

Between Puritan Islamic and Syncretistic Muslim Traditions in Bengal: An Ecological Perspective on the Faraizi Movement

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Abstract. In this paper I propose that the phenomenon of the Faraizi movement in nineteenth-century Bengal can be explained from the perspective of the ecological environment as well as in terms of its relation to reformist Islamic influence, to colonial historical processes in general and to Bengali syncretism in particular. In other words, in this paper I highlight the interesting fact that the Faraizi movement, which is the antithesis of syncretism, flourished in ecological conditions comparable to those in which some historians observe that religio-cultural syncretism emerged. Thus the central question explored in this paper is: how can we explain the emergence of an Islamic reformist-puritan movement under environmental conditions hitherto considered conducive to syncretism?

Historiographic considerations

There are two broad reasons why environment matters in the discourse of modern history of Bengal. The first issue relates to the overall absence of environmental perspective in the historiography of modern eastern Bengal. This contrasts, surprisingly perhaps, to historiography of Bengal in earlier periods. For instance, Abdul Momin Chowdhury has discussed the role of ecology in the shaping of different ancient dynastic traditions in the region. For medieval Bengal, H. Blochman and Richard Eaton have underlined the links between deltaic environment and political and cultural development in the region. Interestingly, however, not much remarkable work has been published on the environmental context of colonial history of Bengal, although there is ample evidence that environment continued to play as significant a role in modern time as in ancient and medieval periods.¹ The second issue relates to the way in which environment has been linked to syncretism. Historians like Eaton have tended to link religio-cultural syncretism to the fluid, forested ecology of Bengal. In other words, such syncretistic practice as reliance on imagined or real pirs during reclamation of fluid *char* (newly emergent alluvial) lands or collection of honey in the Sundarbans (tidal mangrove forests) has been regarded as a product of interaction among peasantry of different religious and cultural backgrounds who must live and work together in a given environmental condition.

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¹ For an environmental perspective on post-1947 Pakistan history, see Kamal 2005.

The Faraizi movement: an overview

The Faraizi movement was initiated by Haji Shariatullah, who was born in the deltaic district of Faridpur in 1781. At the age of eighteen, Shariatullah left Bengal to study Arabic literature, Islamic jurisprudence and Sufism in Mecca and al-Azhar University in Cairo. After returning home in 1820, he started a campaign to eliminate from the Bengali Muslim society various traditional practices (*riwaj*) which he considered contradicted the teaching of the Qu'ran.² Such *riwaj* included the worshipping of the shrines of *pirs* or saints, participation in the *ratha yatra* or Purana-inspired religious processions of the Hindu community, the planting of a banana tree around the residence on the occasion of the first menstruation of a girl, and so forth.³ These practices, often described as *shirk* (idolatry) and *bid'a* (unlawful innovation), were the objects of Shariatullah's condemnation. But his attempt to cleanse the Muslim community from 'syncretistic indulgences' of rural Bengal was not possible unless Islam was made relevant to the agrarian society. Shariatullah and then his son, Dudu Mian, were able to do this amidst a complex series of developments that were taking place in nineteenth century Bengal.

Shariatullah's efforts towards religious reform came at a time when agrarian economy in Bengal was undergoing a remarkable transition. By 1830, the impact of the industrial revolution on textile production in Britain was being fully felt in Bengal. This resulted in imported cotton products quickly taking over from local ones, which became uncompetitive even in the domestic market. This, in turn, caused widespread unemployment or reduction in the earning of the weavers that fell 'below starvation wages'. About the same time, the impact of the worldwide depression reached Bengal, thanks to an emerging linkage between the capitalist centre and its dependent periphery. In the early 1830s, major agency houses or financiers collapsed in Calcutta resulting in the reduction of the flow of credit and a drastic fall in prices. Many peasants were coerced to grow an 'unremunerative cash crop in return for paltry advances from indigo factories at a time when rental demands continued to be stringent' (Bose 1993).⁴ In these highly volatile circumstances, Shariatullah's call for resistance to undue taxes imposed by the zamindars was enthusiastically greeted by both poor peasants and weavers. Shariatullah reportedly had command over about 12,000 weavers who met the threat of unemployment in the traditional textile industry by engaging in agriculture. Within a short period, therefore, Shariatullah not only appeared to be a

² For a life-sketch and activities of Haji Shariatullah, see Khan 1965, 1-22.

³ For an account of the syncretistic practices surrounding childbirth, death, marriage and circumcision in then contemporary Bengali Muslim society and the Faraizi efforts to eliminate them, see Taylor 1840, p. 240 and Khan 1965, pp. lxxxvii-lxxxviii.

⁴ To some extent, the condition might be compared to the condition of 'agricultural involution' in colonial Indonesia as described by Geertz 1963.

spiritual saviour, but also someone who, in 1837, was accused by some zamindars of setting up a kingdom like Titu Mir.⁵ It was the beginning of a wave of peasantization.

It was Muhsin al-Din Ahmad, alias Dudu Miyan, however, who consolidated the budding Faraizi movement. Dudu Miyan, a son of Haji Shariatullah, returned from Mecca in 1837 after completing his education and took charge of the movement in 1840.⁶ When Dudu Miyan took over, agrarian circumstances were not entirely similar to what they had been in the 1820s or 1830s. By 1840, the impact of the depression was beginning to subside, the price of commodities was rising and the government's favourable attitude to primary producers of agricultural commodities was becoming apparent, while land reclamation continued extensively beyond the permanently settled areas. Dudu Miyan's world, therefore, was larger than his father's and he found far more followers around him, which encouraged him to radicalize the idea of peasants' rights as well as to take up a policy of aggressive resistance instead of passive mobilization. He proclaimed that '*Langol zar, zami tar*' ('land belongs to him who owns the plough').⁷ He brought forward before the peasantry the idea of God's sovereignty on earth by proclaiming that the earth belonged to God, and that no one other than the lawful government had the right to lord over or impose taxes on it.⁸ With Dudu Miyan, thus, the Faraizi creed was transformed into a full-fledged agrarian movement.

Bengal Police estimated that Dudu Miyan had about 80,000 followers⁹, while Alexander Forbes, editor of the *Bengal Hurkaru*, calculated it at 300,000.¹⁰ On one occasion, when Dudu Miyan was being tried in a Court in Faridpur for his alleged involvement in attempting to kill an indigo planter, about 3,000 boats filled with his followers stood ready at a river nearby just to protect Dudu Miyan, in case of a negative verdict. Similarly, a witness to the Indigo Commission noted that so great was the apprehension of danger that an entire regiment in Dhaka was ordered to stand ready to tackle any incidents. It was also commonly believed that Dudu Miyan's acquittal in the above case was the 'result of fear on the part of the Government'. During the Sepoy insurrection of 1857, Dudu Miyan was arrested and kept in jail as a pre-emptive measure. The story went that he would have been released if he had not boasted that he could summon 50,000 people at any time to march in whatever direction he so desired. Gastrell, during his survey of three districts of

⁵ Titu Mir was a heroic peasant leader who enlisted the support of numerous peasants to wage *jihad* (struggle) against the landlords and the Raj. After initial success, he died resisting a colonial army in 1831. For a detailed discussion of Titu Mir's life and his influence on subsequent peasant movements, including the Faraizis, see Khan 1977 and 2003.

⁶ Gastrell 1868, p. 36 reported that on Shariatullah's death his followers assembled, and by 'common consent' named Dudu Miyan as the head of the Faraizis.

⁷ Muhibuddin Ahmad, pp.14-15.

⁸ According to Khan 1965, p. 114, following the Quranic verse 'whatever is in the heavens and in the earth belongs to God' (Quran, 4:131), Dudu Miyan declared that the land was the bounty of God, and man being His most favoured creature had equal right to exploit this 'divine gift'. Land, therefore, according to the Faraizis, belonged to those who had exploited it. This interpretation not only helped the peasantry to perceive the zamindari exploitation in terms of illegal taxes as gross injustice; it also legitimized their settlement in the reclaimed and newly formed lands in the delta. See also Wise 1883, p. 24.

⁹ University of Cambridge Library, Add. MS. 7490/39/4: 'Correspondences relating to the Wahabi movement'.

¹⁰ Minutes of Evidence (henceforth MoE), Indigo Commission Report, 1861, answer no. 3979.

eastern Bengal between 1856 and 1862, noted that the number of the Faraizis was 'annually and steadily increasing' (Gastrell 1868).

The number of followers of the Faraizi movement seemed to continue to grow during Dudu Mian's son Noa Miyan's time. In an essay on the subject of revival of Islam, published in *The Times* in 1873, the writer remarked that year after year Islam was converting 'hundreds of thousand of the Indians, especially the natives of Bengal, to the faith of Koran'.¹¹ In response, Isaac Allen wrote in the *Calcutta Review* the following year that he did not believe that conversion was taking place on such a scale. But Allen thought that a 'possible explanation of the above errors might be found in the rapid conversion of Sunnis and Shiahs into Feraizis or Wahabis, which had taken place during the last 20 or 30 years.' This picture of the numerical strength of the Faraizis is matched by the fact, as claimed by their contemporary adversaries, that each of the three Faraizi leaders mentioned above acted as a sovereign or established a 'parallel government'. Some latter day historians also have supported this assertion.¹²

Thus we can attribute the success of the Faraizi movement to the Bengal environment in different ways. Firstly, the Faraizis had found a place in the *chars* and forests to earn their livelihood in a flexible way unlike the regimentation in the older places under the landlords. Secondly, in terms of political strategy, they had developed the slogan '*langol zar, zami tar*', which signified their fundamental anchorage to land. Thirdly, the Faraizis used waterways of the region in their favour to establish communication, mobilize supporters and facilitate marketing. But the question remains: how could that happen at a time when the British Raj was basking in its political supremacy throughout India?

It seems that the Faraizis had built up a horizontal coalition among the peasants of different religious and social backgrounds against any threat to their interests posed by the landed elite or other 'outsiders'. This broader social basis of resistance put them on solid ground for bargaining with the government to secure and defend their interests.¹³ Alexander Forbes testified to the Indigo Commission that religion had nothing to do with the influence of Dudu Miyan and that this could be understood from the fact that one of the Faraizi factions was then led by a Hindu.¹⁴ The relative stability in relations between different communities was reflected in the non-interference of the Faraizis in the affairs of other religious communities. At the same time, the movement seemed to have been consolidated by a strong antipathy against all categories of landed elite of

¹¹ *The Times*, 29 August 1873, p.7.

¹² About the Faraizi quest for autonomy and 'independent statehood', see Choudhury 2001, pp. 56-61 and Bose 1993, p.151.

¹³ For a Marxist approach to the Faraizi movement, see Kaviraj 1982.

¹⁴ MoE, answer no. 3979.

Bengal.¹⁵ But how do we relate this populist political stand of the Faraizis with environmental elements of the delta? We can examine this issue by a case study of indigo plantations.

Forging Islam in local agro-ecology: the Faraizis and the indigo planters

The best indigo lands, according to several witnesses to the Indigo Commission, were those which were subject to inundation during the rainy season and which remained submerged for two to three months. The cultivation of indigo was, therefore, more confined to the low-lying *char* lands, which the planter constantly looked for. The planters invariably selected these lands for the cultivation of indigo. On the other hand, the rising price of the country produce, e.g., rice, induced the *raiyyat* (peasant) to settle in and cultivate *char* lands.¹⁶ Moreover, coinciding with the timing of indigo cultivation, *aman* rice in the Delta was sown at the beginning of the rainy season and was reaped in the winter, between November and January. Another type, *aus*, was sown after the first shower of spring and was harvested in July or August. Consequently in most places indigo and rice became rival products contending for land.¹⁷ It was also a general practice of the planters to compel the *raiyyats* to sow indigo after the first shower. Then they were compelled to weed the indigo fields and, again, when the rivers began to rise, they were forcefully employed in cutting indigo plants.¹⁸ This coercion put the *raiyyats* in a very awkward situation as they not only lost their best lands in this way, but also missed the chance to utilize the right season to cultivate traditional crops on whatever lands were left over for them.¹⁹

New *chars* were overgrown with *doob* (tender grass) providing plenty of food for the cattle. As these lands were appropriated by the planters, the tenants and the *goalas* (herders) could not avail themselves of this grass for their cattle. This meant a great frustration for the Bengal peasants and *goalas*, who not only held their cattle as a means of livelihood, but also looked on them as members of their families.²⁰ The practice of the cultivation of indigo prevented the *raiyyat* from availing himself of the three main ecological endowments that provided subsistence in deltaic Bengal: the best land, the right season and the productive power of the land. The Faraizis responded to these challenges with well-developed strategies, ranging from the formation of unions to outright violence. In this context, the Faraizis responded decisively in their own interests

¹⁵ For notes on the antagonistic relations between the Faraizis and the Muslim landlords, see Choudhury 2001, pp. 70-71.

¹⁶ MoE, answer no.139. For a description of competition for *chars* between *raiyyats* and planters, see MoE answer nos. 14, 97, 741. When the Indigo Commission asked an indigo planter whether he had ever found the *raiyyats* disinclined to settle on the *chars*, he replied in the negative. In addition, he had found the *raiyyats*, when settled, 'disposed to dispossess him [the planter] always of the best lands'; see MoE answer no. 14.

¹⁷ Minutes of Richard Temple, RIC, p. XVII, (381); MOE, answer no. 139.

¹⁸ Comm. of the Chittagong Div., to Under Secy to GoB, no. 33, 13 Jan 1855, RIC, p. 22.

¹⁹ Petition from the inhabitants of Zillah Nuddea to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, 16 February 1860, in RIC, p.186; see also Offg Magistrate of Nuddea to the Under Secy to the GoB, no. 31, 12 Jan 1855, in RIC, p. 45; see also answers nos. 482-3, 1121, 1212, 1255,1382, 1392, 2360-61, 2513.

²⁰ A classic example of humane relations between man and his cattle is captured in the Bangla short story 'Mahesh' by Sharat Chandra Chatterjee 2002.

when there was any challenge to their settling on the *khas mahal* (personal, non-rental) lands, particularly *chars*.

Given the widespread discontent among the *goalas*, who were mostly Hindus, the Faraizis sought alliances with them, although they were Hindu.²¹ Within their own Muslim community, the Faraizis resorted to Islamic signs and symbols to build up a collective strategy for resistance. A planter reported that he knew an old Muslim *raiya*t who had stopped indigo cultivation. On being asked why he did so, he replied that this was because there was a league formed against the factory, and that he and his fellow villagers had kissed the Quran, and that one village could not settle without the other.²² During the widespread resistance against indigo cultivation in the late 1850s, the Faraizis widely used the weapon of *hookah-pani-bandh* (social boycott) to make their solidarity invincible.²³ Blair B. Kling has remarked that the Faraizi peasants who participated in the indigo disturbances were a 'tightly organized puritanical sect' and were skilled in 'military organization and the use of arms.'²⁴ The Faraizis along with other cultivators of indigo were able to cause a stir against the indigo interests²⁵ and the government was forced to scale down the power of the indigo cultivators and the cultivation of the plant in Bengal.

The decline of the Faraizi movement

After the death of Noa Miyan in 1884, the Faraizi movement seems to have gradually abandoned its original peasant-oriented agenda and therefore lost its political influence.²⁶ In the broadest sense, the degeneration of the Faraizi movement could be linked to the decline of the ecological regime of eastern Bengal. By the turn of the 20th century, the waterways of the region seem to have been deteriorating for a number of man-made and natural reasons and the process of deterioration continued throughout the twentieth century.²⁷ The decline in the water regime had far-reaching implications for the Faraizi movement. Firstly, it probably meant a lower rate of creation of new *char* lands, minimizing the scope for expanding their spatial extent. Secondly, the deterioration of the water regime as reflected in water-logging or abnormal flooding also resulted in the decline of an autonomous peasant production pattern upon which the agrarian economy and the Faraizi mobility depended. Thirdly, the Faraizi communication and mobilization network

²¹ Nobo Biswas, *tehsildar* (revenue-collector) of an indigo concern, testified against some prisoners, in Nobo Biswas vs. Alum Biswas, Gopal Ghose et al., RIC, p. 267.

²² MoE, answers nos. 2962, 3072; see also Dampier's report on the leagues or combinations as formed by the Faraizis 'Report on the state of the Police in Lower Provinces, for the first six months of 1842' in the *Calcutta Review*, 1 (May-Aug, 1844), 216.

²³ Ramesh Chandra Dutt, *The Peasantry of Bengal*, ed., Narahari Kaviraj (1st published 1874, reprint Calcutta, 1980).

²⁴ Kling 1966, p. 61.

²⁵ For Hindu-Muslim cooperation in the indigo movement, see Dina Bandhu Mitra's drama, *Nila Darpana Nataka* 1861.

²⁶ The remnant of the Faraizi resistance in the countryside was curiously non-agrarian. For instance, the Faraizis were reported to be exceptionally hostile to the program of vaccination against small pox. See *East Bengal and Assam Era*, 20 Jan 1906, p. 5.

²⁷ A detailed discussion of the decline of the water regime is provided in Iqbal 2005.

was entirely built up along the waterways of eastern Bengal. The headquarters of the movement were so connected with different rivers that it was quite easy for the Faraizis to move across the entire Eastern Bengal.²⁸ The death or fluvial weakness of the river system caused problems of navigation which might have resulted in the displacement of the indigenous network of information gathering and political mobilization. Fourthly, by the turn of the 20th century, the government itself, by dint of superior methods of collecting information of interior landscapes and properties, seems to have obtained a relatively clearer knowledge of the fluid and peripheral ecological regime in which the Faraizis flourished. Since the state could now more confidently ensure its presence in the interior of the delta, the benefit of peripheral wilderness, in which the Faraizis had flourished, ceased to be available.²⁹

Conclusions

In summary, I have argued that while colonial conditions were conducive to many purist-reformist religious movements in India, nineteenth-century eastern Bengal, in particular the Faraizi movement, developed not merely as political resistance to colonial rule, but as a sustained system of mediation and solidarity among the peasantry and that this was due in large part to local agro-ecological variables which it exploited effectively. It was because of this that the Faraizis remained a very popular forum for the peasants although it was not at all syncretistic in religion.

²⁸ For further discussion of the development and flourishing of the Faraizi communication and organizational network along various rivers, see Khan 1965, pp.118-20.

²⁹ Some *diara* surveys were carried out in the 1870s. But the cadastral survey that started by the turn of the 20th century truly 'opened up' the countryside. For an analysis of the relationship between the state's strength and scientific knowledge of the landscape, see Scott 1998. For a detail discussion of the early colonial drive for exploring the physical landscape of India, see Edney 1997.

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