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P O S O O W A

News & Events of the Assamese People Living Around the World
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Dr Utpola Borah writes on
*Zikir and Zari: Sufi
songs of Assam*
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A Radhasura tree in full bloom in late May 2006 on the highway from Guwahati to Dibrugarh, near Dhoromtul in Nagaon. Photograph: Jugal Kalita

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CAMPHILL SOLTANE visit to India

UTPAL BORAH

When the idea of traveling to India and visit Camphill India first came in Silvia's mind I was wondering how it can be made possible but on the other hand I was delighted that I will have the opportunity to show our Companions my own country and my roots, and time passed by and things worked out.



In our conversations in Camphill India, our guys shared their Camphill experience here in the US and you could clearly see how all the people in Camphill India listened to them with rapt attention. In these 4 weeks our guys coped really well and I was really amazed to see how they quickly adapted the Indian way of sitting in the floor and eating; they made lots of friends which they still talk about.

We started this exciting trip in the month of October 2005. Our first visit was Goa where we all experienced magnificent beaches which are unspoiled. We ended our journey after our visit to Mysore and Bangalore.

Since I joined Camphill Soltane, it was my first visit to India in 3 years and I really felt different; for the first time I felt how much different it is in India for people with special needs, and how much help is needed to develop awareness in the society about people with special needs.

People with special needs don't have access to public places as there are no ramps or elevators in most public places. Neither is there any government intervention nor are there any laws passed to help disabled individuals. Most of the time special needs people in India stays at home as there are not enough special schools in all towns and villages. The choices are very limited. The most important thing is to develop self advocacy so that people with special needs can raise their voice at the government and at the society they live in.



My traveling companions from the USA definitely left footprints on Indian soil and sowed the seeds of self advocacy; people around us have observed how these young men with disability could also travel across the world, and could express their feelings clearly and vociferously to their new and mostly hapless friends in India.

This was just a beginning....

(Utpal Borah has been involved in the non-profit sector since 1999. For the last 3 year he is associated with CAMPHILL North America. His main area of work is education and therapy for people with special needs.)



Campus Life in Camphill Soltane in Pennsylvania

Zikir and Zari: Sufi songs of Assam

DR. UTPOLA BORAH

Zikir and *Zari* represent a musical genre of Assam; they are a group of devotional songs prevalent among the Muslims of Assam. Although *Zikir* and *Zari* are similar in tune, *Zikir* songs embody the teaching of Islam whereas the *Zari* songs are based on the tragic episodes of the *Karbala* tragedy.



Zikir

The term *Zikir*, derived from Arabic “*Ziqr*”, literary means singing or remembering Allah’s name. It applies both to the musical genre and to the occasion of its performance, the devotional assembly of Islamic mysticism or Sufism in Assam. *Zikir*, took root in Assam during the 17th century within the socio-cultural framework instituted by *Bhakti* movement of Saint Srimanta Sankardev (1449-1568) and under the patronage of *Ahom* (1200-1800) kings.

Zikirs were mainly composed and popularized by the 17th century *Sufi* saint and poet Hazrat Shah Miran, popularly known as Ajan Fakir. Ajan Fakir came to Assam from Bagdad accompanied by his brother Shah Navi, and settled in Suwaguri Sapori, near present Sibsagar town. According to a legend, Hazrat Shah Miran received the name “Ajan Fakir” or Ajan Pir (Saint) because he was the one who taught the Assamese Muslim to recite “*Azan*” as its part of Muslim ritual. The time of Ajan Fakir cannot be stated positively but from references in two Assamese chronicles and some *Zikirs* prove his stay in Assam in 17th century. In the following *Zikir*, Ajan Fakir described the time he composed *Zikir* and the Quran the source of the *Zikir*.

*Dah xa dukuri nabison hijiri/aru pase bosor jai/Ajan Fakire ai zikir korile/
Koran kitapot pai.*

Ajan Fakir composed the *Zikir* in 1038 Hijri (1636). The Quran is the source of this *Zikir*.

It is known from history that Muslim settlers stepped in to Assam as Mughal and Pathans invaders. The Badshahs and the Sultans of Delhi made many attempts of expedition to conquer Assam and as a result a small number of Muslims stayed back as a prisoners of war. Apart from these invasions, during the Ahom reign some Muslim artists of special skills were imported from various part of India. A considerable number of these Muslim settler married local Assamese women and also adopted Assamese culture.

Though the underlying motivation of Ajan Fakir was the preaching of Islam, he was very influenced by the Vaisnavite thoughts, teaching and music of Sankardeva. Singing the glory of Allah and Islam in high lyrical terms often came down in part to explaining the ideas and issues in terms of events and activities of daily life of the common people. It is also interesting to note that the *Zikirs* have been able to build a bridge in ensuring the harmonious relationship between Islam and Hinduism, particularly with Vaisnavism. One of the most impressive example of *Bhakti* doctrines preached by Ajan Fakir to express admiration for this sect of Hinduism as follows.

Sankardeur jiyari Madhavdeur buwari
Rahpur nagarat ghar
Rahpur nagarat rasak nami ani
Diya sakaloke bati

She is the daughter of Sankardeva and daughter-in-law of Madhavadev; and she dwells in the city of Rahpur or land of *rasa* (aesthetics); that is, the sentiment of love and devotion; bring down the *rasa* from the city of Rahpur and distribute in among us all.

Ajan Fakir had encountered much difficulty in stabilizing Islam as prevalent in Assam during the 17th century; it had already deviated here from its main principles and practices. It is stated that during that period the local Muslims used to take part in the singing of *Kirtana*-songs for community prayer composed by Sankardeva, for the purpose of propagating Vaisnavism. The Muslim also took *mah-prasads* (uncooked eatables generally consisting of gram, sugarcane,



Ajan Fakir's Dargah, Suwaguri Sapori, Sibsagar. Photo: Author

coconut, ginger and fruits) distributed at the end of the community singing of Kirtana. With a view attracting these Muslims towards Islam, Ajan Fakir introduced the custom of distribution of *sinni* (considered food prepared out of rice) at the end of the community singing of *Zikir* and *Zari* song

Apart from Vaishnavite music, Ajan Fakir was also greatly inspired by the regional music of Assam such as the tone and spirit of other Assamese folk genre like *Oja-pali* and *Deh bicarar geet*. Ajan Fakir adopted the practice of Vaisnavite lyrics, one often comes across lines “*Savaro ghate ghate Alla*” evidently borrowed from Vaisnavite poetry. Ajan Fakir himself was a good singer and poet; he composed one hundred and sixty *Zikirs* in Assamese. Although Islam does not promote music and dance for entertainment, from the religious perspective there is no restriction as such. At that time dance and music constituted a very popular way of praying to God among the Hindu and the Muslim communities of Assam. Ajan Fakir and his disciples, popularly known as “*Bhakat*” in Assamese, performed *Zikir*, dancing and singing with hand clapping like folk performance such as *Diha nam*, *Husori*, etc. Even today *Zikir* songs are performed with dance in some areas of Assam.



*Zikir performance at Daliluddin Khan’s residence, Sibsagar.
Photo: Author*

Language of Zikir

Until the middle of the last century, *Zikirs* were not written down, but handed over from mouth to mouth for generations. There was some kind of prejudice against writing *Zikirs* down. Since they are transmitted orally from generation to generation, the authenticity of tune and poetry may not be exactly what Ajan Fakir had composed. It is worth mentioning here that language of *Zikir*, except for a few Arabic and Persian words is colloquial Assamese.

Lyrics of Zikir

Though being couched in the spirit of Sufism, the Assamese *Zikir* sing the glory of Gurus or religious preceptors and urge upon the detachment from mundane pleasure for the sake of the selfless services to God. The Vaisnavism preached by Sankardeva is also known as “*nama-dharma*”, because it gives utmost importance to *svavana kirtana* or the listening to and reciting of the name of God with intense love and devotion. An Assamese Vaisnava regards it as superb mode of worship. The *Zikir* also uphold this mode in the same vein. Thus the highlights of *Zikir* appears to reconstruct



Zari dance performance by Ajimuddin Khan and party at Srimanta Kalakhetra Complex, Guwahati. Photo: Author

Assamese Muslims society by their faith and love for Islam in such a way that there will be no discord in their age-old harmonious relation with Hindu society

Mor manta aan bhav nai o Alla
Mor manta bhin par nai
Hindu Musalman, ek Allar farman
Gorethane kabar sari sari
Hinduk puribo Mominal garibo

In my mind, Oh dear Allah/ I have no different thought/Hindus and Muslims are bounded by the same act of divine rules of Allah/ the act of cremating a Hindu and the entombing of a Muslim only signify one end-death for all.

Ajan Fakir composed around hundred and sixty Zikirs, out of these very few has been collected from different sources specially by the scholar and writer Late Syad Abdul Mallik, renowned literature of Assam, under the title “*Asamiya Zikir aur Zari*” (Assamese Zikir and Zari). In this book collector included the available *Zikirs* collected from all over Assam.

Performance

Ajan Fakir came to Assam for propagation of Islam, there are evidence to indicate that there were some other Muslim missionaries working in the same line before him. But none of them had the sustained influence like Ajan Fakir. His Zikir are popular and sung by the folk singers of all communities. Gradually they have made their entry into the cultural arena of the urban society.

It is probable that some Zikirs were also composed by poets contemporary or prior to Ajan Fakir. According to the Vaisnava literature of Assam Chand Khan or “Chand Sai”, disciple of Vaisnava Saint Sankardeva (dates?) composed spiritual lyrics more like Borgit’s of Sankardeva and Madhavadeva. But Zikir’s of Ajan Fakir are the foremost of all. It is a group song performed by the group of singers, professional performing group led by one or two solo singers and accompanied by handclapping and two musical instrument *dotara*. The poetry is colloquial homey Assamese with few Arabic and Persian in a fluid style of alternating solo and group passages characterized by repetition. The goal is to repeat almighty Allah’s name again and again, create awareness among audience for divine love and power.

Zikirs singing considered as an occasion is a gathering for the purpose of realizing ideals of Islamic mysticism through listening. The assembly is usually attended by Sufi devotees through it is open to all comers. *Zikir* assemblies commemorates the death anniversary (*urs*) of the Sufi saints at their shrines, private gathering and functions organized for any festive occasion, most often accompanied by appropriate dances. The women performer also takes part in the private function but they do not dance.

Zari

The “*Zari*” derivation of “*Jari*” is translated in Persian and Urdu dictionaries as “crying, groaning, wailing”. Such demonstrative expressions of grief are an important part of Muharram celebrations. The *Jari* is also popularly known as “*Jarigan*”, the songs concern to *Karbala* episodes “*Hasan-Hosein*” and stories from Islamic history and legend. The devoted Muslims enjoy listening to “*Jari gan*” till late hours of the night. Some of the Assamese *Zari* may be called independent ballads giving the stories of Haidar Ghazi.

These songs are sung by men with accompanied by musical instrument *dotara* (two string instruments) in the month of Muharram and has similarities with Oja pali (storytelling tradition with music and dance) performance of Assam. These songs are choral singing group with lead singer like the *Oja* (leader) who indicates the singing and is later joined by members of the group like *palis* (group). As the group sings, they move in a circle, clapping and following rhythmic steps. Lyric of these songs are Arabic, Persian and colloquial Assamese words, which reflect the cultural assimilation that has taken place over time in Assam.

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Rafting Down the White Waters of Wisconsin Rivers

SATYAM K BHUYAN

It was Saturday morning. I woke up at 5 am that day and a long Memorial Day weekend was waiting for me. As I watched out of my window it was pouring down. But, nonetheless, the trip would go on as per schedule. So, after a light meal at my home I left for my college where a group of nine others waited for me. We packed our vehicles with all the necessities for a camping trip and the ten of us left at 6 am. We took two vehicles, a truck and a van. The destination was Wisconsin, a state bordering Iowa on the east. Our intensions were laid out at a pre-trip meeting on Thursday. We would be camping at a Boy Scout campground and our rafting adventures are going to take us down the white waters of the Wolf and Peshtigo River.

We stopped at few places on way for meals. After a brief detour we reached the campgrounds at 4 pm at the conclusion of an anxious 10 hour journey. The sky was overcast and the river was up, a perfect condition for rafting. Half of us stayed back at the grounds while the remaining drove to the Wolf River with our rafting materials. On any rafting trip what you would need apart from rafts are paddles, personal floatation device (PFD) or life jacket, helmet, wetsuits, paddle jackets and items to carry on the boat include water bottles, cameras, sun-block lotion and something to bite on when hungry. Once we reached the river we unloaded the truck, inflated the raft, put on our PFD and were all set. We did not have to put on our wet suits as the weather was pleasant and the water was not chilly. There were five of us on the raft. We encountered few minor rapids which are called Class 1 rapids. The river was clearly high owing to rains. We rolled over the rapids though we were stuck on some of them due to the rocks. Nevertheless, it was quick perhaps an hour down the river. We reached the drop off point where we were picked up by Jerry, our trip leader, who was already there with the truck. After loading our truck we headed back to the camp. The rest of us who did not raft that afternoon got the campground ready. They set up the tents along with the kitchen. The ground had all facilities like bathrooms,



a videogame parlor, a pool table and a shop to buy camera which are waterproof and are ideal to carry on the rafts. It was gradually getting dark and we decided to cook dinner. We ate pasta that night. We sat by the campfire and chatted for a while. The next morning we had an early breakfast and left for the Peshtigo River, a 45 minute drive from the grounds. There was already a party that arrived before us. Unlike us they brought kayaks with them and they set out before us. Our party of ten took two boats down the river. This time we encountered the Class 2 rapids. It was a long day for rafting. The weather was perfect with clouds covering the sky until the sun came out at noon. There were stopover points at the rocks where we planned our strategy to stumble upon the next rapid as well as take pictures. The rapids have their own common name. For instance, a race course rapid which is quite a long stress will allow you to race through the obstacles until you are out of it. It was fun to see the kayakers who breezed through the rapids maneuvering their kayak much better than we controlling our raft. Once we were through all the rapids we had a smooth stress of shallow water where we hopped off our boat for a swim. We reached our drop off point where we had parked the one of the vehicles. By the time we reached there it was four in the afternoon. We realized that we rafted for six hours. We had a late lunch and headed back to the campgrounds. After we washed ourselves off we got ready for some charcoal cooking. There was grilled salmon and steak that night. As darkness fell we sat besides the fire. We chatted that night with another experienced camping party who told us weird tales of past camping trips. We retired that night early as the next day we had to pack off our tents. The next day was our last day of camping. So, we woke up early and after a quick breakfast we packed our belongings and dismantled the tents and the kitchen. It was not over yet. We still had some more action in Class 3 rapids. So, we went up to the Menominee

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Peace Talks – GOI – ULFA: What Next?

UMESH SHARMA

After the third round of the peace talks between the Government of India and ULFA-appointed PCG, it seems there is still demand of independent Assam by some ideologues of the PCG. Further, there is demand that some ULFA leaders/militants be released from Indian jails. There seems to be little or no discussion about what ULFA wants in the name of development of Assam – an alternative plan if independence is not granted.



Release of ULFA prisoners: Why?

First lets ask the question that why anyone is put in jail. I would say for two reasons. First, obviously that the person in question can do no further harm to the well-being of the society. Second, that person be reformed while in jail. I would say the jail terms are defined according to the time it would take a person to get reformed while in jail. Many whose case is hopeless are given life in prison without parole.



Members of the PCG. Photo by UB Photos

Only when someone is reformed and unlikely to cause any more trouble to the society is that when s/he should be released

from prison. Do the jailed ULFA leaders show signs they will behave if and when they get out? Do they promise not to indulge in violent activities against anyone? Do they promise NOT to run across the border and indulge in anti-India activities? Do they promise to help build a developed Assam state through constructive activities through active participation in the democratic process and community involvement?

Development

Many PCG members (and thus ULFA) hold that control of oil is the key to Assam's development and Indian government is stopping Assam's development merely because it controls oil found in Assam. Do such PCG members have any vision how else Assam's economy could progress – by looking at other Indian states which lack any mineral resources : such as Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu etc.

When other nations (including US, China, France) are now sending their youth and business persons to train in India's booming hi-tech business districts –why not Assam's government do likewise? Can ULFA/PCG help become the catalyst for community mobilization –or do they want to keep pouting and promoting violence which does no region any benefit?

Do Indian babus and politicians have any plan how to relaunch Assam as a showcase for India's development –in the event ULFA etc., stop violence in the region. Can they see beyond Bihar and UP –to look across the chicken-neck into the NE region? Can they overcome their lethargy and deep-rooted biases –and envision a region which can grow into India's Shanghai (and not like the 1960s Vietnam it resembles now?

(Umesh Sharma lives in Maryland, USA)

Rafting Down the White Waters of Wisconsin Rivers

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Reservation inhabited by American Indians. There we had to use their rafts which were smaller and lighter than our rafts. But, the biggest surprise of all was the last rapid which was essentially a twelve foot fall. The Indians call it The Great Smokey Falls and bear a daring adventure for rafters and kayakers. Ten of us divided ourselves into groups of three so that we could fit in to the smaller size boat. There were two rapids that we came across before we reached the falls. The second rapid was a beauty as we glided between two cliffs. Speaking of cliffs, we did little bit of cliff jumping off a 15 feet cliff. The next 30 minutes was a smooth ride till we got close to the fall where we could hear the sound water flowing down. It was as if a

giant monster was waiting for us. We scouted the fall which looked pretty scary at first until we planned our strategy. To describe the fall a little bit, it consists of a sprout of water called the "rooster's tail" on its left. The goal is the hit the rooster's tail right in the center. The current on the rapid would drive the boat away from the tail but proper steering techniques would keep it on its course. None of the three boats made it to the rooster's tail. Fortunately or unfortunately, my boat hit the edge of the tail and was skewed by 45 degrees which threw my out off the boat. Not to worry! I had my PFD and eventually swam to the shore. After everything was over we got off the boats at the drop off point. That was the end of our rafting adventures. After changing our clothes we straight away headed for lunch. Thereafter, we left for our home. It was a pleasant experience for me.

(Satyam K Bhuyan lives in Iowa, USA)

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