

Ali Madat- A Syncretistic Cult of Sundarban

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ABSTRACT (10pt)

KEYWORDS (10pt)

I. INTRODUCTION

Ali Madat is a Muslim saint with a mystical origin playing a dominant role among the jungle goers of Sundarban. The name ‘*Ali*’ implies those persons who follow an austere ascetic life engaging themselves in glorification of God and ‘*Madat*’ means help. Thus *Ali Madat* is considered as a blessed soul of God who helps the people seeking his cooperation in some problem. His idol wore the Muslim attire with his uplifted right hand in the form of giving blessings. Previously he got a very high importance among agricultural families, but in the present days he has lost his relation with the economic life of community. Now he is adored as the deity of diseases by the people of Sundarban.

The present paper addresses *Ali Madat* as a benevolent God of Sundarban. It attempts to portrait *Ali Madat* as a syncretistic emblem which creates an impact on the life of the people of Sundarban.

Syncretism denotes the combination or alliance of opposing religious or philosophical doctrines, often with political undertones that results in public and private rituals and commonly accepted local practices which appear to the observer to link orientations that are normally disparate, if not disjunctive (Peter J. Claus and Margaret A. Mills, 2003). The empirical investigation reveals that the syncretism occurs mainly in the religious behavior of a community of an area.

Religious syncretism exhibits blending of two or more religious belief systems into a new system, or the incorporation into a religious tradition of beliefs from unrelated traditions. Behra (2000 cited in Bera, Mukhopadhyay and Sarkar, 2003) defines ‘Religious syncretism refers to a situation where religious miscegenation or fusion is believed to have taken place’. It is not always a total fusion of religious traits, but may be a combination of separate segments that remain identifiable compartments.

II. METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of the study Pakhiralay (abode of birds) village at Gosaba block had been selected. The village Pakhiralay is inhabited by various caste groups including *Poundra Kshatriya* (numerically dominant), *Bagdi*, *Chamar*, *Jele Kaibarta*, *Malo*, *Namasudra*, *Rajbanshi*, *Brahmin*, *Bauri*, *Goala*, *Tanti*, *Kayastha*, *Mahisya*, *Napit* and so on. There are people who also belong to the faiths of Islam and Christianity. Among the three hamlets of Pakhiralay village (*Uttar-Purba para*, *Paschim para*, and *Dakshin para*), *Uttar-Purba* and *Dakshin para* are more exposed to nature as they are situated near the forest depending on forest based economy while *Paschim* is located interiorly with mono crop type of agriculture as their main occupation.

III. FINDINGS

Only a *Poundra Kshatriya* Raptan family who lives in Pakhiralay at Gosaba has acquired the right to worship *Ali Madat*, both at the community as well as family levels. This family immigrated to this land about three generations ago from Kaikhali located in Satkira district of Bangladesh. The priest, Gobindo Raptan, the elder son of late Biharilal Raptan reported that his grandmother first got *Ali Madat* in dream and thereafter in their tradition. He is neither a communal nor even belongs to priestly caste Brahmin, but he belongs to the Raptan’s family and learned the art of worshipping the God *Ali Madat*.

The worship of *Ali Madat* takes place annually on the last day of *Aghrahasyan* (middle of December), but the preparation starts from the very first day of the same month, *Aghrahasyan* (middle of November) and continues throughout the month. At the time of offering *hajot* the priest faces towards the west and the idol faces

the east, resembling the norm of Muslim prayer. Before the adoration of *Ali Madat* the priest cleans the whole room. This room was built by Late Anil Raptan, uncle of Gobindo Raptan three years ago. The priest places five old round earthen pots made of soil on the floor in front of the idol and puts one *batasa* (a sweet cake made of flour and molasses) into each of the round earthen pots and offers to *Ali-Baba*.

For adoration of *than* milk, coconut water, water of Ganga, incense and *dhuno* are all required. Before adoring the *than* priest removes the previous year's idol of *Ali Madat* and places the new idol there. On that particular day the priest abstains from food. The worship of *Ali Madat* starts with the invocation of the following lines for three times:

“Hey Ali Madat
Hokh mor allahar dohai
Tomar ali chayey banu
Ali darbes tomar naam”.

The daily *puja* starts on the first day of *Agrahayan* which continues for the month at a stretch. The worshipping is done during the twilight hours. Five kinds of fry- rice (*Bheja chal*), flattened rice (*Chinra*), beaten paddy, parched rice (*khoi*), pea, grams are offered to *Ali Madat*. Devotees also offer fruits-as much as they can; *batasa* and five kinds of sweets. One hundred and one lamps of soil and four stands to held the lamps should be given by the Raptan's family.

People who are having serious problems make a promise to offer a particular sacrifice to *Ali Madat* on fulfillment of a prayer (*Mannat*). Votive offerings include *malsha* (a small earthen pot with fry-rice, beaten paddy, parched rice, fruits etc.), idol of *Ali Madat*, only *batasa*, etc. The villagers from different caste and religion also offer *malsha*. Those who are offering *malsha* must have to pay one rupee, otherwise the offering remains incomplete. People who made a votive offering bring the idol of *Ali Madat* on the top of their head to the priest. They take incense in two hand and use to dance in front of the idol of *Ali Madat* if their desire fulfill.

When people are suffering from any disease, like stomach pain, accident case or in an auspicious work, they can put on a *Kabach* if they trust in *Ali Madat*. They can wear it on any day but it is better to wear in the morning or in the evening. Bera, Mukhopadhyay and Sarkar (2003) also conducted a field investigation at Gosaba and they found that this Raptan family has the sole right to prescribe a *kabach* to the needy, distressed and to the people who have a fear for *kumir* (crocodile). They also mentioned that there are some prohibitions written in the prescription of that *Kabach*. Like, the persons who wear this *Kabach* and the priest, Gobinda Raptan who gives this *Kabach* to the people, cannot eat *Kankra*(crab), *Kachhap*(tortoise) and *Kunchemach* (a variety of small fish) and if they transgress this then there is high possibility of being *Kala* in their generation and the same is also applicable to themselves. It can be noted that all these five terms i.e., *Kabach*, *Kankra*, *Kachhap*, *Kunchemach* and *Kala* begin with “Ka”. This is known as “Ka”-Syndrome (Bera, Mukhopadhyay and Sarkar, 2003) which has been scattered in all directions of Sundarban. Almost all people of Sundarban have a venerable image to it.

At our present field investigation it was observed that at the end of the worship of *Ali Madat* the priest, followed by the present people utter this mantra:

“bābā ālir nāme ekbār āllāh āllāh balo
lokkho kālār nāme ekbār āllāh āllāh balo
eklākh āsī hājār pīrer nāme ekbār āllāh āllāh balo
tettiris koti debotār nāme ekbār hari hari balo”

Sur (2010) conducted a field study at Gosaba in Sundarban. He met Kanai Nath, a resident of Dulki of Gosaba. Sur narrates: “Kanai Nath is a *patua* (an icon maker). He said that *Ali Madat* was worshipped by *Kapalis*, *Poundras*, *Bagdis* and *Ghosh* communities (milk man). He himself made some icons of *Ali Madat*”.

Another instance of worshipping *Ali Madat* is found at Gosaba. Sur (2010) interviewed another person named Ashis Gharami who came to Gosaba from Parasmani of Lahiripur area of Satjelia. Sur came to know that Rajendra Gharami, grandfather of Ashis Gharami arranged the *puja* of *Ali Madat*. Sur explained, “Rajendra Gharami learnt ‘*Kalam Mantra*’ from a Muslim. There from he learnt the custom and process of *Ali Madat puja*. He arranged it with a purpose to pass over some unavoidable trouble. The last day of *Pous* was the scheduled

day. A tree was selected by the side of a river and offerings were made under it. Neither any icon nor a mantra was required. Rajendra Gharami did not perform it himself. He only made arrangements. Offerings were made through Kashinath Mandal, a poor jungle goer. This *puja* is continued till date”.

The name of *Ali Madat* was uttered in the mantras practiced by the jungle goers. At a time many groups enters the jungle and they utter the mantras for their protection. The mantra was:

“Hey Ali Madat dohai tomar
Hey Alek Darbes namer dohai lage
Dohai choyed Maniruddin Saha
Dohai choyed Jalauddin Saha
Dohai choyed jangaler dohe Badir Saha
Dohai tomar e Alek Darbes
Dohai Ali Madat dohai Ali Madat.”

IV. DISCUSSION

From above findings it reveals that *Ali Madat* got wide acceptance among the jungle goers where religious faith and belief played no bar at all. The cultural environment of syncretism is also very important as it indicates the broad based foundation of this cult.

The instance of syncretism is that of late, the same cult of *Ali Madat* is referred to as ‘*Ali Madhav*’ or ‘*Ali Madan*’ by a certain section of people where the term ‘*Madhav*’ or ‘*Madan*’ stands for Lord Krishna. The process of syncretism that has been under cooperation here has taken a different root of transformation with a possible influence of the Hindus (Bera, et al., 2003).

Secondly, *Ali Madat*, a Muslim saint is worshipped by a *Poundra Kshatriya* family comes under the purview of the process of syncretism.

Again, the very term ‘worship’ of an idol does not fit in the normative pattern of Islamic mode of religious sacrament. So, as per faith in Islam there is no place for idol worship while Hindus believe in idol worship. The case study of Pakiralay village of Gosaba, Sundarban portrays a Hindu officiates the ritual of *Ali Madat* in front of his idol where various caste groups of Hindu and Muslim offer *puja* without any hesitation.

Lastly, Muslim devotees offer *hajjat* which consists of fruits, sweet cakes (*batasa*), parched rice and puffed rice to *Ali Madat*. Both Hindus and Muslims accept the offerings as *prasad* which is linguistically Hindu origin.

From the above note it is apparent that the people of Sundarban worship *Ali Madat* which has become a communal worship where irrespective of caste and community people participate in it. Some people called him *Ali Madat* and some of them called as *Ali Madan*- these two names was never an obstacle in the joint prayer of so vast a people in Sundarban. This God is recognized as a benevolent deity of this area who is worshipped due to various problems mainly related to disease.

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