

Symposium of Saint Legends of Bengal: The Chronicles and the Anecdotes

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ABSTRACT

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A legend is defined as a fictitious story handed down from generation to generation, popularly being accepted as a historical phenomenon. This paper deals with Saint's legend—a category of legends, concerning a holy person or an object. Bangladesh, a commonplace for preaching Islam from the eighth century onwards, is home to many great legends over the years. From miraculous capabilities to superhuman skills, the stories of the saint legends are very much ingrained in the culture of this country. This paper sums up a brief overview of five of the most renowned saint legends to grace Bangladesh, namely Shah Makhdum, Balkhi Shah, Pir Gazi, Hazrat Shah Jalal, and Bayazid Bostami. In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation.

1. Introduction

Prominent folklorist Linda Degh has defined folk narrative as something which encompasses all genres of oral literature in prose. Generally, the term narrative means "story" or "saga". Folk narratives are the stories that have been handed down from generation to generation, either in writing or by word of mouth. The folk narrative has its various sub-divisions, including legends, myth, fairy tales, romantic tales, religious tales, animal tales, numskull, etc. Again, this classification can be divided into several sub-genres, depending on their context. In this analysis, only legends will be taken into account. In this paper, the aforementioned method is used for the assembly of articles I, II, and V. To accompany this method, all of the related locations were visited and thorough interviews were conducted to get an idea of their views on the legends and the stories that were transmitted across generations traditionally. For articles III and IV, various books related to folk narratives and legends were used as a backbone to shape up the structure of the writings. Along with the books, reliable internet sources were used to strengthen the findings and further clarify the views on the already collected data.

According to scholar Stith Thompson, a legend is an account of extraordinary happenings which is assumed to have occurred in the past. He further mentioned that a legend of an incident that has an attachment to a certain locality was probably told with equal conviction in various other places around the world. Although the main characters are humans, legends often contain supernatural elements. The fundamental forms of legends are found to be namely historical legends, religious legends, saint's legends, local legends, etc.

2. Saint Legends of Bengal

Most people in Bangladesh are religious and the majority of them follow Islam. From the eighth century onwards, many Arab merchants and Pir (Islamic saints) came to this land. Between these two groups, the Pirs came only to preach Islam. In the early stages, they had to struggle a lot. Later, they were able to establish themselves in society and gained the respect of people of all religions. Numerous folklores (involving saint's legend) have been made to glorify their majestic and miraculous powers.

Saint's legends are the narratives that are centered on a holy person or object. A great many such legends are prevalent in Bangladesh. Here are some legends about five renowned Pirs of the Islamic saints from northern, southern, eastern, and western parts of the country.

I. The legends of Shah Makhdum

Rajshahi is a city in the north of Bangladesh. This city was formerly known as Mahakalgarh. Mahakalgarh was ruled by two brothers—Anshudeo and Chandkharga who were the believers of Kapalika Tantra (witchcraft). Everyone was terrified of these two oppressive brothers. At that time, it was customary to offer human sacrifices to their worshiped deities. Shah Makhdum first sent some saints to eliminate such injustice but they were captured and murdered. After hearing this news, Shah Makhdum came to Rajshahi from Persia on the back of two crocodiles. Shah Makhdum then fought with the two Deep brothers. Anshudeo's two sons were killed. But, when Shah Makhdum prayed for them to come back to life, the two princes came alive. Seeing this, Anshudeo and Chandkharga, along with their family and followers, converted to Islam.

II. The legends of Balkhi Shah and Raja Parshurama

Balkhi Shah came to Mahastangarh to spread Islam. It is said that he came to Mahastangarh on the back of a huge fish with some of his disciples. In a very short time, he gained lots of followers. As a result of this, a war between Raja Parshurama and Balkhi Shah was inevitable. During the battle, Balkhi Shah was surprised to see that, although his army was reducing noticeably, King Parshurama's army was not decreasing in number. This fuss was befalling due to some supernatural and miraculous power. For several times during the war, the dead soldiers of Parashuram were seen participating in the battle again! The astonished Sultan later found out that there was a well called "Jiyat Kund" or the "Immortal Well" which had the miraculous powers to reincarnate humans. King Parshuram used this well to revive his soldiers from death. The Sultan then threw a beef into the well with the help of a hawk to contaminate the sacred elixir of the well. Due to this clandestine attack, the miraculous power of the holy water from the well was eroded. Shah Sultan Mehmed Balkhi then defeated King Parshuram at last.

III. The legends of Pir Gazi

In the Khulna region of the southern part of Bangladesh, Gazi Pir came to preach Islam. He was the son of Shah Shekandar, the ruler of Bairat Nagar. He had a foster brother named Kalu. Gazi's mother found him in a floating chest from a river. Gazi had miraculous powers since childhood. Gazi's father threw a needle in the sea. To test him, he ordered Gazi to bring him the needle from the sea. Gazi then brought him the needle back with the help of saint Khawaja Khijir. The Gazi turned his "Ashabari" or

the magical stick into a boat and came to Khulna's Sundarban region with Kalu. Mukut Roy was the then king of Khulna who had a beautiful daughter named Champavati. Gazi was also handsome, kind, and very polite. Seeing his charms, some fairies told princess Champavati about him, making her fall in love with him immediately. In Gazi's dream, the fairies told Gazi about Champavati. When Kalu took Champavati's marriage proposal, Raja Mukut Roy ridiculed and imprisoned him. Gazi, a calm preacher of Islam, became very angry about this. Then he demonstrated his power and created a tiger army. Dakshina Roy was the commander of Mukut Roy's army. He created a crocodile army of his own. A devastating fight broke out between the tiger and the crocodile army. After some time, the demon army of Dakshinaray also joined the battle. But Gazi burnt everyone with the enchanted verses. To prevent an imminent defeat, King Mukut Roy made a treaty by stopping the war. He and his family then converted to Islam and married off Champavati to Gazi.

IV. Legends of Hazrat Shah Jalal

Hazrat Shah Jalal strengthened the foundation of Islam in the eastern part of Bangladesh. Goura Govinda was the ruler of Srihatta (Now Sylhet). He was ruthless and intolerant. Hazrat Shah Jalal marched towards Sylhet to save the people from such a ruler. Legend has it when Gaura Govinda destroyed all the means of crossing the Barak river, Shah Jalal crossed the river on a "Jaynamaz" (on which Namaz/ Salah is performed). Gaura Govinda knew that defeat in the battle with Shah Jalal was certain. He gave a cursed bow to Shah Jalal and said if anyone could break that bow, he would leave the kingdom. Fortunately, the most virtuous man from Shah Jalal's army could break the bow. After the conquest of Sylhet, Shah Jalal concentrated on preaching Islam and alleviating the suffering of the people. The yellow water of Surma River was not usable by anyone. Shah Jalal then prayed to the almighty to provide the general people with the holiest water. An invisible voice told him to dig a well beside his shrine. On one Friday when the well was made, he hit that well with his stick. Immediately, the water started emitting from the well. It is thought to be connected to the Zamzam well in Mecca and the water of this well is regarded as a cure for various ailments.

V. Legends of Pir Bayazid Bostami

Chittagong which is called the land of the "twelve saints", is a city which is located in the southern part of Bangladesh. Bayazid Bostami is one of the aforementioned saints. It is believed that Hazrat Bayazid Bostami (PBUH) once came to Chittagong and on his departure, he was very pleased with the devotion of the people. Thus he shed some of his blood on the ground and asked the locals to build a shrine there. While staying in Chittagong, Bayazid Bostami transformed some bad jinn (evil spirits) into turtles. Their descendants are still in the pond adjacent to the shrine.

3. Conclusion

Legends are considered to be true but it has rumors mixed with them. In most of the legends mentioned above, by attributing supernatural powers to a common person, the peoples of our folk society have introduced its unique creative features. Through these legends, different geographical environments, animals, different customs, etc from various geographical areas can be identified. In conclusion, it may be mentioned that these saints' legends have provided the opportunity through which we can know and study the history of the arrival of saints in this country as well as copious queers of their lives.

4. References and Notes

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