

Hazrat Azan Fakir: His Harmonious Message in “Zikir and Zârî”

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ABSTRACT:

Hazrat Azan Faqir came from Baghdad to Assam in the seventeenth century AD accompanied by his brother Nabi Shah with a view to spreading the message of Islam. He began to live first for a few years in the Khanqah of Giyath al-Dîn Awliya, Hajo. It is 24 Kilometres northwest away from Guwahati. Then he lived at Chun Pora village for a long time, and finally at Saraguri Chapori, Sibsagar along with his 120 beloved disciples until his demise in 1690 AD. He preached the message of Islam to the Muslim people, who do not keep any difference from other religious adherents. So, Azan Fakir made them acquainted with the rituals of Islamic Sharia along with a harmonious message of Islam. In this connection, he composed “ Zikir and Zârî” in the form of Bargeet of Sankardeva. Here Zikir means remembrance of Allah i.e. saying prayers; while Jârî means remembrance of the martyrs who fought for Islam. In addition, his “ Zikir and Zârî” are endowed with the message of cultural harmony irrespective of caste and creed. In the passage of time, his Zikir and Zârî have been considered a distinct literary genre of Assamese literature. The message of Sufism also appears in the contents of his Zikir and Zârî and many Perso-Arabic words are available in their contents. In fact, he has been familiar as a legendary poet of Assam.

Keywords: Zikir and zârî, message of Islam, communal harmony, Sufism, Arabic and Assamese languages etc.

Introduction:

The Arabic language is an offshoot of the Semitic group of languages ¹, and the Persian language belongs to the group of Indo-Iranian European languages. ² Likewise the Assamese language also belongs to the family of Indo-European languages. ³ In fact, the Assamese language came in contact with the Muslim people when they came to Assam from foreign countries in the early thirteenth century. It is known that the Muslims entered the region of Assam and established their settlement in several ways like conquest, trade, and preaching Islam. Because the Muslim sultans and Sufi saints carried out social, cultural, and political communications with the local peoples in the state of Assam. Assamese people were conversant with Perso-Arabic vocabularies through reciprocal communications. Thus a good number of Arabic and Persian words were incorporated into the Assamese language and literature. ⁴ Under such circumstances, we find a good number of Arabic and Persian vocabularies have been incorporated into the consistency of the present Assamese literature. Undoubtedly, it is a matter of linguistic aspect of the Assamese language and literature.

We have come to learn that the Sufi-saint Hazrat Azan Fakir came to the state of Assam in the seventeenth century from Baghdad along with his brother Nabi Shah. As a Sufi

saint, he had a goal to spread the message of Islam here in Assam. It is worth mentioning to note that the Sufi saint became familiar with the nickname “Azan Fakir” because of his calling people for saying five-time prayers. In fact, this method of invoking people for accomplishing prayers is known as Azan in the ritual institution of Islam. In respect of the literary point of view, Hazrat Azan Fakir has been considered a legendary poet of Assamese literature, especially for his contributions to Zikir and Zârî. His original name was Shâh Milân or Mu‘in al-Dîn Mirân Shâh.⁵ It is aware of the fact that he began to live for the first time in the Khanqah of Giyath al-Dîn Awliya, which is located on the top of the mountain Garurachal Hill in Hajo for a few consecutive years, then he went with his brother to Gargaon and stayed in the vicinity of Chun Pora for a long period to lead his normal life and finally went to Saraguri Chapori, which is located in the vicinity of the present Sivasagar. Hazrat Azan Fakir used to say prayers five times along with his dear disciples until the Almighty Allah called him to His vicinity; he passed away in 1690 AD.⁶

Review of Literature:

We are aware of the fact that Hazrat Azan Fakir had 120 beloved disciples and they always accompanied him in rituals and spiritual activities. To spread the message of Islam, Hazrat Azan Fakir composed many Zikir and Zârî following the poetic genre of Bargeet composed by Srimanta Sankardeva (d. 1568 AD). Because he deemed it very suitable to the atmosphere that prevailed in the Muslim society of that period. We notice in the consistence of Zikir and Zârî, a large number of Arabic and Persian words. As such, the literary genre of Zikir and Zârî has been a vital source of research in the eyes of scholars related to language and literature.

It is worth mentioning that Hazrat Azan Fakir, may God have mercy on him, composed a kind of popular poetry in the form of Assamese songs⁷, and his poetry has conveyed the message of Islam whatever found in the light of the Holy Qur’ân and the Noble Hadith. Undoubtedly, his poetry also bears the message of cultural harmony for the different peoples of the state of Assam. Moreover, in the consistency of his Zikir and Zârî, we find the message of Sufism. Needless to say that he came from Baghdad to the state of Assam and tried his best to bring reformation to the Muslim people who were unaware of the obligatory rituals of Islam. To serve the purpose of Sufism and Islamic tenets he was bound to convey the true Islamic religion among the Muslims, which he deemed to be the prime duty of his life. It has been observed from the history of his life that he was educated in Islamic institutions, and had sufficient knowledge of Arabic and Persian languages. And when he came to India he learned the Urdu language and after coming to the state of Assam he also learned the Assamese language.⁸

In fact, many scholars have highlighted the life of Azan Fakir and his zikir and zârî as well. Syed Abdul Malik wrote a book entitled “Asomiya Zikir Aru Zârî” published by Gauhati University in 1958 and reprinted in 2003. He also authored another book entitled “Azan Fakir Aru Suriya Zikir”, published by Students Store, College Hostel Road, Guwahati in 1988 and subsequently reprinted in 2008. M. Wahidur Rahman authored a book entitled “Azan Peer Sahebar Zikir”, published by Bani Mandir, Guwahati in 2006. Indeed, this book has brought all the purposes of his Zikir and Zârî under different angles of Islamic Sufism.

Dr. Painuruddin Ahmed wrote a book entitled “Azan Fakirar Jiwan Katha”, published by Mamat Ali Foundation, Ambari, Guwahati in 2004.

It is a matter of fact that all these above mentioned books have highlighted the life of Hazrat Azan Fakir and his literary genre Zikir and Zârî. In the consistency of his Zikir, we find harmonious message to establish peace and tranquillity in the pluralistic society. Linguistically his style of composition is simple and comprehensive to the people of Assam. Mention may be made that this paper reviews the linguistic aspects that a good number of Arabic and Persian words are in vogue in the expressions of Zikir and Zârî composed by Hazrat Azan Fakir, and this issue has made a remarkable mark in the realm of Assamese literature.

Description

There is no doubt that the term zikir belongs to the Arabic word, of which real transcription is *dhikr* and grammatically it is a noun masculine word. Linguistically it means remembrance of Allah by tongue and heart. And the term zârî is of Persian word, and grammatically it is a noun feminine word; it means crying for showing love. That is to say that it is one kind of elegy found in the domain of literature.⁹ In this connection, Hazrat Azan Fakir has explained the term zikir as the basis of the Islamic religion-like belief in Allah and His Messenger, performing Islamic injunctions, and maintaining sanctity with Islamic spiritualism including the faith in the life of the hereafter world. And the term zârî indicates pouring tears from the eyes as and when someone is inflicted with sorrowfulness. Here Hazrat Azan Fakir made expressions in poetical form for lamenting the martyrs like Hasan and Husain, who were the sons of Hazrat Ali (RA) and grandsons of Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH). In fact, zârî is like *marthiya* (i.e. elegy) poetry in Arabic literature, and the same means bewailing or lamentation for a dear one who died. Hazrat Azan Fakir composed a good number of zikir and zârî and occupied a prominent place in the realm of Assamese literature. It has been observed from the contents of zikir and zârî that knowledge of Islamic mysticism appears in both the literary genre (i.e. zikir and zârî) and they also carry the message of spiritual knowledge and reformation for the Assamese Muslims who were unaware of performing the Islamic rituals (*al-‘ibâdah al-islâmiyyah*). In addition, they contain the message of social harmony and definitely inspire people to maintain peace and tranquillity in the social aspects of Assam. As a literary genre of Assamese literature, “zikir and zârî ” of Hazrat Azan Fakir became acceptable to the common people and a source of inspiration for the masses to eradicate hatred from society. Undoubtedly, the Assamese people consider zikir and zârî of Hazrat Azan Fakir as popular poetry and they find in them a forceful inspiration and source of knowledge to establish the bridge of cultural harmony irrespective of different castes and creeds; and as a literary genre, zikir and zârî have been a repository of knowledge to scintillate value-based learning for every people in the North East of India.¹⁰

It is evident from the history of Assam that the Sufi-saint Hazrat Azan Fakir came to Assam in the year 1635 AD during the reign of the Ahom King Pratap Singha (d. 1641 AD), who ruled the Ahom Kingdom from 1603 to 1641 AD. In fact, Azan Fakir had the target to spread the message of Islam in Assam, for which he started living in the place of the wilderness without fear of animals like lions in the forest and used to make the call to prayer i.e. Azan, and established prayers with his Muslim companions. As and when the Sufi-saint

continued Azan i.e. the call for prayer five times daily, and due to which he became known among the people as Azan Fakir.¹¹

It has been observed that a good number of Arabic and Persian vocabularies have been incorporated into Indian languages like Hindi, Urdu, Kashmiri, Marathi, Tamil, Bengali, Oriya, Assamese, etc. So, it has been an important chapter in the linguistic scenario of India and its federal states as well. In this regard, Muzaffar Alam (Professor of History at the University of Chicago) asserts that the Persian language was the lingua franca of the empire that Akbar ruled. Moreover, Persian was the official language of the rules of Ghurids, the Delhi sultans, and the Mughal Empire; during that period Persian was the language of poetry and literature as well. On the other hand, the Arabic language was used in all matters of Islamic rituals.¹² It is known that after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the East India Company came to power and started ruling over large areas of India¹³ and the British made a policy and accordingly constituted the “General Committee of Public Instruction” (GCPI) in 1823. Thereby Persian was removed from the position of official language in 1837, and it was replaced by the English language.¹⁴ It is known that during the administration of the Muslim rulers in India, several invasions were made of Assam. In this connection, sometimes the Muslim invaders were defeated, and their armies remained captives, who settled here in Assam and also married the daughters of the indigenous people for leading their normal lives. In this regard, Shihâb al-Dîn Tâlish mentioned the indigenous Muslims in Assam as follows: “As for the Muslims who were captured in the previous times and chose to marry there, they took care of their offspring in the correct Assamese culture, and they have no Islamic culture except the name of Muslims. They tend their hearts more to their mixing with the Assamese culture than their association with the Muslims.”¹⁵ In addition, during the era of the Ahom kings who invited some Muslim artists from all over India to Assam, because they had special skills in various activities and they settled there; and they also mixed with the entity of the Assamese culture. The truth is that the Sufi-saint, Hazrat Azan Fakir, may God have mercy on him, tried for these Muslims to bring them back to the Islamic mainstream through zikir and zârî. In fact, the main objective of his zikir and zârî was to encourage the local Muslims; so that they can acquire the knowledge of Islamic legislation and spiritual duties in the true sense of terms. In his composition of Assamese zikir and zârî, many Perso-Arabic words have been used in a smooth flowery expression; which was endowed with Islamic philosophy and social harmony. It is Needless to mention that the readers of zikir and zârî of Hazrat Azan Fakir, find the message of tranquillity in their consistency. In the Modern period, the zikir and zârî as Assamese literary genres are considered to bear a great significance and relevance, because they are full of philosophy to maintain peaceful harmony in the societies of the different peoples of North East India.¹⁶

Here it is worth mentioning that the term “zikir” (i.e. *dhikr*) in the Arabic language denotes the remembrance of the Almighty Allah and the performance of the Islamic rituals as imposed on His servants. In fact, the first and foremost holy words of Islam are *La Ilaha Illa Allah Muhammad Rasul Allah* (there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah); as and when servants of Allah recognize and accept them by heart and soul, they need to establish prayers five times daily, keep fasting in the holy month of Ramadan, and perform the pilgrimage to Mecca and giving poor dues (*zakat*). In this connection, it is reported by Abdullah bin Omar bin Al-Khattab, may Allah be pleased with them, who said:

“I heard the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, saying: “Islam is built on five things: testifying that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, establishing prayer, paying zakat, pilgrimage to the House, and fasting of the month of Ramadan”.¹⁷ The truth is that these lessons are given in the contents of zikir of Hazrat Azan Fakir, may God have mercy on him, and thereby he has drawn the attention of people to be encouraged to follow Islam. As a result of which, people have accepted his zikir, and as a literary genre it is alike the Assamese folk songs.

It is worth mentioning that the Assamese zikir was composed first by a Fakir Majnûn al-Dîn, but his work was not accepted by the people. On the other hand, the literary style of Assamese zikir of Hazrat Azan Fakir was well accepted by all peoples. Because it is one of the kinds of folksongs. In this connection, we may draw a comparison between the two poets namely Madhab Kandali (d. 1580 AD) and Srimanta Sankardeva (d. 1569 AD); the former firstly composed the “Bargeet” in the direction of Vaishnavite literature. It is known that the Bargeet Songs are the devotional songs for Hinduism, but this literary genre (Bargeet) was developed greatly by the late poet Srimanta Sankardeva; because his Bargeet was endowed with the literary qualities to the great extent.

It appears from the literary capability of Srimanta Sankardeva that he is undoubtedly considered to be the best poet of his contemporary time. According to a report from the local literature, the Vaishnavite movement was reinforced by the literary genre of Bargeet composed by Srimanta Sankardeva. It is well known that his Vaishnavite movement was prevalent throughout the state of Assam, and had a very acceptable strength to his dear followers. As and when the Sufi saint Azan Fakir looked at the influence of Bargeet among the Vaishnavite followers, he was extremely impressed by the technique and ideas of the Bhakti movement, and thus he tried his best to spread the message of Islam among the ignorant Muslims, to give them knowledge of the law of Islam; for which he composed Assamese zikir and zârî. The truth is that the Sufi-saint, Hazrat Azan Fakir, may Allah have mercy on him, made people attractive to sing the glory of Allah and follow the injunction of Islam as indicated in zikir and zârî. Moreover, through the versification of Assamese zikir and zârî he made endeavour to bridge the harmonious relationship between Muslims and Hindus. It is evident from the study of Assamese literature that the literary genre of Assamese zikir and zârî originated in the seventeenth century. It should also be noted that the social and cultural framework of that time in Assam was established by the Hindu mystic Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568) through his “Bhakti” movement.¹⁸ In this regard, Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan pointed out: “The Zikirs are devotional songs handed down from generation to generation among Assamese Muslims. They embody the teachings of Islam and are couched in the language and pattern of Assamese Vaisnava poetry.”¹⁹

In fact, the Sufi-saint Azan Fakir lived in Assam from about 1635 to 1690 AD, and this period fell between the rules of Ahom King Pratap Singha (d. 1641) and Gadadhar Singha (d. 1696). During these periods Hazrat Azan Fakir found a suitable atmosphere for the composition of Assamese zikir and zârî at a large scale in the nature of Assamese folk songs. The truth is that King Gadadhar Singha gave him honour with the title “Devang”, which means “divinity”, and also established for him a monastery at Saraguri Chapori, which is located at the confluence of the rivers Dikhau and Brahmaputra, where he lived for the rest of his life along with his 120 followers or disciples.²⁰

Discussion :

In fact, the Assamese zikirs of Hazrat Azan Fakir are thematically philosophical and religious folksongs. By which he endowed with Islamic knowledge and gave the message of social harmony irrespective of castes and creeds. According to Islamic philosophy, the Sufi saint, may God have mercy on him, urged to keep faith in the Almighty Allah, which is termed as kalima and it is essential in every sphere of Islamic faith, of which testimony finds as follows:

Duniyato ai kalima illinoto ai kalima
Zindigoto ai kalima mautoro mul
Lahuto ai kalima Nasuto ai kalima
*Malakuto ai kalima zabarutoro mul*²¹

(The Islamic basic faith is known as kalima in the sense of “No God, but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah”, which is referred to this world and the paradise, concerned with the life in this world and hereafter; divinity and humanity, the sovereignty of Allah and His Omnipotence.)

In the above-mentioned verses, there are terms of Arabic and Persian languages and an attempt has been made to show them as follows:

Sl. No.	Assamese transcription	Meaning
1	Kalima	This is an Arabic word, which religiously signifies: <i>La Ilaha Illa Allah Muhammad Rasul Allah</i> (No God but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah).
2	Duniyâ	This is an Arabic adjectival feminine noun of superlative degree, i.e. the world, which is nearest to us. (NB: Arabic language has only two genders, namely masculine and feminine.)
3	Illiyîn	This is an Arabic word, which means Paradise (i.e. in the eighth heaven)
4	Zindegî	This is a Persian word, which means 'life' of human being.
5	Lâhût	This is an Arabic word, which means 'Divine nature' or 'Divinity'.
6	Nâsût	This is an Arabic word, which means 'human nature' or 'humanity'.
7	Malakût	This is an Arabic word, which means 'kingdom or sovereignty'.
8	Jabarût	This is an Arabic word, which means 'Omnipotence', Might, Power etc.

According to Hazrat Azan Fakir, Hindus and Muslims are all the slaves of the Almighty Allah, and to His sight, there is no distinction among them. In fact, all people are created by One Supreme Power Almighty Allah. As such, Hazrat Azan Fakir tried his level best to exert influence in the minds of different people through his religious philosophy,

endowed with a harmonious message. He established peace and harmony in the society among the different tribes of Assamese peoples, especially between Hindus and Muslims, of which testimony appears in the verse of zikir of Azan Fakir as follows:

Mor monot an bhav nai o Allah

Mor monot bhin par nai

Hindu ki Musalman ak Allahr forman

*Mor monot akti bhav*²²

(Oh God! I do not have any distinctions in my mind regardless of the Hindu and Muslim nations, because the Almighty Allah has created them on one system, and I do bear harmonious tendency in my mind.)

It appears from the linguistic observation in the context of the above mentioned verses that there are Arabic and Persian terms in the same as indicated in the following table:

Sl. No.	Assamese transcription	Meaning
1	Allah	This is an Arabic word of distinct character, having determination 'the' is prefixed as Allah (al+ilah) signifying the sense "the One and Only God", the creator of the universe.
2	Musalman	This is a Persian word, which means the Muslim people
3	Farman	This is a Persian word means 'an ordinance'.
4	Hindu	The term Hindu is meant for the people who belonged to Sanatan religion.

Furthermore, Hazrat Azan Fakir composed a good number of Assamese Zârî, which are especially related to the expressions of sorrowfulness, and thereby the Sufi saint sought to lament the death of Hasan who was killed by taking poison, and Husayn was also killed in the war of Karbala in Iraq, on the tenth of Muharram in the year 61 A.H. and his death date corresponds to the 10th October, 680 AD. In fact, his Zârî songs generally bear a reference to the trickery and war in the case of the martyrs of Hazrat Hasan and Husayn. It was an unhopeful situation for the Muslims who paid homage to the family of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). In the versification of Assamese zârî, we find the sad environment created by the people of their clans, as and when both of them prepared for taking part in the holy war of Islam. As such, the images of heroism are found in the composition of Assamese zârî of Hazrat Azaqn Fakir. In this connection an attempt has been made to show the reality of Assamese zârî as follows:

Ghoxa: *Hai hai Subhanallah*

jan diu Karbala,

Sato hajar nure, zârî kore.

Pada: *Ranare gaila sangare Husayn*

hai hai phiriya nahil ghare.

Ase Quran Kitab,

Parhota nai baba,

*Dekhile Agun jale.*²³

Ghoxa: Glory be to Allah! Alas, Alas, (in the memory of Hasan and Husayn) we need to sacrifice our souls at Karbala. For this cause seven thousand lights (i.e. angels) elegize.

Pada: Husayn went for battle along with his companions; alas, alas, he did not come back to home. There is the Holy Qur'an, the book of Allah, but no readers like the father i.e. the son Husayn. And when he is not present, the fire is burning in the heart.

It is a matter of fact that the above mentioned zari verses of Hazrat Azan Fakir are pregnant with a number of Arabic and Persian words, they are as follows:

Sl. No.	Assamese transcription	Meaning
1	Subhanallâh	This is an Arabic compound term, it signifies an exclamation of surprise, God be praised!
2	Hazâr	This is a Persian word, which means 'housand'.
3	Nûr	This is an Arabic word means 'light', in the sense of angel, because angels are made of light.
4	Zârî	This is one of the Persian terms, and it means 'elegy'.
5	Qur'ân	This is a verbal noun word, which means to read continuously, i.e. The Holy Book of Islam.
6	Kitâb	This is an Arabic word, means 'a book'.

Here it is worth mentioning that we find Arabic and Persian words in the contents of *Zikir* and *Zârî* which are mentioned above. It appears that in Sufi terms, there are five stages of consciousness; they are namely Nasut, Malakut, Jabarut, Lahut, Hahut. All these words are of Arabic language. But in the *Zikirs* of Hazrat Azan Fakir, we find four Sufi terminologies; they are as follows:

1. *Lâhut* (divine nature): This is a higher experience of consciousness. It is a position that raises a man from the material stage to the immaterial stage; where there is greater peace and joy in the nearness to the divine essence.
2. *Nâsût* (human nature): It means our consciousness that depends on our senses of five organs like eye, ear, nose, tongue, and skin; thereby we get experiences, that is human nature.
3. *Malakût* (sovereignty) is the stage of consciousness beyond our senses and this position experiences life in a different plane. In fact, it is the central field of activity of the Master's Presence.
4. *Zabarût* (omnipotence): It is a spiritual development from the experience of deep sleep without dreams, and it connects the aforesaid three levels of non-creation and comes to the levels of creation.²⁴

Conclusion:

The Sufi-saint Hazrat Azan Fakir (may God have mercy on him) rendered a great service to Assamese literature by means of his poetical genre like zikir and zârî, and thereby he made an important work to convey the message of Islam among the Muslim peoples in the state of Assam. His main service was to preach Islam in North East India. Through his composition of zikir and zârî, he endeavoured to create a bridge for cultural harmony among the people of Hinduism and Islam in Assam. He occupied a prominent place in the Assamese literature with his composition of *zikr* and *zârî*. Needless to mention that in the contents of *zikr* and *zârî* there are a large number of Arabic and Persian vocabulary. In the present day world, Assamese literature has annexed a colourful beauty to its consistency having incorporation of Arabic and Persian vocabularies, and it has been a matter of linguistic study.

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