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Betwixt Hindus and Muslims

The Many Lives of Zafar Khan, Ghazi of Tribeni

This essay explores the legends surrounding the enigmatic figure of Zafar Khan Ghazi, whose tomb still stands at Tribeni (West Bengal, India), a major Hindu pilgrimage spot on the River Ganga. Zafar Khan has been seen variously as the spearhead of the Turkish conquest in late thirteenth-century Bengal, a harbinger of early Islam, and a founder of one of the first Sufi lineages in the region. It illustrates the conflicted nature of the *ghāzī pīr* figure, idealized as a Muslim warrior and martyr, but also remembered as a champion of the poor, a composer of odes to the river Ganga in Sanskrit, and a historical bridge between Muslims and Hindus. Examining the architecture of Zafar Khan's mosque and tomb built on the ruins of a Vishnu temple, along with iconic portrayals of the *gājī* in contemporary Bengali *maṅgalakābya* verse poetry, the paper locates Zafar Khan as an interstitial and contradictory figure at the margins of what is commonly understood as Hindu devotional worship and iconoclastic Islam.

keywords: Tribeni—Ganga River—Zafar Khan Ghazi—architecture of *spolia*—*ghazā*—syncretism

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OF THE MANY odes written to the Ganges in various Indian languages, this is one of the most poignant and memorable (CHATTOPADHYAYA 1962):

> O River, daughter of Sage Jahnu, you redeem the virtuous
> But they are redeemed by their own good deeds—what is your credit there?
> If you can grant me salvation—I, a hopeless sinner—then I would say
> Here is your greatness, your true greatness.
>
> Those who have been abandoned by their own mothers,
> Those that friends and relatives will not dare touch,
> Those whose very sight makes a passerby gasp and take the Lord's name:
> You embrace these living dead in your own arms
> O Bhagirathi, you are the most compassionate mother of all.[1]

These are translations from Sanskrit *śloka*s that appear in an eight-stanza poem dedicated to the Ganges. These memorable odes entered the repertoire of hymns, recitations, and ritual offerings to the river among the Brahmins of Bengal sometime during the medieval period, and many people knew them by heart just a generation ago. They were composed—surprisingly—not by a Brahmin, not even by a Hindu, but by an author who went by the popular name of Darap Khan Gaji. The noted Bengali linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterji identified "Darap Khan" as "Jafar" Khan Ghazi, credited with daring military exploits during the first major phase of Islamic expansion in Bengal toward the end of the thirteenth century, after the Turkish Sultanate had been established in northern India around Delhi as the new capital. How did Darap Khan or Jafar (Zafar) Khan Ghazi come into the possession of such knowledge of Sanskrit? And how did his compositions acquire such popularity? And most importantly, what does the figure of the Ghazi and his associations with the pilgrimage of Tribeni tell us about the relationship between history, folklore, and myth around the advent of Islam in medieval Bengal?

This essay is based on a close reading of primary and secondary sources in Bengali along with a number of surveys conducted during the period of British rule in India. Accounts such as those of William Wilson Hunter or Henry F. Blochmann examined here contain snippets of oral history and first-hand observations that I believe are particularly valuable in any attempt to recreate the historical milieu in which the iconic figure of Zafar Khan might have taken shape. There are, of course, both promises and pitfalls in using such secondary narratives, even though

they happen to be the only first-hand accounts at our disposal. Many of the stories that the British colonial archeologists were presented with appear in their accounts translated and digested from accounts in native Bengali dialect, whose denotations and nuances are now lost. There is often no way of determining what kinds of questions were put to informants, or what kinds of responses such inquiries were met with. However, despite their inconsistency and variance, by comparing multiple accounts over a period of time, it is possible to locate the essential elements of the overall narrative that has been passed down, including sequences of memorable events. There are, of course, further problems posed by the ambition, bias, and idiosyncrasies of early colonial and early nationalist accounts that are often steeped with antiquarian and archaic views of the emergence of Islam in Bengal as an inevitable result of conquest, forcible conversion, and sectarian conflict. At the same time, they present a valuable record of past inquiries.

While I have attempted in this essay to find a definitive historical context for the origin of the story of Zafar Khan as one of the harbingers of popular Islam in thirteenth-century Bengal, I have also tried to keep in mind Dell Hymes's well-known caution that no ethnography, including historical ethnography, can be reduced to a preconceived set of determinants (Moore 2015, 11–12). In this regard, in every version of the Zafar Khan story that has been recorded, one would find disparate and contradictory elements, not to mention the whims of the narrator and the slant of the recorder being brought to bear upon the narration.[2] While all traditions of oral transmission rely on continuity, nothing persists unchanged. Storytellers impart their own experience and sense of form, influencing the ways in which audiences make sense of their own relationship with both history and genealogy (Hymes 2003, x). If there are residues of historical evidence to be found in these stories, they are not accessible in any direct way. The history of Zafar Khan is fused together with moral precepts and hagiography that have been passed on for centuries by many communities of believers. To that end, this essay is less occupied with the empirical veracity of the received histories of Zafar Khan, or the exact nature of Islamic "conquest" along the Bengal frontier, as it is with the range of possible inferences that can be drawn about the Ghazi myth in Bengal from a concerted study of history, epigraphy, archeology, and literature.

To find what remains of the memory of the Zafar Ghazi one must travel to Tribeni, now a small nondescript town in Hugli in West Bengal on the banks of the Bhagirathi, which is the name by which the Ganga is known there. Tribeni has been venerated as a sacred place by Bengali Hindus for a very long time, a spot where the Ganga once branched off into three streams: the river Saraswati flowing southwest beyond the reputed port of Saptagram, the Jamuna flowing southeast, and the Bhagirathi proper coursing through the present Hooghly channel all the way to Calcutta. This meeting point, known as the *muktabenī saṅgama* or the "unbraided confluence," was once one of the most frequented pilgrimage sites of ancient Bengal. This was also a major center of trade and commerce, ever since the time of the Pala and the Sena dynasties, and especially during the period of Turkish conquest in the thirteenth century (Ray 2004, 198–99).

Figure 1. Zafar Khan Ghazi's mosque in Tribeni. All photos by author.

Tribeni was located two miles away from the bustling port of Saptagram (also referred to as Satgaon or Satgan). We can glean from the travel accounts of Arab and European travelers that by the end of the thirteenth century this port-city had effectively replaced Tamralipti or Tamluk, which had begun to dry up as a port from the eighth century onwards, as the most important *entrepôt* of trade in deltaic lower Bengal (Chattopadhyaya 2003, 59). Saptagram was located on the banks of the Saraswati river, which flowed southwest and joined up with the distributaries Damodar and Rupnarayan before debouching into the Bay of Bengal. These waterways were part of an extensive network of trade. Saptagram rose to great prominence during the Pala and the Sena periods, and after the Turkish incursions, it became a major administrative center for the Sultans of Bengal (Ghosh 1957, 496–97). Arabic and Persian inscriptions from the year 1298 CE as well as the account of the renowned Moroccan traveler Ibn Batuta confirm that Saptagram flourished as a major city and boasted of at least seven major villages and many large markets (Ghosh 1978, 13–17). Bipradasa's *Manasabijaya*, written in praise of the goddess Manasa of the serpents, further confirms the flourishing state of contemporary Saptagram (Sen 1953, 142–43; Ghosh 1957, 505). Even after the renegade Turkish *mālik*s led by Bakhtiyar Khalji seized Saptagram from local chieftains during the late thirteenth century, the place continued to flourish. It soon became the site of a major Turkish stronghold in Bengal.

Changes in the course of the Ganga eventually affected the fortunes of Tribeni, located on its right bank. The river Saraswati, which had once been the main channel for drainage of the Ganga basin, dried up sometime during the fifteenth century CE. Saraswati was also a river distinguished by its sacred waters. According to legend its waters ran in a discernibly separate current within the main channels of the Ganga and the Yamuna rivers. Saraswati's waters were deemed particularly propitious for the cleansing of earthly sins, which is why the stretch between the

spot where it emptied into the Ganga, beginning with the first confluence of the Ganga at Prayag in Allahabad, and the spot where it supposedly flowed out at the second confluence at Tribeni (Hunter 1885, 480), was seen as ideally suited for ritual ablution. This is why Tribeni was especially venerated as a pilgrimage site.

The closed mouth of the old river at Tribeni could still be seen a hundred years ago, its former course outlined by lakes and marshes (Cotton, Burn, and Meyer 1908, 173). By this time the Bhagirathi had become the main branch of the Ganga. Satgaon continued as the official port and the main commercial hub of Bengal, at least until the sixteenth century during the period of the advent of the Portuguese, even though the main channel of the Saraswati had become obstructed with alluvial deposits and was no longer fit for the navigation of Portuguese maritime caravels. However, the port of Tribeni did not lose its ritual sanctity and status. Observers noted its importance as late as the early twentieth century. During the celebration of the festival of Makara Sankranti in the month of January, when the sun enters the house of Capricorn, Tribeni typically recorded a gathering of eight thousand or more pilgrims (Hunter 1885, 282). Similar crowds of bathers thronged the *ghāṭ*s of the Ganga leading to the water during the celebration of Dasahara in June, in honor of the descent of the river from heaven to earth to bless the ashes of the fallen sons of King Sagara. According to H. Blochmann, who visited the shrine of Tribeni in the 1860s, there was a well-maintained set of steps leading down to the main bathing area on the banks of the Ganga built by the last Gajapati ruler of Orissa, Raja Mukund Deo, who exercised his sway over this part of Bengal during the latter half of the seventeenth century (Blochmann 1870, 282).

It was this legendary status of Tribeni, especially its trade, pilgrimage, and shrines that must have attracted the attention of the Sultans of Delhi. If local history is any indication, Zafar Khan Ghazi—along with his fellow Turkish invaders—was supposed to have struck terror among the local Hindus, attacking their temples and idols. He fought valiantly and conquered the port of Saptagram, apparently destroyed a large and ancient temple in nearby Tribeni, and used the spoils to build an imposing mosque. He was conferred the title of Ghazi, and established one of the first schools for Quranic and Arabic learning (*madrasā*) and a charity (*dār-ul-khairat*). Epigraphic evidence, however, suggests that there was a commander also by the name of Shihabuddin Zafar Khan who was deputed by the Sultan of Lakhnauti to administer Saptagram, and who *also* founded a school and charitable endowment in Tribeni. Not only is it difficult to determine with any certainty whether these two are the same person, disparate histories seem to have converged in the overall legend of the Ghazi. This is hardly surprising considering the centuries over which these narratives have been shaped, not to mention the diverse communities of believers who have memorialized Zafar Khan in their own demotic ways.

Who was Zafar Khan Ghazi?

When the British official and archeologist D. Money of the Bengal Civil Service went to study the mausoleum attributed to the Ghazi in 1847, the custodians (*khādim*s) of the building produced an authentic historical document or

kursīnāmā (Money 1847, 395). This record stated that Zafar Muhammad Khan had indeed traveled all the way from western India with his nephew Shah Sufi to lead the infidels of Bengal toward recognition of the Islamic faith. He converted a local raja, Man Nripati, to Islam, and then fought against the powerful Raja Bhudeb near Hugli. In this second battle he was decapitated, and his torso buried in Tribeni. The Ghazi's son, Ulugh Khan, followed in his footsteps and eventually defeated the king of Hugli, converting his subjects to Islam and eventually marrying the Hindu king's daughter. Money also found a second narrative, suggesting that a certain Sultan Firuz Shah had dispatched Zafar Khan and his nephew to Bengal to avenge the death of a Muslim subject of a Hindu kingdom whose son had been killed by the Raja as a punishment for cow slaughter. This king was also known as Raja Bhudeb. In this version of the story, Zafar Khan killed Bhudeb in battle in a place called Mahanad near Saptagram. This second narrative, as we shall see, connects the exploits of Zafar Khan with the feats another Sufi saint, Shah Safiuddin of Chota Pandua.

H. Blochmann was among the first British Indian officials to study the Arabic inscriptions preserved on the interior walls of Zafar Khan's tomb. He deciphered a part of the second inscription (AH 698, CE 1298) which describes Zafar Khan as a Turk, a "lion of lions," and a builder of benevolent edifices in the manner of conquerors of yore, smiting infidels with sword and spear and lavishing gifts on the faithful (Blochmann 1870, 286). Almost four decades later, in a report on the relics of Satgaon and Tribeni submitted to the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, the noted Indian archeologist Rakhal Das Bandyopadhyaya put this epigraphic evidence in the larger context of the Muslim conquest of Bengal (Bandyopadhyaya 1909). After the first forays of Bakhtiyar Khaljik, the Turks ruled the area between Deokot in the north to Lakhnaur in the south, but the entire Bhagirathi delta was not under their immediate command. Zafar Khan's advance to the region of Saptagram and Tribeni, according to Bandyopadhyaya, was thus a particularly significant event. Zafar Khan, originally of Turkish descent, had been appointed by the Sultan of Delhi as the governor of Deokot before the expedition, and his full name—found in another contemporary inscription from Dinajpur—was "Ulugh-i-Azam Humayun Zafar Khan Bahadur Bahram Tigin." Another inscription from the same site (also noted and translated by H. Blochmann) states that an Islamic institution of learning was built at Tribeni by Khan Muhammad Zafar Khan in CE 1313 during the reign of Shamsuddin Firuz Shah in Delhi. Bandyopadhyaya suggested that this was the same Zafar Khan, the conqueror of Tribeni. He had not really courted martyrdom, but was well and alive fifteen years after the conquest of Tribeni (Bandyopadhyaya 1909, 248).

Years later, the eminent Bengali historian Jadunath Sarkar studied these three Arabic inscriptions found in Tribeni for his voluminous history of Bengal. Sarkar came to the conclusion that Zafar Khan was indeed sent on a mission of conquest to Saptagram by the ruler of Lakhnauti, Ruknuddin Kaikaus, grandson of the Delhi Sultan Ghyasuddin Balban, during which he courted martyrdom (Sarkar 1973, 77–78). Shamsuddin Firuz Shah, who succeeded Kaikaus as the ruler of Lakhnauti, dispatched the fallen Ghazi's son, Ulugh Khan, from the stronghold of Munger

in Bihar to Bengal to resume the siege of Saptagram and Tribeni. He too might have died in battle. After this, Firuz Shah appointed Shihabuddin Zafar Khan as the administrator of Saptagram, who set up a school and a charity. Sarkar's account clearly suggests that there might have been more than one Zafar Khan associated with Tribeni.

There seems to be no particular agreement among historians about the exact identity of this Ghazi. Was he truly the first spearhead of Islam in lower deltaic Bengal, as many have claimed? Was he the founder of the oldest Sufi order in the region? Was he the first Turk or Muslim to have worshipped the Ganga? These are pointed questions that illustrate the problem of casting the Islamic "conquest" of Bengal as a singular historical event. This is a problem that is common to both colonial and nationalist accounts. For a more realistic and variegated historical account, we have to disaggregate these tangled histories of Turkish raids, the establishment of Sufi lineages, and the appropriation of certain facets of Islam in Bengal. The history and legend of Zafar Khan Ghazi, however, deserves much more scholarly attention than it has received so far. It holds a key to an important question that can only be addressed partially within the space of this brief essay: how far did the military ventures undertaken by the first founders of Sufi lineages result in the extension of the Delhi Sultanate's political writ into frontier territories that it claimed as the *arẓi-bangālā* (the country of Bengal), based on its new stronghold in Lakhnauti, especially after Sultan Ghyasuddin Balban routed the forces of the rebel Mu'izz al-din Tughral? Right after this victory Balban appointed his own son, Bughra Khan, as the commander of Lakhnauti, who took charge from CE 1281, an event that some historians have seen as especially significant (Karim 1992, 8). Bughra Khan was recalled to Delhi shortly before Sultan Balban died. The rule of Lakhnauti passed to Ruknuddin Kaikaus, who ruled from CE 1291 to 1301, and then to Shamsuddin Firuz Shah, who ruled till CE 1322. Ruknuddin and Shamsuddin ruled virtually as independent governors while the Khaljis were attempting to consolidate their power in northern India. This is exactly the period during which most of the early historical legends of military conquest, martyrdom, and establishment of Sufi lineages seem to appear in lower deltaic Bengal.

The ghazi as emissary of early islam in bengal

The interwoven nature of local accounts and apocryphal lore make it difficult to determine with any degree of accuracy which historical actor was the original inspiration behind the figure of the conquering saint who fought against tyrannical Hindu kings and brought the message of Islam to the interior of Bengal. There are two key contentions here. First, it is possible to argue from surviving inscriptions of the Tribeni memorial that "Zafar Khan" was simply a title bestowed by the Sultan of Delhi on the Turkish commander Bahram Tigin. It is most likely that the same title was also given to Shihabuddin, founder of the aforementioned school of learning. Second, there are at least two other stories of Sufi saints whose life histories have become fused with the legend of Zafar Khan Ghazi in the oral narratives.

One of these is the story of Shah Safiuddin, who is credited to have introduced the first tenets of Islam to the area known as the Chota or "Little" Pandua in the district of Hughli during the early fourteenth century (Hanif 2000, 334–35). One of the first colonial reports on the living legend of Hazrat Shah Safi was submitted in 1824 by an unnamed correspondent and can be found in the old periodical, the *Calcutta Asiatic Observer*.[3] Reverend James Long later furnished a similar account in the *Calcutta Review* in 1846 (Long 1846). Safiuddin was the son of a Turkish *āmir*, a nephew of the Sultan Firuz Shah Khalji, and according to some accounts also a nephew of Zafar Khan Ghazi, who migrated to Bengal and settled down in the region of Pandua (Long 1846, 404–405). This was the time during which a Hindu king, known as the Pandu Raja, had just banned the slaughter of cows in the nearby region of Mahanad (or Mahanath) in Hugli. Safiuddin hosted a large feast during the circumcision ceremony of his son, for which he also killed a cow. The Raja of Hugli came to know of this act and seized Safiuddin's son, and later offered him as a human sacrifice at the altar of a temple of the Goddess Kali. In a different version of this story recorded by the British civil servant and statistician W. W. Hunter, the king had to sacrifice one of his own children, who was born on the day of the cow-slaughter (Hunter 1876, 313). Hearing of the misdeeds of the Raja, the Sultan of Delhi sent a large army under the leadership of Zafar Khan. Safiuddin volunteered to accompany this army and was killed in the encounter that took place between the army of the Turks and the Raja of Hughli. He was buried in Pandua and became known by the title of Shahid, or martyr. Before the expedition Safiuddin had sought the blessings of the famous Sufi elder Bu Ali Qalandar at Panipat near Delhi. After his martyrdom his followers gave him the title of Shah, and a new Sufi lineage traced to Bu Ali began in Hugli. Local residents of Pandua believed that there were traces of a large battlefield called the Jang Maidan where Shah Safi had fallen, and there had been a water tank dug up after the victory of Zafar Khan's army, known as the Fateh Allah (victory to God) tank (Crawford 1908, 434–35). Some believed that the Pandu Raja had a miraculous tank called the Jivat Kunda, whose waters were an elixir that could bring fallen soldiers back to life. This was the reason why he could not be defeated. The soldiers of Zafar Khan succeeded in defiling the tank with cow remains and were able to overcome him. Other versions of the same story ascribe the tank and its healing powers to the Raja of Hugli at Mahanad, an ally of Pandu Raja, who was also defeated in battle by Zafar Khan (Long 1850, 128–29). A very similar story can be traced to the founding of the renowned Sufi lineage of Shah Jalal in Sylhet (Wise 1873, 279–80).[4] In this case a Muslim man had slaughtered one of his cows to celebrate the birth of a son. A kite flew away with a piece of flesh and dropped it on the house of a Brahmin. Much aggrieved by this, he complained to Raja Gaur Govinda, who not only persecuted the man but murdered his son. Once again, Sultan Firuz Shah intervened and sent a military expedition under the command of his nephew, Sikander Khan Ghazi, resulting in a battle that led to the conquest of Sylhet.

The fact that the legends of Shah Safi and Shah Jalal resemble each other so closely, not to mention their historic association with the figure of Zafar Khan, points to the possibility of one dominant narrative strain converging around the

tropes of militancy, iconoclasm, and martyrdom. This is not only evident in the basic sequence of events narrated by these tales, such as a tyrannical Hindu king punishing innocent Muslims for butchering cows, but also in certain striking details. One example of this is a popular insignia of Zafar Khan the warrior, now a popular relic. Near one of the main entrances to his tomb, there is a stone with a piece of iron attached. This is known as the handle of the axe with which he supposedly combated his enemies (*gājīr kuṛul*). The saying goes in Bengali: "the Ghazi's axe moves but does not fall down" (*gājīr kuṛul noṛe coṛe kintu poṛe nā*). The axe is thus not just a weapon but an emblem, a reminder of Zafar Khan's resilience and endurance. According to Rakhal Das Bandyopadhyaya, this so-called "Ghazi's axe" referred to one of the two iron hooks that were used to fasten the chains by which the entrance of the original Vishnu temple was once secured (Bandyopadhyaya 1909, 246–47). Over time the tomb itself came to be known as the Ghazi's axe. A remarkably similar relic is associated with the Pandua Minar, which is supposedly the tower of victory erected to commemorate the success of the Turkish forces led by Zafar Khan in Chota Pandua, right next to the tomb of Shah Safi. There is an iron rod that runs all the way to the top of the structure that is known as the Shah Safi's "walking stick" (Hunter 1876, 313).

Scholars are still attempting to piece together fragments of evidence to determine the historical authenticity of Zafar Khan's military exploits in the cities of Lakhnauti, Debkot, Tribeni, and Hugli.[5] From the standpoint of folklore, however, it seems that a composite, overarching figure of the Ghazi looms over these discrepant histories, whether or not his character can be definitively identified with the Turkish military commander, or indeed the poet who originally composed the hymns in Sanskrit dedicated to the river Ganga. However, it is not difficult to imagine that as the figure of the Ghazi of Tribeni gained popularity over time, prayers at his mosque and adjoining tomb overlooking the flight of steps to the Ganga became customary among Hindu pilgrims as the *āstānā* (hermitage) and *dargā* (tomb) of Ghazi Sahib (Blochmann 1870, 282). Eventually, the venerated confluence at Tribeni became tied to his name as well. Reverend Long, during a tour of the Bhagirathi River in the early nineteenth century, noted the frequency with which the tomb received offerings from Hindus and was told by his informants that although he was a devout Muslim, Zafar Khan had indeed "worshipped the Ganges" (Long 1846, 404–405). In the version of the story related by locals to D. Money, Zafar Khan sat in prayer to receive the blessings of the Goddess Ganga. When she actually heard the Ghazi's prayers, she rose from the surface of the water and appeared before him in all her heavenly glory (Money 1847, 396). The Ghazi quickly became her ardent devotee. He abjured the Quran and Persian and turned to the study of the Hindu scriptures. His daughter-in-law, a Hindu princess, was buried in the same precinct which, according to Money's account, was another reason why during the yearly memorial of the Ghazi Hindu pilgrims visited his tomb. Zafar Khan's odes to the river in Sanskrit became part of this legacy, not only for Hindus, but Muslims as well. One of the oldest Bengali Shi'i texts, for instance, has this praise for the Ghazi (Chattopadhyaya 1962, 161):

On the quays of Tribeni pay respect to Daraf Khan
Whose water for *wazu* (ritual ablutions) came from the river Ganga.

And the following lines in simple Bengali rhyme attributed to the resident poet of Shantipur, Mahiuddin Ostagar, run thus (Ghosh 1957, 490):

jāphar khān gājī roila tribenī sthāne
gaṅgā jāre dekhā dila ḍāka śuni kāne
Jafar Khan was the Ghazi in the place called Tribeni
to whom Ganga revealed herself after having heard his call.

These incarnations of Zafar Khan, first as a warrior of Islam, then as a martyr, and finally as a devotee of the Ganga, have all endured. They are inextricably tied up with the aura and reputation of Tribeni itself as a site, which in the local Bengali parlance can be summed up in the word "*sthānamāhātmya*," which translates as "greatness of place." The sanctity of the river Ganga at Tribeni in this manner has attached itself to the memory of the Ghazi as a savior of the downtrodden and the benighted, a truly great man (*buzurg*) who laid down his weapons, donned the humble robes of a spiritual leader, and earned the love and respect of the local community. For Bengali nationalists of the nineteenth century, Zafar Khan as a devotee of the Ganga became emblematic of the much-sought-after harmony between Hindus and Muslims. The noted Bengali critic, novelist, and historian Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century in his utopian *Svapnalabdha Bharatabarsher Itihas* [History of India revealed in a dream], imagined a country where all Indian Muslims would happily pay obeisance to the river by singing the hymns of Darap (Zafar) Khan (Mukhopadhyay 1995, 224).

The Ghazi's mosque

Blochmann, when he wrote about Zafar Khan Ghazi's mosque in 1870, noted that almost half of the existing structure was "filled with stones and rubbish" (1870, 280). When Joseph David Beglar of the Archeological Survey of India took a photograph of the interior of Zafar Khan Ghazi's tomb at Tribeni in 1872, he found it overgrown with trees and vegetation, and in a state of imminent ruin.[6] Beglar stated in a subsequent report that the structure was most likely built by material taken from Hindu temples, especially their carved stones for lintels and doorposts. Basing his observations on previous reports filed by Blochmann and Money, he noted that the temples over which Zafar Khan's shrine had been built were most closely reminiscent of the style of temples built by the Kalachuri kings in Janjgir during the eleventh century, known for their elaborate sculptures of Hindu deities and scenes from the great epics engraved on the walls (Beglar and Cunningham 1878, 206). During his visit to the monument in the early nineteenth century, D. Money had seen remnants of an entire cluster of dilapidated temples in the courtyard of the mosque complex (Money 1847, 398). He had also observed that near the northern and eastern entrances to the structure there were images from the Hindu pantheon still standing, including the various incarnations (*avatāra*) of Vishnu: Narasimha, Varaha, Rama, Krishna, and also of the goddess Lakshmi.

Stones with Arabic inscriptions had been planted directly below the partial remains of some of the deities, some of which were defaced and some almost destroyed. Money concluded that the building was once a former Hindu temple dedicated to Vishnu that overlooked the confluence and pilgrimage site.

The present-day public notice at the mosque issued by the Archeological Survey of India (ASI) describes this multi-domed structure built by bricks and stones as a "rectangular mosque" and as the earliest known "mausoleum" in eastern India, built in 1315 CE. A prominent inscription in Arabic appears over the central *mihrāb* (prayer niche) of the mosque. The main vaulted chamber rests over five stone arches and rows of ornamental stone pillars. It is possible that some of these are the pillars of the Vishnu temple whose ruins had been observed by Blochmann, Money, and Beglar. Even today, not only can one see partially effaced images of the ten avatars of Vishnu, but also carvings that have survived from the original temple illustrating episodes from the Hindu epics. At the same time, it appears that some of the masonry was brought to the site from elsewhere. A report by the Archeological Survey written in the 1930s mentions nine inscriptions on the walls of the western tomb. It suggests that the stone slabs and plinths bearing these carvings once formed part of some "Hindu buildings" whose spoils were "utilized" in the construction of the tomb and the mosque (Fabri 1936, 212–13). Written in Sanskrit with early Bengali characters below the bas-relief, they describe popular scenes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata such as the marriage of Sita and Rama or the fight between Dhrishtyadumna and Duhshasana.

Some of the keenest insight into the origins of the mosque complex can be found in the report on the relics of Satgaon and Tribeni in Bandyopadhyaya (1909) mentioned above. Bandyopadhyaya noted that the clutch of temples noticed by earlier observers had all but disappeared by the time he visited the edifice. However, the plinth of black basalt on which the main structure stood was still recognizable as the foundation of the original temple. He also saw remnants of deities, some defaced, and scenes from the Hindu epics carved on pillars. Within the mosque itself, he saw the impression of four images stuck on the walls between the *mihrāb*s, one of which was clearly of the main deity Vishnu recognizable by his main weapon, the mace. Bandyopadhyaya came to the conclusion that while the main part of the building complex was indeed a Vishnu temple, it also contained fragments of older Buddhist and Jain monuments.

Figure 2. Basalt plinth showing the original structure of the building.

He found a row of four Buddhas on some of the pillars seated in the *bhūmisparśa* or the "earth-witness" position, and also parts of a statute of the twenty-third Jain emissary Parshvanatha, the one who came before Mahavira (Bandyopadhyaya 1909, 247). The feet of the statue were still intact, as were coils of the giant *śeṣanāga* serpent whose hood must have adorned the head of the figure.

Bandyopadhyaya's detailed field notes raise a further set of doubts about the purpose and symbolic value of the Zafar Khan complex. What kind of ambience or authority did the mosque try to claim in its day? Perched atop one of the holiest and most frequented riverside pilgrim spots, what kind of message did it convey to idolaters and iconoclasts? The history of the construction of these early mosques in Bengal during this period of Turkish incursion remains largely unknown. One of the more authoritative chroniclers of the period, Minhaj Siraj Juzjani, mentions in his *Tabaqat-i Nasiri* that after the conquest of the capital of Bengal Lakhanawati (or Lakhnauti) and the dissolution of the Sena Dynasty, Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji built mosques there (Juzjani 1881, 560). Khalji *mālik*s or military commanders, such as Husamuddin Iwaz, also erected mosques that did not survive, including a large Friday mosque (Juzjani 1881, 583). Fragments of an inscription ascribed to another governor of Bengal, Jalaluddin Masud Jani (CE 1241–51) were found by Alexander Cunningham on the back wall of a nondescript mosque on the bank of the river Ganga half a mile to the east of the village Gangarampur, in district Malda (Cunningham 1882, 45).[7] The inscription indicated that Masud Jani erected the mosque during the reign of Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah of Delhi. Since none of these mosques stand today, Zafar Khan Ghazi's tomb may very well be the earliest mosque still standing in Bengal from this period. Later mosques built in Saptagram during the fifteenth century have been found with similar remnants along with broken or defaced idols marked with inscriptions in Arabic (Ghosh 1957, 502).

However, for reasons discussed below, Zafar Khan's house of prayer may not quite fit the description of what some architectural historians might label a "conquest-mosque," heralding the triumph of Islam over Hinduism. The main schools of devotees in Saptagram during the early fourteenth century would have been the worshipers of Vishnu, the supreme god of preservation, and Surya, the sun god. Bṛndāban Dās, the famous biographer of Caitanya in his *Caitanyabhagabata*, describes the Turks as defying the authority of Vishnu (*biṣṇudrohī yabana*).[8] In this regard the history of Zafar Khan's mosque needs to be located in the context of the protracted power struggle between the Turks and the rajas of Saptagram as patrons of temples to these two deities, and not simply viewed through the customary paradigm of an inevitable clash between Hindu idolatry and Muslim iconoclasm.

The legend of the Lal Masjid (also called the Ranga Masjid) or the "red mosque" of Pir Gorachand (Syed Abbas Ali) of Gorai Gaji in Haroa-Balanda in the 24 Parganas, present-day West Bengal, is instructive in this context.[9] Local folklore has it that the solar deity Surya, very pleased by the devotion of the Muslims, asked Pir Gorachand to build a mosque. There was one condition, however. The entire mosque had to be built while he was away. In other words, Gorachand and his followers had to begin construction of the building at the start of sunset and finish the work before the sun rose the next morning. They tried their best to please the

Sun God, and almost finished building the structure overnight. However, as they were putting the roof in place a crow called and announced the arrival of the first rays of the sun. Gorachand and his men had to abandon their almost-finished project. This particular fragment of "Gorai Gaji" lore makes two key concessions: first, that Gorachand was prepared to acknowledge the authority of the sun deity, and second, that his mosque could not be completed. Some archeologists suggest that the floor of the Red Mosque was actually erected on the site of a ruined Buddhist *stūpa* dating to the late Gupta or the early Pala period.[10] In the case of Zafar Khan Ghazi's tomb and mosque complex, not only do we have fragments of Buddhist and Jain structures, but broken pieces of sculpture from many ancient Hindu temples. At Pandua, close to Tribeni, debris from images, most likely from a Sun temple, were discovered by Rakhal Das Bandyopadhyaya (Bandyopadhyaya 1909, 247). One of the fragments, bearing a much later inscription of Sultan Shamsuddin Yusuf Shah from the fifteenth century, had most likely been relocated from the original mosque where it belonged and was found lying near the grave of Shah Safi. On a close inspection of these remnants, Bandyopadhyaya concluded that the piece was the lower portion of an image of the sun god Surya, which had once been adorned with seven horses and the charioteer Aruna. It seems that the Surya idol was also accompanied by an image of Saturn and other planetary deities.

F. B. Flood, in his suggestive study of early Indo-Islamic architecture in the frontier regions of the Ghurid Empire in Sind and Rajasthan, points out that mosques that incorporated material from Hindu and Jain temples have long been misread as an architecture of conquest and defeat, and seen as assemblages of "mutilated fragments" (Flood 2009, 159). Such a simplistic view, Flood argues, glosses over the incongruent signs inherent in any architecture of *spolia* (spoils), which should be seen as an extended commentary on the processes of confrontation, incorporation, and translation. In the case of the Tribeni mosque, the presence of Hindu deities, albeit partially defaced, not to mention the ubiquity of ornamental temple motifs, suggest a similarly unfinished text, akin to an incomplete exercise in political and cultural appropriation. Not only are there remnants from older temples fixed into the bases of walls, some upside down, but the basalt slabs on which the temple once stood are the visible foundations of the mosque itself. Panels abound with decorative motifs composed of the nine planets (*navagraha*), and vegetal patterns (*kalpalatā*).

The Ghazi's tomb located at the entrance of the mosque complex is composed of two unroofed rectilinear chambers. Here are the graves attributed to Zafar Khan Gazi, his sons, grandsons, and a daughter-in-law. A carved temple portal frames one of the main entrances to the tomb. Figures at the base of this doorway have been largely removed except for full-vase (*pūrṇaghaṭa*) and miniature curvilinear (*rekha deul*) motifs (Hasan 2007, 62). The architecture and layout of the mosque and the tomb present an architectural palimpsest that seems to have added to the elusive and legendary appeal of the Ghazi.

The available evidence makes it difficult to support the contention that this was indeed the earliest commemorative mosque—built by Bahram Tigin and his troops who arrived in Tribeni—as a definitive monument to the Turkish conquest in Bengal. It was Blochmann again who first noticed that the inscription in black

Figure 3. Floral motif from inside the mosque.

basalt affixed to the right of the northern *mihrāb* of the Tribeni structure, which records the deeds and exploits of Zafar Khan dating to 1298 CE, also mentions a congregational mosque or Jami Masjid that must have already been in existence (Blochmann 1870, 285). The slab in question appears to have been reinserted from this or some other contemporary mosque. Another inscription, which is in essence a laudatory *qaṣīdat* in Arabic that appears near the second *mihrāb*, also seems to have been brought in from elsewhere. The exact origins of these inscriptions can no longer be determined with any accuracy. Blochmann, quite perceptively, described Zafar Khan's tomb as having been turned into "a sort of museum" of older artifacts over the course of centuries (Blochmann 1870, 281). A few scholars have speculated whether some of the pillars of the present structure might have belonged to the original mosque that Zafar Khan built after the conquest of Saptagram (Ali 1979, 83). In other words, the Tribeni memorial was not only built out of the ruins and spoliation of Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist monuments, but also out of the fragments of older mosques.

Reconfiguring the *Gājī*

The latter-day veneration of Zafar Khan Ghazi, to be sure, is not based on the architectural integrity or the historical authenticity of the mosque, but the perceived sanctity of his final resting place. He is remembered during the annual commemoration (*ʿurs*) of his passing, when pilgrims gather to adorn his grave with votive blankets, and troops with *tablā*s (drums) and harmoniums perform their obeisance through devotional singing (*qawwālī*). After their ritual ablution in the Ganges, Hindu pilgrims stroll into the *dargā* and make a wish. Zafar Khan Ghazi's enduring place in folk memory is not only a testament to the sacredness of Tribeni, or to the reassuring trope of conciliation and mutuality among Hindus and Muslims. It is also a reminder of the iconic figure of the ideal Ghazi (*gājī*) in rural Ben-

gali folklore. In Bengal a Sufi saint is often known by the same name. The history of Zafar Khan provides an early example of the creation of a legendary figure in the form of the Sufi acolyte, who combines the roles of an iconoclastic crusader, philanthropist, and worker of miracles.

In a landmark essay on holy war and the foundations of Ottoman rule in Turkey, Linda Darling suggests that *g͟hāzī* was a much-contested title whose contenders varied widely at different points in time (Darling 2000, 142). A *g͟hāzī* could be the title of a military adventurer seeking religious sanction, prestige, and territory. It could also be a distinction conferred upon *ʿulamā* (Muslim clerics) who wanted to put their own stamp of orthodoxy over religious institutions and subjects far away from the writ of the state. It was often an honorific bestowed on Sufi saints who wanted to test their faith among non-believers. Soldier-adventurers seeking spoils during frontier raids also sought this status (Kafadar 1995, 90). Darling finds this to be as true in Ghaznavid Afghanistan as in Sultanate Delhi. What might be the salience of a designation shared equally among tribal raiders, orthodox clerics, aspiring rulers, and anti-establishment Sufis? (Darling 2000, 157). It is worth noting, as Ali Anooshahr has shown in the context of Babur's frontier campaigns in Afghanistan and India, that the duty of raiding and marauding also fell equally upon the humblest soldier and the most powerful sultan to uphold the cause of justice (Anooshahr 2008, 11). It is this very indeterminacy of the *g͟hāzī*'s spiritual quest and physical journey, along with the wider latitude given to the task of bringing the message of Islam to non-believers, that seems to have inspired and animated the popular, retrospective genealogies of Islam that emerged in early Turkish Bengal. In such narratives, which have taken shape over centuries, the controversial question of how subjects were diverted from idolatry to iconoclasm cannot be answered in any simple way, especially as instances of violence occur right alongside acts of beneficence, conciliation, and acknowledgement of extant forms of Hindu devotion, often without any outward or obvious contradiction.[11]

Divinely inspired militancy, marvelous deeds for the edification of infidel rulers and their subjects, and the punishment of unjust tyrants are all forms of a praxis very much at the center of historical narratives chronicling the exploits of early Sufis who brought popular forms of Islam to the interiors of Bengal (Eaton 1993, 77). Their journeys and their quest for virtue, routinely celebrated in the hagiographic accounts of other prominent Sufi groups in India, were an essential part of their disciplinary practice. As Richard Eaton has pointed out, such Sufi pioneers were not necessarily self-proclaimed emissaries of the Islamic faith who actively sought to convert infidels (Eaton 1974, 126–27). The pilgrimages and privations of wandering Sufi mendicants—encapsulated in the terms *jihād* and *ḥajj*—were seen as the obligatory means of self-purification (Ernst 1992, 159). Similar stories of long and arduous journeys are attributed to the great Sufi leaders of Bengal discussed above, such as Hazrat Shah Jalal of Sylhet, or Pir Gorachand, who died from his wounds fighting the evil brothers Akananda and Bakananda near the village of Haroa-Balanda.[12] One is also reminded of the struggles of Bara Khan Ghazi in the *Raimangal* epic, who ultimately subdued the fearsome forest deity Dakshinarayan and his tigers to establish his preeminence (Rahman 2013, 241).

There is not enough space in this essay to discuss the rise of the tradition of verse poetry exclusively dedicated to the veneration of the figure of the Ghazi in Bengali Sufi saint literature (*pīrsāhitya*). One can easily see how closely the heroic feats of the fear-dispelling, tiger- and crocodile-battling Ghazi, who emerges victorious through all trials and tribulations, resemble the deeds and miracles performed by local deities, such as Chandi or Manasa, typically described in medieval Bengali *maṅgalakābya* verse poetry.[13] These portraits are consistent in texts such as the *Gaji-Kalu-Champabati* story, the *Raimangal*, or the *Banbibi-Jahurnama*. Considering all the known texts of this genre, the legends of Gaji, Kalu, and Champabati prove to be the most relevant in placing the figure of Zafar Khan Ghazi in the proper context of Bengali Muslim folklore.

This is a long and winding tale of which only an outline can be presented here.[14] Gaji (Bengali for *ghāzī*) was the son of Sikander Shah, ruler of the kingdom of Vairat, and Queen Ajupa. Gaji and his foster brother Kalu were inseparable. Because of his father's tyranny, he left his family and renounced his kingdom and traveled far and wide with his brother Kalu. During their many wanderings they tamed crocodiles and tigers, converted King Sriram to Islam and erected a golden mosque in his capital, and finally defeated King Mukutrai and his fabled military chief Dakshinarai, also converting their courtiers and subjects. Most notable in this text are the frequent references to the Ganga as a goddess. Gaji's mother Ajupa is described as her sister, and in times of danger Ganga turns up to help him. When a destitute woodcutter gives Gaji and Kalu shelter in his hut in the great forest, and cannot feed them, Ganga sends one of her serpents (*nāga*) with lavish gifts and provisions (Rahim 1961, 16). Toward the end of the story Gaji and Kalu travel to the shore of an ocean where they disturb the meditation of three hundred powerful yogis (Rahim 1961, 77). Enraged by this intrusion they prepare to attack the two. Asked about the object of their penance the yogis tell Gaji and Kalu that they are also worshippers of the Ganga. The Gaji then summons Ganga, and she appears in person seated on the leaf of a lotus. Witnessing this, the yogis are overwhelmed:

yogīgaṇa bale dhanya dhanya śāha gājī
jāhar adhīn gaṅgā morā jāke pūji
yabaner tulya ār nāhi āche jāti
jāhāke karen mānya gaṅgā bhāgirathi (Rahim 1961, 78)

The yogis said praise be to Shah Ghazi
Who commands the Ganga that we worship
There is no other race of people like the Muslims
Even the river Ganga-Bhagirathi pays respect to them.

Thereafter the yogis embrace Islam as their faith, and a new mosque is established on that spot. Note that Muslims (*yabana*) here are entirely represented by the Ghazi and his disciples.

There is yet another detail embedded in this narrative that is worthy of attention here, and it can be traced back to the oral histories recorded in nineteenth-century British accounts of the exploits of Shah Safi and Zafar Khan. When the Ghazi attacks Raja Mukut Rai and his army of tigers, he is able to fight back with the help of a special water-well described as the *mṛtyu jība kūpa*, or the "well that restores life"

(RAHIM 1961, 66). The miraculous waters of this reservoir are able to bring back to life the Raja's elephants, horses, and soldiers that have fallen in battle, and they are ready to fight again. The Ghazi is able to put an end to this marvel by sending his tigers and angels to defile the Raja's tank with a piece of cow's flesh, so that he is no longer able to replenish his forces after each skirmish. In this instance, is the *Gaji-Kalu* narrative simply an embellished retelling of the history of Zafar Khan Ghazi's conquest of Tribeni, as some local scholars have suggested (ALI 1979, 5)? This is impossible to ascertain. More significantly, the blessings of the river Ganga and the familiar narrative plot of military conquest, the performance of miracles, building of mosques, and the spread of Islam, precipitate an iconic agent who is able to reconcile and ultimately rise above discrepant forms of authority and devotion. There are, of course, standard descriptions of the *gājī* figure in Bengali verse poetry and folklore. He has a shackle around his waist, wooden clogs on his feet, and carries a formidable cudgel (*āsā*).[15] Parts of his composite image still circulate through the ubiquitous Ghazi scrolls (*gājīr paṭ*) carried by the scroll-painters (*paṭuā*) of the Bengal countryside (KOROM 2006), where a copiously bearded Ghazi is typically depicted as sitting atop a giant tiger. The stories sung in praise of this figure are generally faithful to the overall genre of traditional *pīr* literature, where the Sufi saint must fight with oppressive kings and disbelievers, perform miracles, and bring new hope to the downtrodden and the destitute. It is in the context of these historical fragments and ambient mythmaking that we must explore Zafar Khan Ghazi's complex legacy. He is not only an embattled icon from the early period of the advent of Islam in Bengal, but a figure whose history is overgrown and intertwined with legend and apocryphal lore, samples of which have already been discussed above. The significance of this Ghazi-like figure, located at the margins of prescriptive forms of religious practice, cannot be understood within the typical explanatory device of syncretism, which treats the categories of "Hindu" and "Muslim" as given and stable.[16] Similarly, straightforward models of cultural synthesis, heterodoxy, or populism that have often been applied in the study of Sufi figures in rural Bengal, do not help explain the conflicting elements in the life story of Zafar Khan Ghazi. There is no equivalence or easy reconciliation between the figure of the destroyer of temples and the ardent devotee of the river Ganga. It is the virtuosity and resilience of folklore that allows these acts of violence, piety, and compassion, told through conflicting narratives, unruly metaphors, and partial translations, to live on within the overall allegory of the Ghazi's long and difficult adventure of suffering and redemption.[17]

NOTES

1. My translation. The ode is known by its opening words "*jahnavī munikanye*."

2. These observations are based on the idea of ethnopoetics, developed by the eminent folklorist and linguist Dell Hymes, which is still being debated and tested by contemporary scholars (MOORE 2015, 11). For a spirited discussion of the problems of trying to locate an authentic voice in oral texts see HYMES (2003, x).

3. See the essay "Traditional Account of the Minaret at Pandua," originally published in the *Calcutta Asiatic Observer* in 1824, which was later excerpted in an essay by Reverend LONG (1850).

4. J. Wise's essay was based on the hagiography of Shah Jalal. The text is known as the *Suhail-i Yaman*, composed in 1859 by Maulvi Muhammad Nasir al-Din Haidar. His account was based on two earlier eighteenth-century texts now lost, the *Rawzat al-Salihin* and the *Risala-yi M'uin al-Din Khadim*. Details of these lost texts have been discussed by Eaton (2009, 384) and Khan (2013, 25).

5. Some commentators have suggested that Zafar Khan was almost singlehandedly responsible for the conquest of Bengal and the spread of Islam. See the preface to Momammad Ali's work (Ali 1979, xxvi).

6. A copy of this is available at the British Library, UK.

7. Jalaluddin received the governorship of the province of Lakhnauti after the death of Tamar Khan Qiran in 1246 (Karim 1992, 32).

8. The phrase appears in the *ādikhaṇḍa*, *tritīẏa adhyāẏ* (first part, third section) of the text (Dās 1928, 94).

9. Recorded in my 1992 field notes written during the festival of Pir Gorachand in Haora-Balanda, North 24 Parganas district. See also O'Malley (1914, 240–41).

10. For a discussion of the Buddhist architectural remains found near Haroa, 24 Parganas, see the reports of the Odisa Samskrti Parisada (1995, 57).

11. Ernst (1992, 156–58) has provided a succinct summary of the major scholarly debates around the question of conversion.

12. For an account of Shah Jalal's exploits in Sylhet, see Roy (1986, 110). For the stories surrounding the martyrdom of Pir Gorachand or Gorai Gaji, see Mitra (2001, 482).

13. Asim Roy has discussed the basic contours of the *pīr* ballads in Bengal in a recently revised book (2014, 235).

14. The summary given here is based on Rahim (1961).

15. In the *Gaji Kalu* story these symbols of the *gājī* are all made out of gold (Rahim 1961, 8).

16. For a succinct discussion of some of the problems encountered in the use of the term syncretism in the history of Indian Islam, see Carl W. Ernst and Tony Stewart in Mills, Claus, and Diamond (2001, 586–88). Syncretism remains a controversial category of analysis, subject to differing interpretations. Some critics have pointed out its pejorative connotations in describing aspects of religious practice that are either inauthentic or innovative, where the mélange of symbols and meanings drawn from incompatible traditions also implies a corruption of original forms of the religious traditions in question (Stewart and Shaw 2003, 1–3). Asim Roy, an early exponent of the idea of Hindu-Muslim syncretism in Bengal (Roy 1982), has recently defended the idea of a "syncretistic tradition" arguing that it best describes the nature of the interaction between religious traditions set in motion by cultural mediators. Such a tradition, according to Roy, developed in medieval rural Bengal where an external and relatively alien Arabic-Persian tradition of orthodox Islam ultimately failed to transform the world of Bengali-speaking Muslims, who cultivated their own idioms and practices of piety and devotion in intimate proximity to local Hindu traditions (Roy 2014, xvi–xvii). Tony Stewart, one of the foremost critics of this idea of synthesis, drawing on the study of devotional practices associated with the Satya Pir tradition in Bengal, has argued that this version of syncretism, in the way it poses "Hindu" and "Muslim" as relatively monolithic formations, fails to account for distinctive, local forms of identity manifest in both oral texts and architecture (Stewart 2002, 28). Syncretism in this regard is a modern concept that does not elucidate the problems of religious identity or overlapping categories of religious affiliation in medieval Bengal (Stewart 2003, 63). More importantly, it does not help explain how power and authority were claimed and expressed in the narratives dedicated to the life-stories of eminent Sufi saints.

17. Stewart (2001) provides a stimulating discussion of translation and language as the site for a critique of the Hindu-Muslim "encounter" in histories concerning the advent of Islam in Bengal.

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