

Cultural and Literary Dimensions of Zikir: The Assamese Tradition of Devotional Chanting

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Abstract

The Assamese devotional compositions known as Zikir were crafted by the Sufi mystic Shah Miran, widely revered as Azan Fakir. During the 16th and 17th centuries, Sufi missionaries from diverse regions, including Central Asia, journeyed across the globe to spread and rejuvenate Islamic teachings. One such figure, Shah Miran, hailing from Baghdad, reached Assam in the early 1600s and gained access to the Ahom court under King Pratap Singha. By that time, Muslim communities had been migrating to Assam from northern India in waves since the late 1200s, establishing lasting roots in the region. Over the ensuing century, these settlers forged deep intercultural bonds with local ethnic and faith-based communities, blending traditions seamlessly—yet, apart from their surnames, they often lacked a distinct religious affiliation. In response, Shah Miran created an innovative form of Islamic bhakti poetry in the vernacular Assamese tongue, termed Zikir, which introduced core Islamic principles in an accessible way. Its melodies drew entirely from indigenous Assamese folk traditions, making it resonate deeply with the populace. While Zikir undeniably served the mission of Islamic outreach and renewal, its enduring value lies more in its artistic depth and sociocultural resonance as a unique devotional genre. This study delves into its literary dimensions—including semantics, allusions, motifs, linguistic choices, and narrative techniques—while also exploring its broader cultural imprint, from mirroring everyday societal dynamics and fostering interfaith coexistence to enhancing the tapestry of Assamese heritage.

Keywords: Zikir, Devotional Song, Folk Song, Sufi Saints

1. Introduction

Zikir stands out as the profoundest gift from Islamic traditions to the rich tapestry of Assamese literary heritage. In the opening decades of the 7th century CE, the Prophet Muhammad from Arabia refined and established the foundational tenets of Islam. It was around 1636 CE that Shah Miran, later revered as Azan Fakir, along with his sibling Nobi, braved treacherous terrains of peaks, waterways, and unfamiliar weather to reach Assam. Once there, he resided briefly in the town of Hajo before venturing northward to the upper reaches of the region. Prior to his coming, Muslim communities had already taken root in Assam, though their identity was superficial—tied merely to their surnames—while they strayed from core Islamic practices, rituals, and daily conduct. Azan Fakir devoted himself tirelessly to guiding these wayward groups back toward authentic faith. In the village of Sunpura, he constructed a mosque and issued the resonant call to prayer, known as Azan, which endeared him to locals and earned him the

affectionate title of Azan Fakir from the Baghdad-born saint. Drawing inspiration from the era's beloved Assamese folk melodies, he pioneered an innovative form of devotional hymns dubbed Zikir, infused with practical wisdom tailored for everyday people.

Objectives:

Through this research article, an attempt is made to discuss the socio-cultural aspects of Assamese Devotional song Zikir, and present a brief review of the relation of Zikir with other Assamese folk songs even with Vaishnavite literature.

Methodology:

The study is descriptive in nature based on both primary and secondary sources.

Discussion of the Study:

Composed in the rhythmic patterns of Assam's traditional folk melodies from that era, Zikir centers on the rhythmic invocation of Allah's name, aiming primarily at cleansing the spirit and attaining ultimate liberation. For certain devotees, it serves as a profound act of divine adoration, while others savor its poetic elegance and melodic charm. In essence, Zikir emerges as a captivating melody that celebrates the essence of human connection, embodying Assam's exemplary interfaith unity on a global scale—and therein resides its true value. Infused with elevated and compassionate mystical insights, the term "Zikir" itself signifies the continuous recitation of Allah's sacred name. Notably, it parallels the exalted devotional verses of Assam's Neo-Vaishnava tradition. Just as the adherents of Neo-Vaishnavism hold that incessant chanting sanctifies the inner self, so too do Islamic practitioners in this context affirm that persistent naming of the Divine purifies the essence of being. Echoing the convictions of Hindu devotees inspired by Srimanta Sankaradeva and Madhavdev, who embrace the singularity of the Supreme Being, Zikir vividly underscores the transcendent might of the formless Creator and the transformative potency of repetitive invocation toward everlasting redemption. Gandhi says – "Iswar Allah Tere Naam/Sabko Sanmati De Bhagawan". It declares the inherent harmony among all religions. Azan Fakir even many centuries before sings –

“Mur Monot Bhed Bhav nai O’ Allah
Mur monot bhin par nai
Hindu ki Musalman eke Allar forman
Mur monot eketi bhav”
(In my heart, no bias lingers, O Allah,
No rift of sides divides my soul.
Hindu or Muslim, one form of Your decree —
In my heart, a single boundless love.)

When it comes to thematic content, Zikirs fall into three distinct groupings. The initial group targets everyday folks who lack formal education, who perform these verses during various communal gatherings. These pieces outline the essential Islamic obligations, serving as an accessible primer on concepts like obligatory duties (Farz), recommended practices (Sunnat), and necessary observances (Wazib), particularly for those who identify as Muslim in name alone. Their straightforward language makes them relatable and digestible for the masses.

The next set appeals to more scholarly devotees, delving into the depths of Sufi mysticism and its profound essence. Through these, listeners can glimpse the profound merger between the individual spirit (Atma) and the universal divine (Pratatma). Interpreting them, however, demands mentorship from a wise spiritual mentor (Sheikh) or a skilled instructor. Key stages include Shariat, which involves adhering to Islam's foundational guidelines; Tariqat, the disciplined pursuit of rigorous spiritual disciplines under a guide's tutelage; Haqiqat, the attainment of ultimate reality via elevated contemplation; Fana fillah, the soul's intimate fusion with the Divine; Baqa billah, the perpetual sustenance of that sacred bond; and overall, the arduous journey of ascetic devotion known as Ma'rifat.

The final category encompasses verses that explore the deeper existential and mystical interpretations of the human form. At their core, these highlight the ephemeral nature and impermanence of mortal existence, urging reflection on life's fleeting illusions.

Like Vaishnavism, Islam, too is the belief in one God. Both have realized the great power of God and advised to mediate uttering His name:

“Seiti namor ji jona momine
Sadai Kari ashe rati
Mawar sat purush bapor sat purush
Si-O pai jibor gati”
(To faithful hearts bound to that holy name,
They invoke it endlessly, through vigil and through night.
From seven lineages of kin, ancestors deep and true,
From their legacy, I claim the way to life's pure flight.)

It is interesting to note that the Vaishnavite and the Muslims could come to a spiritual nearness although they belonged to two different religions. These songs are good examples of this amity. Sankaradeva sings the reality of the temporal world.

“Athira dhana Jana jivana jauvana
Athira Chu sansara
Putra parivara sabahi asara
Kaibo kaheka sara”
(Fleeting wealth, fleeting kin, fleeting life and fleeting youth—
All this world is but a passing shadow.
Offspring, household—all hold no true worth;
What, then, endures as the essence of value?)

It reflects in the Zikir –

“Duniai edinar duniai dudinar
Duniai Phulonir bari
Katat sale bale Kara tai duniya
Dhariba Khewali mari”
(The world endures a single day, or perhaps a pair—
A fragile dwelling woven from petals' tender grace.

When the final hour tolls, who shall seize that realm in hand?

To clutch it fast invites the shadow of demise alone.)

Azan Fakir crafted the devotional Islamic hymns known as Zikir by drawing inspiration from the lyrical structures and melodies of Assam's widely cherished folk tunes of the time. What stands out is how these Zikirs are infused with elements from local traditions, such as Nam-Kirtan chants, Ujjapali performances, and Deh-Bichar ballads. By incorporating authentic regional rhythms and idiomatic expressions, he elevated both the artistic finesse and widespread acceptance of these works. Their charm transcends boundaries of ethnicity, social class, or faith, holding a timeless allure for all. Modeled after the graceful Borgeet and Naam compositions in Ghosha's poetic legacy, Azan Fakir rendered them in everyday Assamese to convey the essence of Islamic tenets drawn from the Quran, Hadith, and Fiqh. He produced an impressive collection of 160 such Zikirs, which hold a pivotal place in the evolution of Assamese linguistics and literary heritage. These pieces have long captivated audiences across Hindu and Muslim communities alike, handed down orally through families rather than committed to script, fostering a deep-rooted cultural bond. This verbal transmission, however, has meant that not all 160 have survived in documented form. Through Zikirs, Assam's Hindu and Muslim populations share an unbreakable thread of solidarity; enthusiasts from both sides harmonize in their rendition, blurring lines of sectarian identity. The songs radiate an unadorned authenticity in their motifs and cadences, endearing them to diverse listeners. Many follows rhythmic patterns like Chabi, Dulari, and Pada—echoing those favored by Vaishnava bards—while blending native Assamese terms with borrowings from Persian, Arabic, and Urdu. These linguistic infusions lend a strikingly evocative and illustrative quality to the portrayal of Islamic concepts.

Our research indicates that upon settling in Assam, Azan Fakir immersed himself deeply in the local tongue and traditions, gaining fluency and insight. While residing in the village of Sunpura, he began crafting verses that echoed the rhythms and simplicity of regional folk melodies, using clear and approachable phrasing. At that time, roughly two centuries earlier, the Vaishnava path of Namdharma had flourished across the land, influencing spiritual life profoundly. Mindful of this vibrant heritage, he channeled it into his own sacred Zikirs, blending innovation with familiarity. Beyond imparting core Islamic rituals, these compositions wove in messages of intercommunity peace and mutual respect. Their straightforward diction, coupled with universally resonant ethical teachings, endeared them to everyday listeners, sparking widespread embrace. Just as communities swayed and clapped to the beats of Diha Naam, Thio Naam, and Husori tunes, so too did they perform Zikirs with joyful movement and rhythmic applause, infusing devotion with lively energy.

Azan Fakir gained prominence through his devotion to composing and singing Zikirs, spiritual songs that conveyed profound messages about the impermanence of human life and the importance of leading a virtuous life, detached from worldly desires. His teachings resonated widely and earned him great respect.

Despite losing his eyesight before his death, Azan Fakir continued to create these devotional songs and lived a pious life surrounded by devotees at Saraguri. Revered as a spiritual leader, his Zikirs have been cherished by the people of Upper Assam for over three centuries. These songs, simple yet rich in moral and spiritual wisdom, are performed with familiar rhythms and often accompanied by dance. Their

enduring popularity arises not only from their captivating melodies but also from their beautiful expression of Islamic teachings with a universal message of harmony and devotion.

Conclusion:

Azan Fakir's Zikirs have profoundly enriched Assamese folk music and played a crucial role in integrating Assamese Muslims into the broader socio-cultural fabric of Assam. His contributions to Assamese literature are widely recognized for fostering communal harmony. The Zikirs have served as a cultural bridge, bringing Hindus and Muslims closer together through shared spiritual expression. Eminent scholar Dr. M. Neog aptly noted that Assamese literature treasures include 240 Borgeets, 260 proverbs, and 160 Zikirs, underscoring the lasting significance of Azan Fakir's work in the region's literary heritage.

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