

The Production of Sacred Space at the Shrine of Bayazid Bostami

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Summary Statement

Existing research on Sufism in Bengal includes Islam's "compatibility" with indigenous spiritual systems, the role of Sufi saints in spreading Islam in the region, and the traditions of saint veneration. This project will focus on the physical space in which these inquiries converge: the *dargah*, or the Sufi shrine complex. Focusing on the shrine complex of Bayazid Bostami in Chattogram (modern-day Bangladesh), I attempt to demonstrate how the architectural space becomes sacred. I posit that the production of this sacred space is underpinned by the worshippers' engagements with "manifestations of the sacred". These manifestations include sacred places (such as the Bayazid Bostami pond), sacred objects (like the tomb of Bayazid Bostami, see Figure 1), rituals performed at the shrine, and mythical narratives surrounding the saint and his shrine. Drawing on Eliade Mircea's "manifestations of the sacred" and Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad, this study analyzes how worshippers' interactions with these manifestations contribute to the creation of a sacred space conducive to spiritual experiences. By investigating the spatial dynamics of the shrine complex, this research aims to shed light on the multifaceted relationship between religious practices, sacred space, and spiritual experiences in the context of Sufism in Bengal.



Figure 1 The tomb of Bayazid Bostami. Photo courtesy of the author.

Introduction

Chattogram, a city on the coast of the Bay of Bengal (in modern-day Bangladesh), is referred to as “Baro Auliyar Desh” (Bengali: বারো আউলিয়ার দেশ) or Land of the Twelve Saints, owing to the history of Sufi saints in the area.¹ Sufi saints played a key role in introducing the spiritual philosophy of Near Eastern Islam to adherents of (mostly) Hindu and Buddhist spiritualities, thereby facilitating the formation of the Bengali Muslim identity.² To this day, their shrine complexes remain important places where worshippers may practice their spiritual traditions.³ The focus of this essay is on the shrine complex of the 8th century Persian saint, Bayazid Bostami.

The shrine of Bayazid Bostami, which was “discovered” in 1831⁴, sits atop a hill in the Nasirabad neighborhood of Chattogram. There are contesting stories regarding the origin of the saint’s shrine; most prevalent of them, however, is that he was so impressed by the local community’s devotion to Islam, that he shed some of his blood on the hilltop to indicate where to construct a shrine.⁵ Most devotees agree that his body is not buried at this site, while others posit that it’s just his arm, or a piece of his arm. Some believe that the saint never actually visited Chattogram, and that the shrine was built by his followers as an homage to their spiritual guide.⁶

The mythologies of the complex’s various components, along with its sacred places (the Bayazid Bostami pond), sacred objects (the tomb of Bayazid Bostami), and rituals (at the shrine) are what Mircea Eliade would refer to as hierophanies, or “manifestations of the sacred.”⁷ Eliade used the term “manifestation of the sacred” to describe how the divine or the transcendent makes itself known or present in human experience through religious rituals, symbols, objects, and myths. Worshippers engage with these manifestations - be it through feeding the shrine’s turtles or making wishes upon strings and tying them onto the trees at the complex (see Figure 2 and Figure 3) - and in doing so, produce a sacred space on Earth. I aim to elucidate upon this process in further detail by interpreting primary and secondary data, collected from the shrine complex and its devotees, through the lens of Henri Lefebvre’s spatial triad.

The spatial triad delineates the production and experience of space into three components: “spatial practice” (perceived space), “representations of space,” (conceived space) and “spaces of representation” (lived space).⁸ For this study, I will:

1. Embed Eliade’s “manifestations of the sacred” *into* Lefebvre’s spatial triad, i.e., elucidate upon the ways in which these “manifestations of the sacred” fit into spatial practice, representations of space, and spaces of representation, respectively; and

¹ “Chittagong City.” Banglapedia, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Accessed April 27, 2024.
https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Chittagong_City.

² Kuldip Singh T. Sarao, “Sufi Mysticism and Indian Religions,” *Cultural Dialogue* 2 (November 20 – January 2021): 129–40.

³ Jamal J Elias. “Sufi Saints and Shrines in Muslim Society: Introduction.” *The Muslim World* 90, no. 3/4 (Fall 2000): 253-58.

⁴ “The Shrine of Bayazid Bostami.” Chittagong Government Website, Accessed April 27, 2024.
https://www.chittagong.gov.bd/en/site/tourist_spot/xxGV-বায়েজিদ-বোস্ফামীর-মাজার.

⁵ Mehanz Tasnim. “Symposium of Saint Legends of Bengal: The Chronicles and the Anecdotes.” *Eastern Journal of Languages, Linguistics and Literatures* 3, no. 2 (2022): 7-10.

⁶ “Bayejid Bostami.” Banglapedia, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Accessed April 27, 2024.
https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Bayejid_Bostami.

⁷ Randall Studstill. “Eliade, phenomenology, and the sacred.” *Religious Studies* 36 (June 1, 2000): 177–194. Accessed [April 18, 2024], [Eliade, phenomenology, and the sacred | Religious Studies | Cambridge Core](#)

⁸ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991).

2. Explore how users of the space engage with these “manifestations of the sacred” at each of the three “corners” of the triad to produce the sacred space at the shrine of Bayazid Bostami.



Figure 2: A mother and child feeding a Bostami turtle. It is believed that these turtles were once bad men who upset God, so He transformed them into these turtles which are only found in the Bostami pond. Photo courtesy of the author.



Figure 3: Back view of the tomb with a tree covered in red and orange strings. Worshippers and visitors make wishes on the strings and tie them around the tree. Photo courtesy of Rayhan Rivu.

Methodology

I conducted this study based on an initial field trip to the shrine complex of Bayazid Bostami in January 2024, followed by conducting semi-structured interviews with a diverse range of worshippers, visitors, and local residents. I interviewed a total of 12 participants, aiming to capture their perceptions, conceptions, and lived experiences at the shrine. I conducted thematic coding of the field notes and interviews to identify recurring patterns and themes. Through this analysis, I observed that a majority of how the participants' understood and consumed the space emerged from mythologies surrounding the shrine complex, as well as engagements with the physical elements of the complex. Thus, it became clear that engaging with these components of the shrine complex contributed to the creation of a sacred space.

To encapsulate “things” like myths, sacred places, sacred objects, and rituals into a single concept, I rely on Eliade’s notion of “manifestations of the sacred.” And to elucidate upon the production of sacred space through engagements with these manifestations, I apply Lefebvre’s spatial triad. The spatial triad, consisting of “‘spatial practice’ (perceived space), ‘representations of space’ (conceived space), and ‘spaces of representation’ (lived space)”⁹, describes how spaces are produced and experienced. In this study, I present a framework which embeds the “manifestations of the sacred” into the spatial triad, and then I categorize interviewee engagements with the shrine and its elements into the various aspects of the triad to demonstrate how a sacred space is produced.

Intended Conclusions/ Outcomes

This study delves into the intricate dynamics of Sufi spirituality in Bengal, with a specific focus on the sacred space of the shrine complex, exemplified by the shrine of Bayazid Bostami in

⁹ Kim Knott, “Spatial Theory and the Study of Religion,” *Religion Compass* 2, no. 6 (2008): 1102-1116.

Chattogram. By examining the interplay between worshippers' engagements with manifestations of the sacred within this architectural site - including sacred places, objects, rituals, and mythical narratives - this study aims to uncover the processes by which a sacred space is produced. Drawing upon Mircea Eliade's concept of "manifestations of the sacred" and Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad, the research offers a nuanced analysis of how these interactions contribute to the construction of a sacred environment conducive to spiritual experiences. By offering a comprehensive analysis of the spatial dynamics of the *dargah* and its role in shaping spiritual experiences, this research not only enhances our understanding of Sufism in Bengal but also contributes to broader scholarly discussions on the interplay between religious practices, architecture, and the production of sacred space.