birth of the barber shaves the child's head and pares the nails of both child and mother. The mid wife's presence is customary at the time of this ceremony. There are two Muslims barbers in the village of *Nashya Sheikh* family, either of whom may be called on this occasion.⁵⁷

After being shaved the child is bathed. The mother also takes a bath and her 'period of pollution' is then considered over. On this day *Nashya Sheikh* celebrate *Aqika*. On this occasion parents, grandparents and other close kin like uncles and aunts etc. Name the new-born. *Aqika* consist of a sacrifice to Allah in the name of the child, to goats for a boy and one for a girl. A quarter of the sacrificial meat is distributed among the poor. The *Nashya Sheikh* at Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri usually give away this portion to the poor within the village. Another quarter of the meat is given to kin, generally close kin. The rest is kept for their own consumption.⁵⁸

Those who cannot afford the ceremony of *Aqika* on the seventh day after the birth of a child may postpone it till the fourteenth or the twenty- first day, or any convenient time later on. Some of them sacrifice only one goat at the time of the *Aqika* of a male child. Others

arrange the rite in consumption with *korbani*, when sacrificing a large animal; they offer one seventh of it to Allah in the name of the child whose *Aqika* is being fulfilled. It may be pointed out that there is no such rule in the secret text justifying this practice. The *Nashya Sheikh* in the area of the study, however, does it because they say that for a long time this has been their practice. The poor who cannot afford anything skip the ceremony of the sacrifice and it is not considered unlawful to do so according to Islam.⁵⁹

Feasts and Festivals:

We will describe here the feasts and Festivals of the *Nashya Sheikh* Muslim as we have observed them in my research area around. Most of these are either village or community level observances. There are a few major Muslim feasts and festivals. Most of them are celebrated in commemoration of mythical events or occurrences in the historical past of the Islamic world. Codified information and instruction as regard different feasts and festivals are available.

The Islamic tradition maintains and overall informative in the different socio religious practices and performances, and these are carried out by Muslims throughout the Islamic *shariat* it is also maintains the 'introduce solidarity of the *Nashya sheikh* Muslim as a community. The source of all these practices is the Islamic sacred texts, the Quran and the *Hadith*. The text forms the ideal model. The tradition is embedded in the text and has its own system of communication for making ordinary Muslims conscious of their faith, values, norms and ideals of life as depicted in the sacred texts. It also acts as the means of converting people from other religions. This tradition helps them to assure their individual, as well as collective, identity and consequently builds a sense of social solidarity among them.⁶⁰

The Muslim found them separated from the rest of the people in the area in their celebration of the standard Muslim feasts and festivals. The Hindu and the tribal did not

participate with the Muslim in these festivals accept as observers or as recipients of special festive alms, such as *Fetra* or part of the meat from sacrificed animals in *Korbani*. The clean caste Hindu, however, does not normally receive anything from the Muslim on such occasions. The tribal's and the Hindu low caste have no such social taboo.⁶¹

The outward aspect of the religion-social segregation of the *Nashya sheikh* Muslim from other communities is evident in the non-participation of the neighbouring, communities in the Muslim feast and festivals this is very important, because it delineates clearly the boundaries that the *Nashya sheikh* Muslim erect through their endeavour to be exclusive.

The Hindu is capable of incorporating any community within their social structure. In the local context they do not recognize the separate entity of a community. To them, the identity of a community is related to the position it holds in the local social hierarchy; but the internal mechanism previously mentions, which is manifestation of the transition of Islam, tends to project the *Nashya sheikh* Muslim as a distinct entity outside the local hierarchy.⁶²

The *Nashya Sheikh* Muslim festivals are held according to the lunar months of the *Hijra* year. The *Hijra* year is strictly lunar, and the months are adjusted to the course of the moon within a cycle of thirty years, containing nineteen common years of the three hundred and fifty-four days and eleven intercalary years of three hundred and fifty-five-days. Each year is divided into twelve months containing alternately thirty and twenty-nine days with the exception of the last month of the intercalary years, which invariably contains thirty days. The intercalary years are the second, fifth, seventh, tenth, thirteenth, sixteenth, eighteenth, twenty-first, twenty-fourth, twenty-sixth and twenty-ninth of the cycle. The *Hijrah* months are not constructed on astronomical principles. Each month commences from the evening on which the new moon is seen. Thus, the duration of the months depends on the state of the weather. No month, however, can contain less than twenty-nine or more than thirty days. The following are the names of the months of the *Hijra* year.⁶³

- | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------|
| 1) <i>Muharram</i> | 7) <i>Rajib</i> |
| 2) <i>Safar</i> | 8) <i>Shaban</i> |
| 3) <i>Rabi-UL-Awwal</i> | 9) <i>Ramazan</i> |
| 4) <i>Rabi-UL-Akhir</i> | 10) <i>Shawal</i> |
| 5) <i>Jumada-UL-Awwal</i> | 11) <i>ZulQad</i> |
| 6) <i>Jumada-UL-Akhir</i> | 12) <i>Zul-Hajj</i> |

The *Hijra* year does not correspond to either the Bengali or Western year. In general, the Muslim of *Nasahya Sheikh* in my area of study follows the Bengali calendar or *Punjika*. There are no corresponding fixed dates and times for these festivals in the Bengal or the Western calendar.⁶⁴ The Muslims observe *Muharram* in commemoration of the prophet Mohammed's grandson Hussain. Hussain was murdered in the battle of Karbala in Arabia. I will give a short description of the way *muharram* is commemorated by the *Nashya Sheikh* Muslims in my area of study.⁶⁵

As a mark of mourning for the sad demise of Hussain, the Muslim of *Nashya Sheikh* in the area of study do not shave or pare their nails from the evening on which *muharram* starts till the 10th day of the month. Nor do they use soap or oil at the time of bathing during this period. The Muslim in Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar and in other Muslim populated villages around west Bengal, as also in the neighbouring towns of Silliguri, arrange them fight at the commencement of *Muhrram* lasting till its last day. Staves of hard bamboo, flexible canes and sometimes sharp weapons like axes are used in the fight. The Muslim performs this with a view to representing the battle between Hussain and his enemy fought in the field of Karbala. They also beat drums (representing war drums) during this fight.⁶⁶

Every *Nashya Sheikh* village or section of village takes out a position to various part of the area. The various Muslim villages and hamates inhabit ate by different Muslim groups came closer through this visit. The participants, however, visit not only *Nashya Sheikhs* Muslim villages or Muslim sections of villages, but also those of the Hindus. They exclude tribal helmets from their visits. Although the *Nashya Sheikhs* Muslims go very enthusiastically to Hindu villages and hamlets with their procession, one can easily perceive and year of aloofness in the Hindu response to such visit. The Hindu usually plays the role of a passive observer. In contrast, when the Muslim passes through, *Nashya Sheikhs* Muslim inhabited areas, there is an active response. The people visited join in a share equally the spirit of the rite. In short, the response is whole hearted and meaningful.⁶⁷

They perceive the limits of their social and cultural boundaries vis a vis those of the neighbouring communities. During Muharram, the display of *Tazia* is also part of the observance. *Tazia* is a symbolic representation of the Musclem erected on the plains of Karbala over the remains of Hussain. It is prepared by covering a framework made of strips of bamboo with pieces of paper neatly clipped and pasted on it. It is further decorated with different kinds of colour paper cut outs of flowers, horses with wings, tinsel fringes etc. Muslim villagers in the area devote a lot of time, of ten days or even month together, in preparing large and elegant *Tazia*. There is obtaining considerable competition among them the Muslim of different villages or sections within a single village in the preparation of large and highly decorated *Tazia*.

The Muslims take out a special position with *Tazia* on the tenth day of Muharram. A large number of such positions in my area of study end at a village named Banarhat (Jalpaiguri district). Banarhat has a *Mazar* (Muslim shrine) of a renewed local pir. Many Muslim of the area visit this village on the tenth day of Muharram to see the positions and the *Tazia* as well as *Mazar*.

The Muslims at Banarhat took out a position with a *Tazia* in every year. In subsequent years the villagers were not able to prepare a *Tazia* due to lack of funds, but they took out positions without the *Tazia*. The framework of the *Tazia* prepared was, however, utilized the next year to prepare a *Tazia* to sell to the residents of another village.⁶⁸

We noticed that some old Muslims at Banarhat resented the joyous way in which Muharram was being commemorated. They dislike making a display of *Tazia*. They also did not like shame fights, the beating of drums and playing of musical instruments. They considered this to be anti-Islamic frivolities. However, we found that the young and the number of older people who enjoyed these things considerably outnumbered the old dissidents.⁶⁹

As is usual, anyone who takes part in the Muharram positions goes barefoot. The Muslims in such positions sing songs in lamentations for the sad demise of Hussain. At intervals they squat, jump, beat their breasts and shout the name of Hussain, demonstrating their indignation for the incident that happened at karbala. This action is locally known as *matam*. Children as well as grown up boys take part very enthusiastically in *matam* and in the singing. To learn the *namaraz* songs for the occasion's eager Muslim villager buy print copies of booklets in Bengali full of (Muharram songs) sold, as the occasion approaches at local fairs (mela) or in the market.⁷⁰ *Sabe Barat* falls on the fourteenth month of *Shaban*. The Muslim believes that god on this night registers all the actions people will perform during the ensuing year. Learned and devote Muslim of both sexes regard this as an important occasion and honour it by sitting up all night reading the Quran.

There is another *Nashya Sheikh* Muslims ceremony of this kind known as *Sabe-i-miraj* which precedes *Sabe-barat* and each observe in the seventh month, *rajab*. According to Islamic tradition *sabe-i-miraj* is the night of the prophet Mohammad ascent or nocturnal journey to heaven on a supernatural horse called *Buraq*. It is said to have taken place on the

night preceding the 27th day of the month of *Rajab*. The Nashya Sheikh Muslim, especially the erudite and the devote, commemorate this event by sitting up all night praying and reading and listening to the *namaraz* written narratives concerning it. ⁷¹*Roza* or the ceremonial fast for a month during the 9th lunar month of *ramazan* is one of the cardinal duties (*i.e., farz*) in Islam. Express injunction regarding it is given in the Quran. Muslim, both male and female, normally observes each day of the *ramazan* month as one of strict fasting from pre-dawn to sunset. The sick, the aged pregnant women or women breast-feeding infants, however, are exempt from the actual necessity of fasting during *ramazan*.

The commencement of every fast day is preceded by the performance of *Niyet*, a vow to keep the fast. It is traditional (*sunna*) for the *Nashya Sheikh* Muslims who fast to take an early morning (pre dawn) breakfast or *siori*. There are certain specific rules that one must or should observe during the fast. In the evening, immediately before and just after the call of *azan* each over, they break their fast. They call this *eftar*. They say *niyet*, a vow for breaking the fast.⁷²

Taraweehnamaz is reading during the month by the fasting *Nashya Sheikh* Muslims which is one of the most important observances. Women do not, however read this *namaz*. There are twenty *rekat*, *i.e. shura*, in the *taraweeh* (locally pronounce as *tarabi*). This prayer is read in congregation in mosques at the time of *aesa*, *i.e.*, late evening prayer it precedes the last three *rekat of aesa*. It is customary among the *Nashya Sheikh*s Muslim who fast to say the *taraweeh* is day for the whole month of *ramazan*, reading through the whole Quran in that period. The Imam leading the *taraweeh* has to know the Quran by heart. Thus, Muslims prefer to employ a hafiz as an *Imam*. When the whole Quran has been read through the *taraweeh* can discontinued.⁷³

To be more specific about the observance of the ceremony, let us see how the *Nashya Sheikh*s Muslim at Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar villages celebrate the month of *ramazan*. As

regard fasting, women are more particular than man. Almost all the adult women at Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar observe roza, unless they are sick otherwise enable to undertake it or are commanded by puranic injunctions not to keep roza or fast. Only a little more than fifty percent of adult males fast however. The general reasons for not keeping the fast, especially among the males, are sickness and overwork. The poor *Nashya Sheikhs* Muslim of this area, who working in the field, maintain that they cannot fast because of their long hours of work.⁷⁴

Although children are exempt as a rule from fasting, some of them fast occasionally with their elders for a day or two. A few devoted youths take keen interest in fasting. The *Nashya Sheikhs* Muslim who carefully follows the fasting but there is not necessary reading *namaz*. There are some persons among *Nashya Sheikh* Muslims who reading Quran both day and night during the month of fasting. The villagers who keep roza try to take their early morning breakfast (*siori*) at the appropriate time, which they came to know from charts send by the local *Madrasha*. These charts show the scheduled time of *efter* as well as *sirori* for each day of the month of *ramazan*. As the timing of *siori* and *efter* each related to sunrise to sunset, it varies a little each day. The chart also contains other instruction concerning *roza* and the ensuing ceremony of *Idu-ul-fitr*. The chart is usually displayed at the entrance of the mosques, so that anyone who wants may consult them. The time schedule is given in the *Nashya Sheikhs* Muslim almanac too.⁷⁵

A considerable number of villages *Nashya Sheikhs* Muslim, is bringing his own food, gather at the village mosques for *efter*. Some bring their children with them. Some old people bring their grand-children. Relatives and friends irrespective of their social positions except foods as their informal gesture of kinship or friendship. If a *musafir* or traveller comes at the time of *efter*, he too gets a share of foods from others. They get through their *Efter* quickly in order to join the early evening prayer, *i.e.,magribnamaz*, after which they disperse to eat

more heartily at home, before gathering again in the monks to say *aesa* and specially *taraweeh* prayers.⁷⁶

Some of these villagers distribute *sinni* after the prayers, usually among the people gathered for the *taraweeh*. Many distribute *sinni* after the *taraweeh* following the completion of their reading of their quran. Many wait to distribute *sinni* until death complete their reading of the Quran. This particular *taraweeh* is locally called *khatamtaraweeh* which literally means compilation of the *taraweeh*. *Sinni* is also distributed by many on the 27th of the *ramazan* month for the following reason. *Nashya* Sheikhs Muslim specially celebrates the 27th night of *ramazan*. The night is literally known as the night of power. On this night the devout spent the whole night reading the *quran*. It is the believed of the local that this night all creation at some moment bows in humble adoration to the omnipotent.⁷⁷

The *khatib* of the village monks, especially if he is a hafiz, leads the *taraweeh*. In reorganisation of his service during the *taraweeh* the Muslim villagers of this area usually present him a gift of one hundred and fifty rupees. This someday rose either by subscription or by selling the paddy given away by the rich as wiser. If there was no *khatib* in the mosques. The villagers employed a *maulavi* from a local *madrasha* to perform the duty of an imam in the month of *ramazan*, especially for the *namaztaraweeh*. He was a hafiz as well as a *kari*. He charged two hundred rupees on each occasion for his services.⁷⁸

From the above description of *roza* we find that the majority of the village *Nashya* *Sheikhs* Muslim involved in fasting, taking *siori*, performing *efter* and reading *taraweeh*, year after year, during the month of *ramazan*. This has a great impact on the mind of individual Muslims and on the *Nashya* *Sheikhs* Muslim community as a whole. A natural tendency arises at both individual and collective levels to keep up the tradition of fasting. This argument is not limited to the actual participants only but is shared by every other member of the community.⁷⁹The day after the month of *Ramajan*, i.e., the first day of the 10th month of

Shawal, is ceremoniously observed as *Idu'lFitr*. It marks the end of the month-long fast or *Roza*.⁸⁰

On this day each local *Nashya Sheikhs* Muslim family which can afford to distributes among the poor two and a half seers of rice or equivalent in money for each member of the donor family, including new-born babies, if any. This is *fetra*. According to Islamic tradition all well-to-do Muslims have to give *fetra*. In other words, *fetra* is *wajib* for such individuals. (i.e., should be performed by the followers of Islam). After taking a bath in the morning and before going for *Id namaz*, the *Nashya Sheikhs* Muslim weigh and put aside the rice to be given away as *fetra*.⁸¹ At the area of my study the head of the family usually undertakes this responsibility.

A portion of the *fetra* is often distributed among poor villagers, mendicants and beggars immediately after the *Id* prayer. Some Muslims in my area of study carry rice in plates or in bowls to the *idgah* for distribution after the prayer. A large concourse of poor people gathers outside the *idgah* to receive alms. At Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts in many villages the neighbouring low caste tribal poor people like *santal*, *orao* from the nearby village outside the *idgah* for the special alms of *fetra*. Also, there are poor Hindu children of low caste who wait to receive alms.⁸² Besides distributing *fetra*, which on this occasion is *wajib*, the *Nashya Sheikhs* Muslims should read two rekat of *Eid* prayer. According to the sacred rule of Islam this is also *wajib*. The *namaz* is to be read between eighth or ninth a.m., and noon, and not on any account after that time.

The *Nashya Sheikh* Muslim wears new clothes for going to the *idgah*. Some wear special scarves, brought from Mecca, on their shoulders. The *Nashya Sheikhs* Muslim villagers usually take particular care to perfume their clothes and body with *attar* or scented oil on this occasion. *Nashya Sheikhs* Muslim children wearing gaudy clothes gather with their elders in the *idgah*. Young boys try to imitate their elders by joining in the prayer and doing

everything the others do. Before praying, some villagers burn incense in the *idgah* and upon the tombs of their near relatives.⁸³

Devout Nashya Sheikhs Muslims usually repeat *takbir* while proceeding from their homes to the *idgah* for saying *Id namaz*. It is *sunna* (traditional and customary) for the Muslim to attentively listen to *khodba*. After the *khodba*, *monajat* (supplication for the remission of sins) is read. Before leaving the *idgah* after the prayer, the *khodba* and the *monajat* being over, Muslims facilitated each other by embracing and shaking hands. Some people shake hands with the imam and give him a present, according to their means, of tenth to twenty rupees, or sometimes less. The imam who led the *taraweehnamaz* in the preceding month of *Ramajan* usually performs the duty of imam on the occasion of Eid namaz.⁸⁴

On the day of *Idul-Fitr* Nashya Sheikh Muslims wear new clothes. At Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar Muslim buy new clothes not only for their respective families but also for their poor relatives living within or outside the village. Servants are also given new clothes. *Nashya Sheikh* Muslim villagers of this area employed as agricultural domestic servants in the homes of local Hindus often persuade their masters to buy them new clothes for this day, although the Hindu usually buy new clothes both for themselves and for their servants for the yearly celebration of *Durga puja* held in the Bengali month of *Aswin* (September to October). Besides wearing new clothes on the day of *Idul-Fitr*, each Muslim family prepares sweetened *semui*, vermicelli with milk, sugar, raisins and dried and sliced coconut.⁸⁵

The actual ceremony of *Idul-Fitr* helps maintain the boundaries and separate identity of the Nashya Sheikh Muslim community. On these occasions, prayer is *farz* (a must). Further it is traditional (or *sunna*) for the Muslim to read the *farzrekat* of their daily prayers in congregation; but the daily round of duties scarcely allows them time to do all this. In the village all male Muslims make it a rule to gather for prayer on the festive day of *Id*. Through this community prayer the villagers realize their common affiliation to a single, identical

religion. Though there may be internal discord and though there certainly are differences in class, rank, status and age, on this day and in this prayer gathering they are all made to feel equal. They come together for the same purpose and, to all appearances, greet one another without inhibition. It must be stressed that this Islamic principle of equality practised in their sacred life does not extend beyond it. The everyday social life of the *Nashya Sheikhs* Muslim maintains its distinctions of class and status rigidly. This is because the Koran and the *hadith* have copious codified rules for religious life but comparatively few for the secular.⁸⁶ This is the last annual *Nashya Sheikhs* Muslim ceremony according to the lunar year, *Hijrah*. It is also called *Baqrid* or *Korbani*. It begins on the tenth day of *Zul-Hajj* and lasts three days. The principal ceremony, however, is usually completed on the tenth. This festival, according to Muslim scripture, is to commemorate Ibrahim's (i.e. Abraham's) willingness to offer up his only son as a sacrifice in obedience to God's command. Like *Idulfitr*, the ceremony of *Idu'zZuha* also requires as reading of an Id prayer in the *idgah*⁸⁷ The *Nashya Sheikhs* Muslim in my area of study tend to get the reading of this Id *namaz* over quickly, so as to get on sooner to the more interesting, though long-winded ceremony of sacrificing animals. Unlike the practice in *IdulFitri*, the Muslim on this occasion does not usually spend large sums of money on new clothes. *Idu'zZuha* is observed among all Muslims, both as a day of sacrifice and as a great festival.⁸⁸

In these verses the reason for Islamic sacrifice has been explained. It is said that the sacrifice is not for the propitiation of the higher power, because God does not delight in flesh or blood. It is more a symbol behind which there is a deep spiritual meaning. The animal generally offered for sacrifice, such as camels, cows, bulls, goats and sheep are, moreover, useful in many ways.⁸⁹

The sacrifice is performed at selected sides within the village. There are many pieces in Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar. All the village men, boys and children get involved in holding

and skinning animals and in dressing and dividing the meat into shares. Care is taken not to spoil the hide while skinning. Although skinning, dressing and dividing into shares is laborious work, it is done with enthusiasm and is finished by the afternoon. On its completion an auction is arranged within the village to sell the hides. Money procured by selling the hides is given to the local *madrakah*.⁹⁰ The most communal part of this rite of sacrifice is the distribution of meat to all *Nashya Sheikhs* Muslim households within the village and to relatives within and even outside the village. The poorest family in the village gets a share of the sacrificial meat.

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