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# Processes of Islamization in Mithilā: Conversion, Acculturation, and Cultural Synthesis

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### Abstract

The processes of Islamization in Mithilā were complex, gradual, and deeply embedded in the region's socio-cultural and economic structures. This study examines how Islam spread not merely through political expansion or coercion, but through multiple interconnected processes such as conversion, acculturation, and cultural synthesis. The growth of Muslim communities in Mithilā from the medieval period reflects diverse pathways of religious change, including the influence of Sufi networks, state policies, occupational mobility, and interactions with local populations. Conversion to Islam did not follow a uniform pattern; rather, it varied across regions, social groups, and individuals. While some conversions were linked to material incentives or political patronage, others emerged from the appeal of Islamic egalitarian ideals, particularly among marginalized groups within the rigid caste hierarchy. The role of Sufi saints proved especially significant, as their inclusive practices, spiritual authority, and establishment of khanqāhs created spaces for social integration and religious interaction. Acculturation further shaped the Islamization process, as local customs, beliefs, and practices were not entirely abandoned but reinterpreted within an Islamic framework. This led to the emergence of a shared cultural milieu where Hindu and Muslim traditions intersected. The interaction between Sufi and Bhakti movements also contributed to softening communal boundaries and fostering mutual understanding. Thus, Islamization in Mithilā was neither abrupt nor homogeneous. It was a dynamic process characterized by negotiation, adaptation, and coexistence, resulting in a rich syncretic culture and fluid religious identities that defined the region's historical experience.

**Keywords:** Islamization, Mithilā, Conversion, Acculturation, Cultural Synthesis, Sufism, Bhakti Movement

### Introduction

The study of Islam in Mithilā highlights the complexity and gradual nature of its integration within the local society, challenging simplistic notions of conversion as a singular event. Initially marked by tension and distinct identities, the arrival of Islam initiated a long transformative process rather than immediate religious change. Instead of attributing the spread solely to political or coercive factors, the paper emphasizes various social, economic, and cultural channels that facilitated the emergence of Islam in the region. Key to this process were structural changes in agrarian practices and labor organization, which fostered new communities receptive to Islamic beliefs. Sufi traditions played a critical role, providing a flexible approach to engaging with diverse populations and establishing social and cultural centers that promoted inclusivity. Concurrently, the Bhakti movement within Hinduism encouraged personal devotion and challenged established hierarchies, fostering dialogue and convergence between the two traditions. The chapter engages with historiographical debates regarding the spread of Islam in South Asia, assessing theories related to force, patronage, and migration, and advocating for a nuanced understanding of the intricate historical processes at work. Thus, the Islamization of Mithilā was neither uniform nor linear, but

rather marked by negotiation, diversity, and gradual adaptation influenced by local conditions and broad historical dynamics. It underscores the fluidity of religious identities and the importance of recognizing the complexities of social and cultural life in medieval Mithilā.

### Various Modes of Conversion

#### Theories and Interpretations of Conversion

The sources confirm the increase of the number of Muslims living in medieval Mithilā in fourteenth century. Every Muslim is considered to have a missionary desire to spread Islam even if they do not actively convert or try to influence others. It was also indicated that the spread of Islam has led to great social change in the many countries that Islam has expanded into. <sup>[1]</sup> But, Ira M. Lapidus suggests that, in India, the effects of conversion were only partially felt with respect to the cause behind conversion, since the degree and nature of conversion to Islam differed not only among regions but also social class and by the individual himself. <sup>[2]</sup> When some scholars express their opinions about the various ways and reasons for people in South Asia converting to Islam, they generally do this from an external perspective as opposed to a subjective evaluation of the totality of the conversion of one individual or group. <sup>[3]</sup> Four generic theories have emerged as

to the conversion of people to Islam in South Asia, according to Ira M. Lapidus. The first was based on the general view that Islam was spread by force, with the example of Muslims coming into a territory with their sword in one hand and the Qurān in the other hand being a common saying at that time. [4] The second was deciding factor for the conversion to Islam was due to the Middle Ages using 'political patronage' or 'material gain' as a method of converting people to Islam. [5] Third, the so-called 'immigration' theory [6] and Richard M. Easton does not believe that this was a conversion theory, but he includes the 'immigration' theory because it relates to the spread of Muslims to both India from the Arabians Sea. To counter these theories, a theory of 'Holyman Islam' was propounded. According to this theory, *Sufis*' use of their own way of living (*tarīqā*) has helped to convert many people to Islam. This occurred partly due to the *Sufis*' liberal interpretation of the most essential tenets of Islam and their willingness to compromise with the customs and traditions of a given area. This allowed the Sufis to become a major source of converting others to Islam. Moreover, they emphasized equality and brotherhood in Islamic philosophy as seen in the *Khanqāh* which motivated the *Śūdras* to accept Islam as their religion. [7] But studies on this issue have questioned the personal role of *Sufis* in the conversion of Islam. The propagation of Islam throughout nomadic tribes was supported by religious figures working together with Sufis and the state, as described by Inayat & Sunita Zaidi. The state's goal of promoting its political and economic influence led to the state encouraging these tribes towards Islam through *Sufi* activities. [8] The state provided financial assistance for Muslims by giving them tax-exempt land to build, maintain, and operate *khanqāhs* (teaching or spiritual sites). Many of the tribes visited these religious sites because of their respect for the religious leaders who led them. These *khanqāhs* became the focal point of the tribal people's cultural activities. Through these two events, the state was more concerned with having the tribal people and those that were difficult to control come under control of the state than it was with spreading the religion of Islam or a particular Sufi order's (*silsilāh*) philosophy. For this reason, the state never sponsored or hindered any Sufi order or religious order that did not pose a danger to it. This was clearly evident in Mithila also.

Eaton writes that, "...from the culture of institutional Sufism came the asymmetric categories of *pīr* and *murīd*, or *sheikh* and disciple, which rendered Sufism a suitable model for channeling authority, distributing patronage, and maintaining discipline – the very requirements appropriate to the business of organizing and mobilizing labour in regions along the cutting edge of state power. It is little wonder that Sufis appeared along East Bengal's forested frontier." [9]

<sup>1</sup> Arnold, T.W. (1956). *The Preaching of Islam* (2nd ed.). Lahore: pp. 254-262.

<sup>2</sup> Lapidus, Ira. M. (1988). *History of Islamic Societies*. Cambridge: pp. 245-248.

<sup>3</sup> Hardy, P. (1979). *Modern European and Muslim Explanations of Conversion to Islam in South Asia: A Preliminary Survey of the Literature*. In Nehemia Levtzion (Ed.), *Conversion to Islam* (New York: Holmes & Meier, p. 78).

<sup>4</sup> Titus, M. (1979). *Indian Islam* (reprint). New Delhi: p.31.

<sup>5</sup> Sharma, S.R. (1962). *The Religious Policy of the Mughal Emperors*. Bombay: pp. 165, 170-174.

<sup>6</sup> Eaton, R.M. (1994). *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontiers 1240-1760*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p.113.

<sup>7</sup> Trimmingham, J.S., *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, Oxford University Press, 1971, p.22. Also see introduction Elliot and Dowson's,

*History of India as told by its own Historians*, Vol. II (revised edition), 1952, p.59; Here, Muhammad Habib holds that many city workers whose social position was precarious in the caste ridden Hindu society were attracted to the philosophy of Islam which provided them equal and respectful status in society. The acceptance of Islam by persons was a mundane affair rather than out of religious consideration.

<sup>8</sup> Zaidi, S. Inayat and Sunita Zaidi, "Conversion to Islam and Formation of Castes in Medieval Rajasthan", in Quiser, A.J. and S.P. Verma, ed. *Art and Culture*, Vol.1 Felicitation Vol. in honour of Prof. Nurul Hasan, Publication Scheme, Jaipur, 1993, pp.27-28.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p.257

### Frontier Expansion and Social Transformation

The woodland delta had previously been sparsely inhabited. Central to the dissemination of Islam in this context were the Muslim clerics, whose capacity for open engagement starkly contrasted with a perspective of the long-established Brahmins in western Bengal, who deemed the eastern territories, predominantly occupied by 'tribal' communities, as ritually impure and unsuitable for Brāhmaṇas to inhabit. Subsequent generations recalled the challenge as 'the forest, a perilous and untamed realm that [the Sufis] were thought to have conquered; the supernatural realm ... over which they were supposed to have ongoing power'. The woodland remained unchanged. The Brāhmaṇas disregarded it; the Sufis accepted it, perhaps bolstered by their longstanding conviction of their dominance over supernatural powers. In this area, the Muslim clerics arrived with zeal. The distinction emerged not just from the Brāhmaṇas' focus on purity and pollution, crucial to the social order they governed, but also from variations in social structure. In the reclamation of forestland for rice cultivation, the Muslim clerics attracted individuals and small factions rather than whole jātis that were honored of their historical identity. The land rights these individuals would get stemmed from their involvement in labor coordinated by religious leaders. Individuals joining the emerging groups lacked a significant connection to the caste system and had little investment in the philosophy that underpins this system, which is an important part of the larger Hindu belief system. In the eastern Bengal developed society, had a dominant Muslim majority.

### Regional and Social Variations in Conversion

Eaton has discovered the proof in Punjab. The Jāt pastoralists journeyed from Sindh to the multan region between the seventh and eleventh centuries. By the thirteenth century, they were well-established in settlements between the Sutlej and the Ravi; by around 1600, there was a substantial increase in their numbers, and they could be described, as the 'founding agricultural caste'. At the same time, many were also becoming Muslim. An examination of this process through an analysis, conducted by Eaton, of a series of 14 genealogical representations of famous Siyal families in the mid-nineteenth century. By taking the names from the genealogical representations and categorizing them into a 'Punjabi secular name' or a 'Muslim name', he finds that Muslim names were present in the early 1400s, formed the majority by the mid-1600s, and had become fully represented by 1815, pointing to a gradual and primarily subconscious shift to Islam. Individual may embrace Islam in expectation of economic advantages, political favours, or to avoid dis-favour; alternatively, it may result from closeness to those in power. A.M. Shah, in his analysis of an early 19th-century report concerning a village in Kaira, Gujarat, discusses a Muslim Rathod Rajput faction that converted to Islam in the fifteenth

or sixteenth centuries due to the Sultans of Gujarat's strategy of establishing social groups in the region to ensure enduring support for their political dominion.<sup>[10]</sup> Asiya Siddiqi studies the history of the Dhangar jāti's involvement in legal matters pertaining to real property in connection with a late nineteenth-century legal case involving a Muslim butcher family. Siddiqi asserts that during the early Sultanate invasions of the Deccan region in the 13th century, it is reasonable to suppose that there would have been a demand for meat to feed the large number of Muslims who were migrating into the region. Consequently, several Dhangar individuals may have converted to Islam to fulfill the religious obligation of animal killing (zabiha). In all instances, the Rajput and Dhangar families, Hindu and Muslim respectively, have maintained strong contacts with one another. E.A. Gait denotes the assertion of Ghuznavi, who said that many converts originated not from the marginalized low castes, but from the elevated strata of Hindu society. At the beginning of the twentieth century, assertions were made that during the Mughal era, several individuals from Bengal's landed aristocracy and even from the priestly class had embraced Islam. Raja of Kharagpur, having been defeated by one of Akbar's generals in Midnapore District, converted to Islam in order to save the ancestral lands of their families. Raja Purdil Singh of Parsouni, Darbhanga District (in northern Bihar), accepted Islam to expiate the sin of revolting against the Mughal Emperor. All the diwān families of Muslims in the pargana Sarail (Tippera) and pargana Haibatnagar (Mymensingh) and Jungalbari, who were formerly Hindus, were originally Brahmins. The Pathans of the Majhoulī (Darbhanga) come from the Raja of Narhar.

10 Chand, Tara, *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture*, Allahabad, 1954, p.24.

### **Caste, Identity, and Gradual Islamization**

The Meo, of Mewat region, have a population over 300,000 and mainly reside in rural with a history of land ownership, and having self-identified themselves to have been historically warriors, or Rajputs. In addition to being Rajput, Meo are also adherents to Islam. There is some folkloric discussion regarding their having converted to Islam, with estimates of conversion occurring between the 8th and 17th centuries, and in the various performance of their conversions, that the conversions have occasionally been violent. When reviewing numerous Meo articles and reports, Partap Aggarwal has stated, "The Meo, because of their historical involvement in politics in Delhi, have always been under tremendous pressure from various factions in Delhi to convert to Islam for the purpose of being used as a 'shield' from violence or persecution"<sup>[11]</sup> Until about the 1940s, the Meo were exceedingly comfortable being identified as members of both the dominant caste and as large landholder castes. Moreover, the Meo, like other landholding communities, have historically been comfortable maintaining and strengthening endogamous marriages, and living according to their own personal marriage development systems, which do not accommodate traditionally accepted norms of Islamic endogamy, nor arrangements for traditional interfaith marriage practices. Therefore their marriage ritual, for example, contains the same key elements of Rajput marriage rituals, with the exception that the role of the priest is conducted by the father's sister, versus a Brahmin priest. Thus, viewed collectively, the Meo identity consists of the intersection of multiple Rajput clans. What identified them being a Meo or Muslim: being a Meo or Muslim through their

names; visiting mosques on occasion; having been circumcised; and burying, as compared to cremating their dead.<sup>[12]</sup>

11 Partap Aggarwal, *Caste, Religion and Power*, New Delhi, 1971, p.40.

12 Raymond Jamous, "The Meo as a Rajput Caste and a Muslim Community" in C.J. Fuller, ed., *Caste Today*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996, p.191f.

### **Sufi and Bhakti Effect: Liberal Attitude of the People**

#### **Initial Tensions and Religious Attitudes**

Regarding Hindu-Muslim relations in Mithilā with the arrival of Islam, it may be said that Hindus and Muslims did not actively pursue amicable coexistence and communal harmony. Religious notions were too deep-rooted to pave the way for unity between the two major communities. Given these disparities, religious conflict remains a possibility. Extremists existed on both sides. Several saints, such as Muzaffār Shams Balkhī and H. Abdul Quddus Gangohī, regarded Hindus as unbelievers and deemed them undeserving of faith and confidence. It is important to note the destinies of Shaikh Aaz Kākvi of Gaya and Ahmad Bihāri, followers of Hadrat Sharafuddīn Ahmad Manerī. Ahmad Bihāri was sentenced to death by Fīruz Shāh Tughlaq for being an atheist and discussing the mysteries of divine unity. Conversely, while Hadrat Sharafuddīn Ahmad Manerī was displeased with the actions of the aforementioned Emperor, he did not endorse the views of his followers. The fifth letter of the *Maktubat-i-Sadi* states that the saint said, "If the soul, amidst these experiences, lacks guidance from a spiritual leader, it may, regrettably, lose faith and succumb to erroneous beliefs regarding unity, incarnation, and identification." Over time, through continuous interaction, the proximity of residences, an intrusive and eclectic spirit, and the synthesizing influences of Hinduism, the previously arrogant attitudes of superiority, mutual contempt, and antagonism among adherents of opposing faiths were mitigated, leading to the discovery of common ground in various domains, including social and domestic life, manners, morals, economic implications, as well as art, architecture, language, and literature. Notwithstanding the resistance from orthodox, conservative, and reactionary theologians on both sides, the predominant segments of the public acknowledged the need and appeal of cultural and religious factions for the establishment of peace and quiet. Nature promotes unity, and the arrival of the Sufis and the Bhaktas facilitated the progressive erosion of variety.

### **Transformation of Caste Structure and Rise of Bhakti**

The caste system is slowly losing its rigidity; this means that the status of relation and privileges of caste differences have changed. The original aims of Islam were to convert others to Islam and promote social equality and brotherhood among its adherents.<sup>[13]</sup> As such, Islam was well positioned to attract the lower castes who were predominantly Hindus. The success of this offer is additionally enhanced given that the rulers who had conquered the majority of India and had ample resources available to offer lower caste members as being part of their society. Therefore, Hinduism was potentially facing the dire situation of becoming reduced in size and being assimilated into the rapidly expanding population of Islamic people.

The caste system in Hinduism was created to fit the idea of Karma.

i). The caste system created a leisured class consisting of

- wealthy or strong people with certain traits or titles that had been passed down by birth or inherited;
- ii). Another class composed of labourers who were assigned a degraded social status; and finally
  - iii). It invested this ingenious arrangement with the most sacred and positive sanctions. This argument is based entirely on the scriptures and said that the caste system's inequalities were part of a moral order to which the will of GOD was creator and guardian, and that the created beings only had to thank themselves for being at the bottom of the caste system. <sup>[14]</sup> To counter the rise of Islam, Hinduism attempted to build a bulwark by providing some concessions to the upper castes and by starting to include them as before. This provided no benefits to the lower castes, and they began to form ideas about their own beliefs that laid the foundation for the development of the Bhakti movement. <sup>[15]</sup>

13 Carpentier, J.E., *Theism in Medieval India*, London, 1920, p.321.

14 Chaudhary, R.K., *op. cit.*, p.23.

15 Mookherji, Radha Kamal, *The Indian Scheme of Life*, Bombay, 1951, p.16.

### Bhakti Movement and Social Integration

The *Bhakti Mārg* has developed into an extensive force within our culture and civilization starting from a trickle in pre-historic Vedic times through flooding every part of India, <sup>[16]</sup> since those points in history while being limited only to the priesthood for those who follow the Jñāna Mārg and are unable to take on a duty completely fulfilled. An important aspect of the Bhakti cult's emergence is that Hindu society exists in a state of duality; i.e., Hindu society is constituted by two levels of consciousness, one "higher" (the elite), and the other "lower" (the masses). In terms of numbers, the elite are small in number and comprise the custodians of the orthodoxy, traditional or "high" knowledge, traditional philosophies, traditional social ideas, and traditional institutions; while, in contrast, the general populace is much larger in number, and they comprise the source of folk culture and traditional regional customs. The effective separation of these two segments of society has resulted in a vertical division within the totality of Hindu society. <sup>[17]</sup> The Brahmanical system of creating social divisions from the time of the Vedas has maintained the separation of Hindu society into different compartments by establishing a monopoly on knowledge, refusing to allow the lower caste of people access to or learning of the Sanskrit language; discriminating against other Hindu groups from participating in rituals together; and allowing no inter-caste relations when there is any form of social interaction between people of different *jātis* or castes. As a result, with the spread of Bhakti wave of consciousness (between 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries) a new caste alignment <sup>[18]</sup> consisted of the more populous lower rung of the social order was brought about. Many Bhakti saints, viz. Vidyāpati (A.D. 1350-1450), Kabir (AD 1440-1518), Caitanya (A.D. 1485-1533) and a host of others, through their *bhajans*, *kīrtans* and *dohās*, attempted to harmonise both the orthodox and general mass of the people. Their integrative ideas generated an ethos of intergroup cordiality. In Medieval India, the compassion and love of the social reformers were available to all people regardless of caste; consequently, all people could take advantage of the opportunity created by this ideal form of Bhakti and thus receive prasada of god. At that time there was not such strict differentiation between classes, the impact of these reformers on society tended to create less division among people. <sup>[19]</sup> Fortunately, with entry of Islam in India

there came a set of pence-loving tolerant people called sufis or Islamic mystics, believers in esoteric Islam, and having a way of life of their own characterized by self-abandonment and was against the carnal desires (*nafs*), devotional love of God, quest for union with one eternal, eagerness for Passing away in union with (*Fana*) God to find abiding abode in God (*baqa*). Sufism, said to be the universal aspect of Islam has mystical, monistic, speculative, spiritualistic, humanistic, ritualistic tendencies, but no dogmatic theology. It is a discipline rather than a doctrinal or dogmatic creed. In early medieval Bihar, Sufism practically identified with Islam, and there were no schisms and sects worth mentioning among Muslims. The entry of Islam in India had been followed by that of Sufism which lay midway between two dissimilar systems of Aryan Pantheism and Semetic Islam, tending at times towards, and being associated with, each. The absolute monotheism of orthodox Islam, emphasizing upon eternal distinction between transcendental God and man, the Creator being separate from the Creation, was directly opposed to absolute Monism of Shankracharya's Vedantic thought of *Aham Brahmasmi* (I am Brahma), and stressing the identity and unity of God the phenomenical world. <sup>[20]</sup> Though the *Sufi* thinkers traced the origin of their doctrine to the *Qurān*, and to the mystic tendencies and to life, sayings and actions of the Prophet, the Monistic mysticism of the *Sufis* were looked upon the orthodox Muslim as a class as heretical innovations, opposed to the spirit of Islam. But Sufis of Bihar have demonstrated through their life and writing that regardless of their order (Chishtiya, Suhra-wardiya, Qadria, Firdausiya, Shuttariya) or whether they are orthodox followers of both the Islamic Law (Bā-Sharā') or those who do not follow it (Be-Sharā'), there are several things they all have in common: They all adhere to the Qurān and Sunnat; they accept all of the basic tenets of Islam, play down all types of innovation in religious beliefs and/or practices, think of Bid'ah (heresy); and they all stress the importance of observing the mandatory obligations under their faith. They then reject anything that they feel is out of harmony with the fundamental tenets of Islam. <sup>[21]</sup>

16 Chand, Tara, *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture*, Allahabad, 1954, p.24.

17 Chand, Tara, *op. cit.*, Introduction, p.ix.

18 Mookherji, Radhakamal, *op. cit.*, p.41.

19 *Ibid.*, p.55.

20 Askari, S.H., *Islam and Muslims in Medieval Bihar*, KPJRI, Patna, 1998, pp.92-93.

21 *Ibid.*, p.93.

### Sufi Thought, Practice, and Mission

A precursor of the great *Sufi* saint of Ajmer, the pioneer of the Chishti order of Sufism in India, was Saiyid Husain *Khīngswār*, who was killed by the Hindus and lies *buried* at *Taragarh* Hills near Ajmer. Local tradition, supported by later documentary evidence, says that three of his relatives came to Bihar. One of them, Saiyid Hasan, a direct ancestor of *Diwan* Saiyid Jafar, the saint of Barh of Shāhjahān's time, has a tomb ascribed to him at Neora, in Patna district, while the two others, Saiyid Ahmad and his sister's son, Saiyid Muhammed, popularly called *Māmūn Bhānja* (Uncle-Nephew) are said to have been killed and buried at Jaruha, near Hajipur. Their mausoleum which had remained intact till the earthquake of 1934, is said to have been built much later with the help of Raja Shiva Singh, a Brāhmaṇa ruler of Tirhut, and the patron of Vidyāpati. *Mahārāja* Mān Singh, one of Akbar's governor of Bihar, granted in 1558 A.D. Fifteen *bighas* land area for

upkeep of the mausoleum and the facsimile of his bilingual *Sanad* containing one prose then used in Bihar, and written in *Kaithi* Hindi script, was published long ago. [22] Traces and evidences are also available of others who also lost their lives for preaching their faith and who till sometime before received homage even from the Hindus of the locality. Such was Shaikh Fattu and Shaikh Barhan who came to Bihar during the reign of Firuz Tughlaq and were killed and buried in a place known as Bargazar in North Bihar. The legend of *Salār Masud* or *Ghāzi Miyān* appears to have some truth behind it, though he had become a legend in the 14<sup>th</sup> century as is evident from a question put to Makhdum Sharafuddin and the reply given by him. [23]

*Mirat-i-Masudī* and *Miratul-Asrār*, 17<sup>th</sup> century works, refer to the lightening sporadic raid of *Salār Masūd* in eastern India and his eventual death at the hands of *Raja Hardua* or *Sahdeva*, on 1033 A.D. He lies buried at *Bahraich*. The authority quoted by the writer, *Abdur Rehman Chishti*, excites suspicion for no one else ever heard of it and he does not give even a single extract from it. *Muhammad* and *Firuz Tughlaq* of Delhi, and *Hājī Ilyas* of Bengal, paid reverential visit to *Bahraich* tomb and *Von Graff* the Dutch traveler saw from his boat in 1661 the celebration of the popular and picturesque annual festival at *Maner*. Earlier, *Sultan Sikandar Lodi* tried in vain to stop the fair of *Ghāzi Miyān*, and singing and dancing of Hindus and Muslims, particularly a set of *Qalandar* mendicants, round a long bamboo pole wrapped in coloured rags with horse-hair tied on its top, for the whole thing smacked of practices contrary to orthodox beliefs. Some Muslims may have been intolerant, but Islam and Sufism

were not so. There could not have existed any aspect whatsoever whereby any form of compulsion or pressure or persuasion could have applied. Conversion of non-Muslims was not their objective nor do they frequently mention it, much of India's peaceful adoption of Islam can be attributed to Sufi saints. [24] Many impoverished individuals turned toward Islam to find relief from social oppression or to improve themselves socially, morally, or culturally, which likely significantly influenced their decision. There are a great deal of reactions of Sufis had to their environment. A large majority of Sufis have a very open-minded and accepting attitude towards the world around them; for many, that attitude frequently includes a great deal of love and compassion. The Sufi would often write letters of recommendation to kings and nobles about specific people who were to be given aid; he would also write to kings and nobles requesting that aid be given to the needy and impoverished. The Sufi would not ever do any work or accept money for his work, but rather, he would always be there to offer support to those in his community who were in need. [25] The existence of various Sufi saints of different *silsilāhs* along with their shrines or *dargāhs* located within the territory of *Tirhut*. *Ainā-i-Tirhut* [26] informs that *Mithilā* witnessed the presence of forty-two Sufi saints and the *dargāhs/mazārs* of twenty-two saints were located in different places of the south western part of *Tirhut*. The text also describes in detail about the legends associated with each and every saints. The details of the names of Sufi saints and location of their *dargāhs* are shown in the Table 1:

**Table 1:** List of the names of Sufi saints and their dargahs in Mithilā. [27]

S. No.	Name of Sufi Saints	Dargāhs
1.	Makhdum Saiyyad Shah Tajuddin	Chaktazpur, Pargana : Kusuma
2.	Makhdum Shah Baraktullah	Makhdumganj, Darbhanga
3.	Makhdum Shah Sultan Hussain	Darbhanga
4.	Makhdum Abdullah	Mohalla : Mufti, Darbhanga
5.	Maulana Makhdum Saiyyad Shah Mohammad Afzal	Dharmapur, Pargana : Saraisa
6.	Maulana Qazi Saiyyad Mohammad Ashraf	?
7.	Maulana Saiyyad Shahabuddin	Tajpur, Paragana : Kusuma
8.	Maulana Saiyyad Mohammad Safi	Tajpur, Paragana : Kusuma
9.	Maulana Diwan Shah Ali Mohammad	Tajpur, Paragana : Kusuma
10.	Makhdum Hajrat Diwan Shah Jahid (Suhrawardi)	Pargpur, Paragana : Kusuma
11.	Maulana Shah Bahauddin Ahmad (Nakshabandia)	Jathiadi, Darbhanga
12.	Maulana Shaikh Mohammad Ismail (Nakshabandia)	Jathiadi, Darbhanga
13.	Maulana Mohammad Ismail (Nakshabandia)	?
14.	Makhdum Shah Sufi	Harisimhapur Devaka, Paragana : Gharaur
15.	Qazi Alimuddin Saiyyad Alvi Shaikh Ansari	Mathurapur, Paragana : Kusumba
16.	Makhdum Shah Daniyal (Shuttari)	Mauza : Bela, Pargana : Saraisa
17.	Makhdum Shah Abdurrahman	Kasba : Muzaffarpur, Mauza : Saraiyaganj
18.	Makhdum Abdul Fatah Sarmast	Tangaul, Hajipur
19.	Khas Dulha	Damodarpur, Paragana : Kusumba (Near Rosara)
20.	Makhdum Shah Jalaluddin Bokhari	Chakdargah, Paragana : Bharwara
21.	Bhikha Shah Shilani	Darbhanga
22.	Haji Harmain	Hajipur
23.	Dudhila Pir	Hajipur
24.	Makhdum Shah Nemtullah Jahidi	Mahua, Paragana : Paraila
25.	Shah Abdus Lalif Ghazi	Darbhanga (Belagarh)
26.	Makhdum Shah Daud	Darbhanga

27.	Maulana Khan Mohammad Nakshaband of Lalbagh	?
28.	Saiyyad Shah Talib Hussain	?
29.	Saiyyad Shah Fazal Hussain	Tajpur, Paragana : Kusumba
30.	Hafiz Saiyyad Hussain	Darbhanga
31.	Pir Damaria	Minapura, Paragana : Jarahawa
32.	Qazi Sadullah	Khajapur, Paragana : Sadpura
33.	Saiyyad Mohammad Gaus	Bakhari, Paragana : Saraisa
34.	Saiyyad Shah Mohammad Haibat	?
35.	Saiyyad Shah Wajid	Dharmapur, Paragana : Saraisa
36.	Makhdum Shah 'Taj'	Tajpur, Paragana : Bhaur, Alipura
37.	Makhdum Shah Amaduddin Garaul	Basara (Near Muzaffarpur)
38.	Saiyyad Abdal	Raghva-Chaklanchi, Paragana : Basara (Near Muzaffarpur)
39.	Makhdum Shah Faiyad Shuttari	Naya Basara, Paragana : Bakhra (Near Rati)
40.	Diwan Shah Ali	Jandaha, Paragana : Saraisa
41.	Shah Ghulam Mustafa Qadiri	Wazidpur (on the bank of river Bagmati, near Qila ghat)
42.	Makhdum Shah Abdullah	Napayakta, Paragana : Amadpur
43.	Aqil Shah Darvesh	Mohalla : Maulvi Sarafuddin Hussain, Darbhanga.

List of the names of Sufi saints and their dargahs in Mithilā. <sup>[28]</sup>

22 Ibid, p.95

23 Ibid.

24 Askari, S.H., op. cit., p.421

25 Ibid., p.114.

26 Lal, Bihari, Fitrat', Ainā-i-Tirhut, Matba Bahar Kashmir, Lucknow, 1883, pp.81-93, 146-47.

27 Ibid., pp.81-114.

28 Ibid., pp.81-114.

### Sufi Ideology and Social Harmony

Besides dargahs, there were four important mosques in Tirhut in the nineteenth century. There was also a famous *Idgāh* at Kadirabad *mohalla* of Darbhanga which has been constructed at the time of Emperor Aurangzeb. In the fort of Hajipur, one mosque was built up during the reign of Akbar. <sup>[29]</sup> These descriptions of saints, *mazārs* and mosques not only confirm their popularity but also it indicates the extent to which socio-religious contacts had developed. At these centres a united holy *mela* (fair) of both the communities are held every year. During the festival of Muharram the villages, predominated by the Muslims, in Mithilā like other parts of Bihar and Bengal, the *Tāzia* processions were conducted with outward show and grief. It is estimated that of the 1400 *tāzia* processions of Patna and Bihar Sharif area, 600 were conducted by the Hindus. <sup>[30]</sup> Buchanan also mentions about the participation of Hindus in Muharram. <sup>[31]</sup> In the field of Persian and Arabic learning, Darbhanga was considered a great centre where scholars like Mulla Abul Hasan, Maulavi Fazal Ali (Author of *Fawayed Amiriya*), Maulavi Sharfuddin Hussain, Maulavi Mohammad Salah 'Khamosh', Maulana Mohammad Imām Shah, Moulavi Maniruddin Hussain (author of *Manirul Farayez*, *Manirul Fatabi* and *Fabayed Razia*), Mohammad Murshid Hasan 'Kamil', etc. lived. Notwithstanding the widespread animosity against Muslims in earlier times, evidence indicates that Muslim rulers have supported Hindu authors. Vācaspati Mishra authored the *Chatrayogodbhūtdoshāśānti-vidhih* at the behest of Sāha Bahādūr. This Sāha Bahādūr was likely a Muslim sovereign. Vidyāpati, once a critic of Muslims in his childhood, composed many poems in honor of Muslim monarchs. Among the devoted poems, we are confident of two sponsors. In one, he honors Mālik Bahārādīn, while in another, he pays homage to Sultān Ghiyathuddin. Dr. B.B. Majumdar

associates the latter with the Bengal Sultan Ghiyathuddin Azam Shah. Nagendranath Gupta attributed many more verses of Vidyāpati to Sultans Hussain Shah and Nusrat Shah of Bengal, as well as to Alam Shah. Dr. Majumdar has raised concerns over the identification of the Sultans as presented by Nagendranath Gupta. Dr. Majumdar associates Nasrad Shah with Nusrat Khan Tughlaq, the grandson of Firuz Tughlaq, and Nasīra Shah with Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud of Bengal (1442-1459 A.D.). He asserts that the poem attributed to Sultan Nasīra Shah in the *Ragatarangini* (p.97) was composed not by Vidyāpati but by Kamsanārāyana, a viruda of King Lakshmināth. Moreover, the Hindus shown no reluctance in accordant reverence towards a Muslim monarch and the Islamic faith. Letter No. 55 of the *Likhanāvali* <sup>[32]</sup> tells us that some Hindus executing a sale deed of slaves, invoked the Great *Sultan*, who was adorned with all titles and had received the boons and favours of the *ḵhodā* or the Almighty God (*ḵhodāya-vara-labdha-prasāda sakala-virudāvali-samalam-kṛta Maha-suratrāṇa Sāhi-praeāre*). The Hindus had a sympathetic understanding of the mystics' belief system. They were against illiteracy and promoted equality and brotherhood in their Islamic faith. Improving relationships between different cultures was a social necessity, and the mystics supported improving those relationships through a unified cultural perspective.

Trade ethics and mutual assistance from their respective distribution were beyond the distinctions of religion and caste for the relations of the working class from both religions. No restrictions were placed on either Muslim or Hindu traders in conducting business operations. In the opinion of teacher Habib the process by which Muslims were accepted into the community of urban workers "was a decision of the local professional groups, and that in making their decisions they were naturally more concerned with mundane affairs and their position in the social order than with abstract theological truths". <sup>[33]</sup> The Muslim brought no artisans, no accountants, and no clerks with him; therefore, all of the structures attributed to him were built by Hindus who customised their ancient methods to fit a new environment. Rājput Feudal Lords Lost Their Influence Once Political Power was in the Hands of Muslims. The Lower Classes Were Not Affected Economically. Changing from forced labor to free labor significantly changed the way in which the majority of the

population lived and worked. Muslim landlords received loans from Hindu money-lenders. Economic and social forces caused a merging of both religious communities. Political unrest had little or no effect on how farmers worked in rural areas where they worked without fear. The non-Islamic society comprised of heterogeneous individuals with varying levels of cultural sophistication and language proficiency. Therefore, the beliefs belonging to Hinduism can be viewed from two extremes: some were considered to be based on a developed philosophies and others were considered to be based on the most primitive superstitions. Whilst there was no similar level of disparity in Islamic societies, there were two types of Islamic society; the upper class, as represented by the sharifs (or ruling class) and lower class, represented by ajlap. The contract between the Hindus and Muslims affected the two groups significantly and reformers tried to mitigate the differences between the two groups and bring them together. The Sufis had a keen interest in tenets of the principles and beliefs of Hindus authors have contributed equally to developing the languages of India; there was a fusion of artistic styles such as paintings and music; and finally, Bhakti and Tasawwuf (mysticism) result directly from the contracts between the two religious communities. Hindu customs and behaviour were adopted by Muslims through the combination of the two groups. The artistic fusion between the two groups can be seen in the architecture of Jaunpur which is documented in Vidyapati's firsthand account. The architectural style of Jaunpur art presents a harmonious combination of both Hindu and Muslim architectural design ideals.<sup>[34]</sup>

29 Ibid., pp.146-147.

30 Wise, James, The Muhammadans of Eastern Bengal, in JASB, 1894, Vol.63, pt.3, No.1, pp.6,9.

31 Buchanan, Francis, op. cit., p.189.

32 Likhanāvalī of Vidyapati, ed. Indra Kant Jha, Patna, 1969, Letter No.55.

33 Elliot and Dowson, History of India as told by its own Historians, Vol.II, Introduction, p59.

34 Cf. Askari, S.H., Islam and Muslims in Medieval Bihar, 2nd edn., 1998, p.116.

## Conclusion

The Islamization of Mithilā was not a single or uniform process but a gradual and multifaceted transformation shaped by social, economic, and cultural factors. Conversion occurred through diverse channels such as Sufi influence, state policies, occupational mobility, and processes of acculturation rather than through coercion alone. The interaction between Hindu and Muslim communities, though initially marked by tension, gradually evolved into coexistence and cultural exchange. The roles of Sufi and Bhakti traditions were particularly significant in softening rigid boundaries and fostering a shared social space. Ultimately, the spread of Islam in Mithilā reflects a complex process of negotiation and adaptation, resulting in a syncretic cultural landscape and fluid religious identities.

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