



Sufism, Modernisation, and Social Transformation: The Impact of Twelve Awliya in South Asia's Coastal Region of Chittagong

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Abstract

This study critically examines the pivotal role of the Twelve Awliya in disseminating and consolidating Islam in Chittagong, a prominent port city and trading hub in South Asia. Chittagong's strategic location facilitated interactions with traders from Anatolia, Arabia, and other regions beginning in the 11th century; this interaction provided fertile ground for the activities of Sufi mystics, pirs, and dervishes. These Sufi figures significantly shaped the region's religious, cultural, and socio-economic structures, leaving an enduring legacy. The political establishment of Islam in Bengal commenced with the conquest of the region in 1204 by Ikhtiyaruddin Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji, a Turkish-origin commander. This pivotal event laid the foundation for Sufi scholars to thrive, fostering the spread of Islam and the development of societal systems in Chittagong. Known as the "Land of the Twelve Awliya," Chittagong became a crucial epicentre for the propagation of Islam, influencing not only Bengal but neighbouring regions such as Arakan and parts of India. The Twelve Awliya—including Shah Mohsen, Pir Badr, Kadal Han Gazi, Garib Ullah Shah, Badr Makkan Shah, Shah Ömer, Sheikh Farid, Molla Miskin, Shah Chand Awliya, Shah Sondor Fakir, Bayazid Bastami, and Shah Amanat—were instrumental during this transformative period. The contributions of these Awliya extended beyond religious activities. They played a vital role in promoting socio-economic development, establishing educational institutions, and enriching the region's cultural heritage. Their efforts integrated Islamic principles into the societal fabric by promoting spiritual enlightenment, education, and tolerance. Additionally, their initiatives fostered interfaith coexistence and mutual respect among Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, cultivating a harmonious multi-religious environment despite opposition. However, the Sufi Awliya's activities were not without challenges. Contemporary Hindu and Buddhist rulers, aiming to maintain their influence, frequently engaged in conflicts and orchestrated persecutions against the Sufis. Many Sufi leaders were imprisoned, injured, or martyred during these confrontations. Despite such adversities, the Sufi scholars remained steadfast in their spiritual and social upliftment mission. Their resilience and unwavering commitment proved essential in preserving the Islamic teachings and facilitating their spread across the region. This research addresses a significant gap in the academic discourse on Sufism in South Asia by exploring the religious dimensions and socio-economic contributions of the Twelve Awliya in Chittagong. This study thoroughly examines Sufism's spiritual influence in this port city using a qualitative methodology and primary sources, including Ibn Battuta's *The Rehla*. Ibn Battuta's accounts underscore the pivotal roles of these Awliya in establishing Chittagong as a nexus of Islamic culture and trade. The study further highlights the enduring impact of the Twelve Awliya in advancing education and fostering an inclusive cultural environment. Institutionalising Sufi principles of equality, tolerance, and the integration of spiritual and material well-being laid a foundation for sustainable societal development. By analysing the historical context and the socio-religious outcomes of their efforts, this research elucidates the transformative influence of the Twelve Awliya on Chittagong and the broader South Asian region. In conclusion, this research enhances our understanding of Sufi figures' spiritual and socio-economic roles in Chittagong during a critical period of Islamic expansion. This study underscores their significance in the region's historical narrative by examining their resilience in the face of persecution and their endeavours to promote education, interfaith coexistence, and community development. It is a foundational resource for

future academic inquiries into the dynamics of Sufism in South Asia, enriching scholarly understanding of the spiritual and cultural synthesis that shaped the region's historical trajectory.

Keywords

Sufism, South Asia, Chittagong, Twelve Awliya, Islamic Expansion, Religious Coexistence, Socio-Economic Development, Cultural Heritage

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Tasavvuf, Modernleşme ve Sosyal Dönüşüm: Güney Asya'nın Sahil Bölgesi Çitagong'da On İki Evliyanın Etkisi

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Öz

Bu çalışma, Güney Asya'nın önemli bir liman kenti ve ticaret merkezi olan Chittagong'da İslam'ın yayılmasında ve konsolidasyonunda On İki Evliya'nın oynadığı kilit rolü eleştirel bir şekilde incelemektedir. Chittagong'un stratejik konumu, 11. yüzyıldan itibaren Anadolu, Arabistan ve diğer bölgelerden gelen tüccarlarla etkileşimleri kolaylaştırmış; bu durum, Sufilerin, pirlerin ve dervişlerin faaliyetleri için uygun bir zemin hazırlamıştır. Bu Sufi şahsiyetler, bölgenin dini, kültürel ve sosyo-ekonomik yapılarının şekillenmesinde önemli bir rol oynayarak kalıcı bir miras bırakmıştır. Bengal'de İslam'ın siyasi olarak tesis edilmesi, 1204 yılında Türk asıllı komutanı İktiyaruddin Muhammed Bahtiyâr Halacî'nin bölgeyi fethetmesiyle başlamıştır. Bu tarihî olay, Sufilerin gelişmesine zemin hazırlamış ve Chittagong'da İslam'ın yayılması ile toplumsal yapıların güçlenmesine olanak tanımıştır. "On İki Evliya Diyarı" olarak bilinen Chittagong, yalnızca Bengal'i değil, aynı zamanda Arakan ve Hindistan'ın bazı bölgelerini de etkileyerek İslam'ın yayılmasında bir merkez haline gelmiştir. Bu evliyalar arasında Şah Mohsen, Pir Badr, Kadal Han Gazi, Garibullah Şah, Badr Mekki Şah, Şah Ömer, Şeyh Farid, Molla Miskin, Şah Chand Evliya, Şah Sundar Fakir, Bayezid Bistami ve Şah Amanat gibi isimler yer almaktadır. On İki Evliya'nın katkıları, sadece dini yayılmayla sınırlı kalmamış, aynı zamanda bölgenin sosyo-ekonomik kalkınmasına da öncülük etmiştir. Eğitim kurumlarının kurulması, kültürel zenginliğin artırılması ve toplumsal yapıya İslami değerlerin entegre edilmesi gibi alanlarda önemli ilerlemeler sağlamışlardır. Ruhsal aydınlanmayı, eğitimi ve hoşgörüyü teşvik ederek Müslümanlar, Hindular ve Budistler arasında karşılıklı saygı ve dini çoğulculuğu desteklemiştir. Bu çabalar, dış muhalefetlere rağmen çok dinli bir uyum ortamının oluşmasına katkıda bulunmuştur. Bununla birlikte, Sufi evliyaların faaliyetleri dönemin Hindu ve Budist yöneticileri tarafından dirençle karşılanmıştır. Mevcut etkilerini korumak isteyen bu yöneticiler, Sufilere karşı savaşlar başlatmış ve sistematik zulümler uygulamıştır. Sonuç olarak, birçok Sufi lider hapsedilmiş, yaralanmış ve hatta şehit edilmiştir. Tüm bu zorluklara rağmen, Sufi şahsiyetler yerel halkın manevi ve toplumsal kalkınmasına olan bağlılıklarını sürdürmüş; bu dirençleri ve sarsılmaz adanmışlıkları, İslami öğretilerin bölgedeki varlığını ve yayılmasını sağlamada önemli bir rol oynamıştır. Bu araştırma, Güney Asya'daki Tasavvufun dini boyutları ve sosyo-ekonomik katkılarına ilişkin akademik literatürdeki önemli bir boşluğu doldurmayı amaçlamaktadır. İbn Battuta'nın "Rehla" adlı eserinde yer alan birincil kaynaklardan yararlanan ve nitel yöntemlerle yürütülen bu çalışma, Chittagong'daki Tasavvufun manevi etkisine dair kapsamlı bir analiz sunmaktadır. İbn Battuta'nın gözlemleri, bu evliyaların Chittagong'u İslam kültürü ve ticaretinin önemli bir merkezi olarak şekillendirmedeki rollerini vurgulamaktadır. Araştırma, ayrıca bu evliyaların eğitim ve kapsayıcı bir kültürel ortamı teşvik etmedeki kalıcı etkisini ele almaktadır. Eşitlik, hoşgörü ve manevi-maddi refahın entegrasyonuna dayalı Sufi ilkelerini tanıtmış ve bu değerleri kurumsallaştırmışlardır. Çalışma, tarihsel bağlam içerisinde bu çabaların sosyo-dini etkilerini inceleyerek, On İki Evliya'nın Chittagong ve Güney Asya üzerindeki dönüştürücü etkilerini ortaya koymaktadır. Sonuç olarak, bu araştırma, İslam'ın genişleme sürecinde Chittagong'daki Sufi şahsiyetlerin manevi ve sosyo-ekonomik rollerine dair daha derin bir anlayış sunmaktadır. Direnişe karşı gösterdikleri azim, hoşgörü ve toplumsal kalkınmayı teşvik etme konusundaki çabaları, bölgenin tarihsel anlatısındaki önemlerini güçlendirmektedir. Çalışma, Güney Asya'da

Tasavvufun dinamiklerini anlamak için temel bir kaynak niteliğinde olup, bölgenin tarihsel gelişimini şekillendiren manevi ve kültürel sentezi anlamamıza katkı sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Tasavvuf, Güney Asya, Çitagong, On İki Evliya, İslam'ın Yayılması, Dini Hoşgörü, Sosyo-Ekonomik Gelişme, Kültürel Miras

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Introduction

Historically known as Chattogram, Chittagong is one of the world's oldest continuously functioning ports, distinguished by its natural harbour. Its strategic location has been documented on ancient Greek and Roman maps, including Ptolemy's world map, highlighting its significance as a trade and cultural exchange nexus. The city's historical importance is further underscored by its role in the early spread of Islam in the Bengal region. The arrival of Saad ibn Abu Waqqas and his companions in 615 CE from the Aksum seaport in Ethiopia marked the initial introduction of Islamic teachings to Chittagong, laying the foundation for the region's subsequent religious transformations.

By the 9th century, traders associated with the Abbasid Caliphate had established a commercial outpost in Chittagong, solidifying its role as a pivotal trading hub in the Indian Ocean network. The city's prominence continued to grow, and by the 14th century, it had come under the control of Muslim rulers from Bengal, becoming a royal mint under the Delhi Sultanate, Bengal Sultanate, and later, the Mughal Empire. João de Barros, a Portuguese historian, described Chittagong in the 16th century as "the most famous and wealthy city of the Bengal state," a testament to its economic and strategic significance. In 1666, the Mughal Empire consolidated its control over Chittagong, expelling Portuguese and Arakanese forces and integrating the city into the broader Muslim domain.¹

From the early 8th century, Chittagong became a focal point for the activities of Sufi and Awliya, collectively known as the "Twelve Awliya". These figures, including Pir Badruddin, Bayazid Bastami, Sheikh Farid, Badr Shah, Mohsen Awliya, Shah Amanat, Shah Mastan, Shah Chand Awliya, Shah Badal, Shah Omar, Shah Pir, Kattal Pir, and Shah Zaid, played a pivotal role in the dissemination of Islamic teachings across the region. Their efforts not only facilitated the spread of Islam but also contributed to the socio-religious fabric of Chittagong, earning the city its epithet as the "Land of the Twelve Awliya".²

Chittagong's significance extends beyond its religious heritage. As Bangladesh's second-largest city and commercial capital, Chittagong, known for its natural beauty, is strategically located along the Bay of Bengal, bordered by hills, sea, and valleys. It is famously referred to as the "Queen of the East." The city's role as a vital economic hub is evidenced by its bustling seaport, the busiest in the Bay of Bengal, and its substantial contribution to Bangladesh's economy through various prominent local businesses.³ As of 2022, the Greater Chittagong region had a population exceeding 5.2 million, reflecting its importance as a significant urban centre.⁴

This study seeks to explore the multifaceted contributions of the Twelve Awliya to the social and religious development of Chittagong. It aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of their roles in shaping the region's Islamic identity and examine the broader implications of their

¹ Shariful Islam-Muhammad Monirul Haque, "Unpublished Umayyad and Abbasid Silver Coins in the Bangladesh National Museum", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* 62 (2), 205-231.

² Abdulla Al Mahmud, "The Role of the Turkish Muslims in the Socio-Cultural Formation of Bengal during the Sultanate Period (1204-1525)", *Sinop Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 6/1 (2022), 23-43.

³ *The Daily Star*, "Pangaon container terminal to get a boost" (6 May 2024).

⁴ Population City (PC), "Chittagong Population" (Access 6 May 2024).

activities within the socio-political and religious contexts of the time. By filling a notable gap in existing scholarship on the spiritual dimensions of Chittagong's history, this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the region's complex heritage and its place in the broader history of Islam in South Asia.

Since Chittagong has been a crucial region for maritime routes, many Sufis and Pirs came here to spread Islam. Many of these Sufis were warriors, traders, and Islamic preachers, often occupied with their respective tasks. Despite their significance, many of these Sufis did not compile books or written works. Even the birth and death details of some of the "Twelve Awliya" are not extensively documented in academic studies. Therefore, while preparing this article, we reviewed all relevant articles and books in Bengali and English, as well as in Urdu, Hindi, and Persian, to use as primary sources on this subject. While some biographical insights were found in the academic literature of South Asia, specifically the Indian subcontinent, particularly in the literature mentioned above, there is limited information about their written works and their connection to their Tariqas.

1. Methodology

The research was conducted based on primary sources from Ibn Battuta's "*The Travels of Ibn Battuta: in the Near East, Asia and Africa*" book. In 1346 CE, the traveler Ibn Battuta visited Chittagong. He wrote in his book, "The city of Bengal we entered is called Sudkawan (Chittagong). It is a vast city located on the shores of the great ocean, near the confluence of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers, where Hindus perform their pilgrimage and from where the rivers flow into the sea. I left Sudwan (Chittagong) and headed towards the mountains of Kamru (Kamrup) in India."⁵

This research employs a qualitative methodology, encompassing an extensive review and critical analysis of existing literature, including historical documents, scholarly books, peer-reviewed articles, and academic essays about the contributions of Sufis in the Chittagong region. By utilising primary and secondary sources, the study aims to synthesise and interpret the available information to provide a detailed examination of the impact and role of Sufism in the area.

In preparing this research paper, it became apparent that while the available literature on the Chittagong region is extensive, academic sources that critically examine the intersection of Sufism, regional history, and Islamic propagation are relatively scarce. This necessitated a careful and systematic review of the sources, ensuring that the analysis presented here is rigorous and insightful.

2. Literature Review

Chittagong has historically played a pivotal role in the spread of Islam in the Indian subcontinent due to its strategic position on maritime routes. The arrival of Sufi saints, often warriors, traders, and Islamic preachers, significantly contributed to the propagation of Islam.

⁵ Ibn Battuta, رحلة ابن بطوطة المسماة تحفة النظار في غرائب الأمصار وعجائب الأسفار, (Rihlat Ibn Battuta al-Musammah Tuhfat al-Nuzzar fi Ghara'ib al-Amsar wa 'Aja'ib al-Asfar), edited and annotated by Talal Harb (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1987).

Despite their importance, limited documentation exists on many of these figures' lives, contributions, and written works, including the "Twelve Awliya," a group deeply tied to Chittagong's Islamic heritage.

Historian Enamul Haque delineates the spread of Islam in South Asia into four distinct phases: the Initial Phase (1000–1150), the Establishment Phase (1150–1400), the Syncretic Phase (1350–1550), and the Reform Phase (post-1550). His research underscores the presence of Arab settlements in Chittagong as early as the eighth century; however, it provides limited analysis of the specific role of Sufism or the various Tariqas in the region's Islamic development.⁶ Similarly, Abdul Mannan Talib traces Islam's introduction to Bangladesh through Chittagong in the 7th century in his book *'Bangladeshe Islam,'* which emphasises the role of traders and Sufi pioneers in shaping religious beliefs and a distinct national identity. However, his work lacks a focused exploration of Chittagong's Islamic history.⁷

Abdul Karim, in *Cattagrame Islam O Oitijjo*, identifies Chittagong as the "land of Twelve Awliya," highlighting the profound local veneration of these Sufi figures. Poet Muhammad Khan, a descendant of the Baro Awliya family, provides biographical references to key figures such as Kadol Khan Ghazi and Shah Badr Alam, linking their arrival to the broader narrative of Islamic propagation.⁸

Jamal Uddin's *History of Chittagong* suggests Arab involvement in the region by the mid-eighth century, with early Muslim gravesites in areas like Kumadan Hill.⁹ Shihabul Huda further documents the Awliyas and their shrines in Chittagong, underscoring the supportive role of the region's geography in the missionaries' efforts. His *"The Awliyas and Shrines of Chittagong"* highlights the Awliya's dual roles as assistants in military conquests and critical agents of Islamic propagation through the institutional establishment.¹⁰

While these studies provide valuable insights, they fall short of comprehensively examining the historical and cultural dynamics of Islam's development in Chittagong, particularly the contributions of the Twelve Awliya. This article seeks to address these gaps by exploring the specific historical and spiritual impact of the Awliya and their Tariqa affiliations on Chittagong's religious landscape.

3. Islam in Chittagong: An Analysis Considering Sufism

Chittagong has been known by approximately 48 names, including Ramyabhumi, Chatigão, Chatgaon, Rosang, Chittaganj, and Jatigram. There is some debate among experts regarding the origin of the name Chittagong. Some experts believe Twelve Awliya came to this region to propagate Islam in the thirteenth century. They placed a large lamp (cherag) in a high place. In the local language of Chittagong, 'chati' means lamp and 'gao' means village, which led to the name 'Chatigao.' Chittagong became part of the Mughal Empire in 1666 when the Mughals

⁶ Shahidul Hasan, "Islam and Pir Badr in Chittagong", *Daily Bonik Barta* (5 May 2024).

⁷ Abdul Mannan Talib, *Bangladeshe Islam* (Islam in Bangladesh) (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 2002), 4-7.

⁸ Abdul Karim, *Cattagrame Islam O Oitijjo* (Islam and Tradition in Chittagong) (Dhaka: Jatiya Sahitya Prakash, 2018), 47-49.

⁹ Jamal Uddin, *History of Chittagong* (Chittagong: Balaka Publications 2022), 11

¹⁰ Muhammad Shehabul Huda, *The Awliyas And Shrines of Chittagong* (Chittagong: University of Chittagong, 1985), 41-65.

ousted the Arakanese and named it Islamabad. In 1760, Nawab Mir Qasim Ali Khan ceded it to the British East India Company, who renamed it 'Chittagong.'¹¹

In 615 CE, Sa'ad ibn Abi Waqqas and two companions decided to travel by sea from the port of Axum in Ethiopia to China to propagate Islam. During their journey, they arrived at the port of Chittagong in present-day Bangladesh via the river route and stayed there for some time. During this period, they conveyed the message of Islam to the people of Chittagong. From Chittagong, Sa'ad ibn Abi Waqqas travelled through Kamrup and Manipur, finally reaching the city of Canton (modern-day Guangzhou) in China in 616 CE. He preached Islam among the Hui Chai (later known as the Hui people) in Canton and its neighbouring areas before returning to Arabia in 651 CE.¹²

In the research project "*Islami Tirtha Chattala*" (Islamic Pilgrimage Chattala), directed by Sohel Mohammad Fakhruddin, Masum Chowdhury provides significant information on the arrival of Muslims in Chittagong. According to this discussion, in 610 CE, four companions of Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) led by the renowned Sahabi Sa'ad ibn Abi Waqqas arrived at the port of Chittagong intending to propagate Islam. These companions included Hazrat Tamim Ansari, Hazrat Qays ibn Saifari, Hazrat Urwa ibn Asm, and Hazrat Abu Qays Harith. They anchored their ship at the port of Chittagong and stayed in the region for 4-5 years before proceeding to China.¹³

After 617 CE, during the time of Amir al-Mu'minin Hazrat Umar, a group of Tabi'een (followers of the companions of the Prophet) visited Chittagong. Although the exact timeline of their visit is not specified, the names of seven individuals from this group are known: Hazrat Muhammad Mamun, Hazrat Muhaimin, Hazrat Abu Talib, Hazrat Murtaza, Hazrat Abdullah, Hazrat Hamid Uddin, and Hazrat Hussain. This delegation devoted considerable time to propagating and spreading Islam in Chittagong. They conducted the first Eid prayer with the local converts at a place known as Deyang Hill. Subsequently, five more groups arrived in Chittagong at different times for similar purposes.¹⁴

During the Abbasid Caliphate, merchants established a trading post in Chittagong in the ninth century. According to Shihabuddin Talish, in 1340 CE, the independent Sultan of Sonargaon, Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah, with the help of his general, Kadalkhan Ghazi, and the support of Pir Badruddin and his followers, defeated the Magh pirates and conquered Chittagong, thus initiating Islamic rule in the region. During this period, twelve sufi awliyas came to Chittagong to spread Islam. They settled in the Sonai Chari region of Sitakunda Thana in Chittagong and began inviting people to Islam. This area became the land of the Twelve Awliya. The historical artefacts and place names in this region reflect significant influences from both Arabic and Persian languages.

Analysing the information provided by historians, it is evident that Islam arrived in the Indian subcontinent, particularly in Malabar, as early as the first century of Hijri, with

¹¹ Huda, *The Awliyas And Shrines of Chittagong*, 1-6.

¹² Huda, *The Awliyas And Shrines of Chittagong*, 1-6.

¹³ Md Fakhruddin Sohel, "The beginning of Islam and the arrival of Muslims in Chittagong", *Daily Sangram* (7 May 2024), 7.

¹⁴ Sohel, "The beginning of Islam and the arrival of Muslims in Chittagong", 7.

Chittagong serving as the gateway for Islam's arrival in Bengal.¹⁵ Due to the presence of an important seaport, Chittagong had close contact with Arab Muslim merchants as early as the eighth or ninth century, facilitating the introduction of Islam in Bengal.¹⁶ However, formal Muslim rule in Chittagong was established a few years after Bakhtiyar Khilji's conquest of Bengal in 1204.¹⁷

Chittagong, known as the land of the Twelve Awliya, was initially conquered for Islam through the efforts of these revered figures, among whom Kadol Khan (d. 1423) played a leading role. Kadol Khan was a skilled military commander and a prominent Sufi. He, along with his eleven companions, spread Islam in Chittagong. According to Abdul Karim, Kadol Khan was one of the Twelve Awliya who contributed to Chittagong's recognition as their sacred land.¹⁸ In 1340, when Sultan Fakhruddin (1338-1349) considered conquering the Chittagong region, he appointed Kadol Khan as his general. Kadol Khan defeated the Arakanese rulers and secured the area. During the conquest of Chattala (Chittagong), he was accompanied by Haji Khalil and Badr Alam.¹⁹ Some accounts suggest that Kadol Khan led his followers in battles against local administrators, with Sultan Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah sending troops to support him.²⁰ Regardless of the precise details, there is a consensus that Kadol Khan was instrumental in the initial conquest of Chittagong.²¹

In 1352-1353 CE, after the murder of Ikhtiyaruddin Ghazi Shah by Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah's son, Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah, the first independent Sultan of Bengal, conquered Bengal and brought Chittagong under his control. Subsequently, Chittagong was governed by the Habshi dynasty and later, from 1517 onwards, by the Portuguese. From 1581 to 1666, Chittagong was entirely under the rule of the Arakanese kings. The Arakanese rule in Chittagong was very significant. Between the 15th and 17th centuries, Chittagong was a centre for Arakanese administrative, literary, commercial, and maritime activities. For 3,500 years, Chittagong, a narrow strip along the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal, was under Bengali solid influence. Chittagong adopted many aspects of the Arakanese culture during this time, and the Muslim population in Arakan increased. The Arakanese royal court patronised Bengali poets like Alaol, Daulat Qazi, and Qureshi Magan Thakur, which led to significant developments in Bengali literature.²²

In the 16th century, Chittagong Port became a Portuguese trading post, with João de Barros describing it as "the most famous and wealthy city in the Kingdom of Bengal."²³ 1666 Mughal

¹⁵ Ahmad Sabbir, Abdulla Al Mahmud-Arif Bilgin, "India: Conflict with Minorities in the Conventional Political System. The Status of Muslims." *Conflict Studies Quarterly* 43 (2023).

¹⁶ Mohammad Ali Chowdhury, "The Arrival of Islam in Chittagong Before Muslim Conquestm," *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* 47/1 (1999), 49.

¹⁷ Muhammed Kâzım Kehdûyî, *İrfân u Tasavvuf Nüfûz-i Ân Der Hind ve Bangladeş, hş. (Farsça)* (Kum: Mecma'-i Zehâir-i İslâmî, 1393 hş. [2014]. (Farsça), 201-202.

¹⁸ Karim, *Cattagrame Islam O Oitijjo* (Islam and Tradition in Chittagong), 81.

¹⁹ Rahman, "Introduction of Baro Awlia of Chittagong", 3.

²⁰ Ibrahim, "Chattal-Bijita Mahavir Kadal Khan Ghazi, Bar Auliya and Kadalpur", 7.

²¹ Qazi Muhammad Ibrahim, "Chattal-Bijita Mahavir Kadal Khan Ghazi, Bar Auliya and Kadalpur", *Prothomboshonta* (12 May 2024).

²² Mevlânâ Muhammed Ubeydul-Hak, *Tezkire-i Evliyâ-i Bengâle*, Navakhâlî: 1931 (Urduca).

²³ Encyclopaedia Britannica (EB), "Chittagong: History, Population, & Facts" (Access 7 May 2024).

Emperor Aurangzeb ordered the Subahdar of Bengal, Shaista Khan, to capture Chittagong. On 27 January 1666, Mughal general Buzurg Umed Khan conquered the Chittagong region, expelling the Portuguese and Arakanese. The area was renamed Islamabad (City of Islam) after this victory. On 22 December 1863, the Mughals declared Chittagong a municipality.

After the defeat of Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah of Bengal in the Battle of Plassey, the British East India Company took control of Chittagong in 1793.²⁴ 1887, the Chittagong port was reorganised, establishing a busy shipping link with British Burma. 1928, Chittagong was declared a “major port” of British India. During World War II, Chittagong served as a base for Allied forces engaged in the Burma campaign. The port city began to expand and industrialise in the 1940s, particularly following the partition of British India. It was historically the terminus of the Assam-Bengal Railway and the Pakistan Eastern Railway.

In 1971, during the Bangladesh Liberation War, Chittagong was where the declaration of Bangladesh's independence was announced. The port city has benefited from the growth of Bangladesh's heavy industry, logistics, and manufacturing. In the 1990s, trade unionism was strong in Chittagong.

Chittagong houses the headquarters of many of the country's oldest and most prominent companies. The Chittagong port is one of the busiest ports in South Asia. Shah Amanat International Airport serves the city for both domestic and international flights. Despite being predominantly Bengali Muslim, Chittagong exhibits a high degree of religious and ethnic diversity compared to other cities in Bangladesh. Minorities in Chittagong include Bengali Hindus, Bengali Christians, Buddhists, Chakmas, Marmas, Tripuris, Garos, and others.

4. The Port City of Chittagong: Known as the Sacred Land of the Twelve Awliya

Chittagong is also known as the “Land of the Twelve Awliya”, a term widely recognised and used throughout Bangladesh, particularly in the Chittagong region. Two notable sites in the Greater Chittagong are associated with the Twelve Awliya. One is the Pir Twelve Awliya shrine in Sonaichhari village in Sitakunda Upazila. Although the town is named Sonaichhari, this area in Sitakunda Upazila is more commonly known for the shrine of the Twelve Awliya. Another site is near Padua Bazar, south of Lohagara Upazila in South Chittagong, on the Arakan Road heading towards Cox's Bazar. Here, some relics are associated with the Twelve Awliya, although none of the actual shrines of the Awliyas are present. These sites were primarily the khanqahs, hermitages, or dwellings of the Twelve Awliya.²⁵

The term “Twelve Awliya” is widely recognised and used throughout Bangladesh, particularly in the Chittagong region. Another name for Chittagong is “the land of the Twelve Awliya” or the “sacred land of the Twelve Awliya.” Several Sufi Awliyas, pirs, auliyas, faqirs, and darveshes came to Chittagong from distant regions such as Arabia and other countries to propagate and spread Islam. Some stayed for a while before returning to their homelands, while

²⁴ Md. Akhtaruzzaman, “*Medieval Mints*” (Dhaka: Banglapedia Trust, Bangladesh Asiatic Society, 2012).

²⁵ Muhammad Enamul Haq, *A History of Sufism in Bengal* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh 1975), 121.

others remained in the port city until their last days. The city hosts the shrines of many renowned Sufi Awliyas and auliyas who came to spread Islam.

Golam Saklayen's book "*Bangladesher Sufi-Sadhok*" (The Sufi Awliyas of Bangladesh), pages 129-130, lists ten out of the Twelve Awliya of Chittagong. They are as follows: Hazrat Sultan Bayezid Bostami, Sheikh Farid, Badr Shah or Badr Awliya or Pir Badr, Kattal Pir (Pir Kattal), Hazrat Shah Mohsen Awliya, Hazrat Shah Pir, Hazrat Shah Umar, Hazrat Shah Badal, Hazrat Shah Chand Awliya, Hazrat Shah Zayed, Hazrat Shah Amanat and Hazrat Shah Mastan.²⁶

There are two notable sites in Greater Chittagong where the shrines of the Twelve Awliya can be found. One is the Pir Baro Awliya shrine in Sonaichhari village in Sitakunda Upazila.²⁷ Every year, on the 22nd of Muharram, the Urs of the Twelve Awliya is celebrated with great enthusiasm. During the Urs, cows, buffaloes, and goats are sacrificed, and events such as Islamic gatherings, Quran recitations, and Milad Mahfils are held. Devotees who gather there receive Tabarruk (blessed food).²⁸ Additionally, about 9-10 kilometres from the city on the Chittagong-Hathazari Road in Baluchhara, there is a mosque built in 1933 named after the Twelve Awliya. This emphasises the historical and spiritual significance of Chittagong as the land of the Twelve Awliya, showcasing its rich legacy in the propagation of Islam through the dedicated efforts of these Sufi Awliyas.²⁹

The Sufi Awliya played an instrumental role in the spread of Islam in Chittagong, particularly during the era known as the period of the Twelve Awliya (1353–1666). Their propagation efforts were characterised by simplicity, humility, and substantial moral conduct, which attracted many followers from diverse religious backgrounds. Historians such as Abdul Karim and Shahabuddin Talish and poets like Muhammad Khan document the significance of figures like Kadol Khan Ghazi and his eleven companions in their efforts to establish Islamic infrastructure in the region. These Awliyas' influence extended beyond religious conversion, contributing to the region's social and cultural development. Their legacy endures through the shrines that remain prominent in Chittagong today, symbolising the lasting impact of their work.³⁰

These Twelve Awliya played crucial roles in the propagation of Islam in Chittagong, contributing significantly to the region's religious and cultural development. Their influence is evident in the numerous shrines and historical sites dedicated to their memory, which continue to be revered by the local population, and Twelve Awliya's activities have been described extensively here. One of the renowned Sufi Awliyas in the world is Bayazid Bastami (d. 874). He was born in Bastam, Iran, in 804 CE. Due to his origin from Bastam, he is known as Bayazid Bastami. According to historians, his father's name was Tayfur Abu Yazid al-Bastami. Some also refer to him as Sultan al-Arefin.³¹ There is no concrete evidence regarding the exact year Bayazid Bastami arrived in Chittagong. However, medieval poet Syed Sultan refers to Bayazid Bastami's

²⁶ Shahedi, "Gateway of Islam Chittagong", 3.

²⁷ SM Fakhru'l Islam Nomani Morshed, "12 Auliya Punyabhoomi known as "port city of Chittagong", *priyochattogram.com* (9 May 2024).

²⁸ Karim, *Cattagramme Islam O Oitijjo* (Islam and Tradition in Chittagong), 88-89.

²⁹ Morshed, "12 Auliya Punyabhoomi known as "port city of Chittagong", 5.

³⁰ Muhammad Salim, "Sufi-Awliyas of Chittagong", *Daily Bangladesh Pratidin* (9 May 2024).

³¹ Banglapedia (BP), "Bayezid Bostami" (Access 17 May 2024).

arrival in Chittagong to propagate Islam in his poetry. According to popular legend, Bayazid Bastami engaged in humanitarian services upon arriving in Chittagong to spread Islam. It is said that he visited Chittagong once more towards the end of his life. Before departing, he cut off his little finger and let a few drops of blood fall to the ground at the request of his followers and devotees.³² His devotees later used the place where the blood fell to establish a shrine.³³ Popular belief holds that Bayazid Bastami himself instructed the construction of this shrine.³⁴

The mausoleum of Hazrat Bayazid Bastami is situated on a small hill in Nasirabad, near the Chittagong cantonment. This site was discovered in 1831, and the original burial site has since been replaced with a modern structure. At the base of the hill, the mausoleum features a Mughal-style rectangular mosque with three domes and a large pond. The architectural style suggests that the mosque was constructed during the reign of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb.³⁵ Bayazid Bastami Thana is a metropolitan police precinct in Chittagong District, Bangladesh, falling under the jurisdiction of the Chittagong City Corporation.³⁶ The precinct is named after the famous Persian Sufi scholar Bayazid Bastami.

Abdul Karim considers Sheikh Farid (d. 1230) a native of Chittagong. In the 17th-century poem "*Muktal Hossain*" by poet Muhammad Khan, it is mentioned that Sheikh Farid's maternal family was a Sufi family and a descendant of Sheikh Sharifuddin, one of the twelve Awliya. Many in Chittagong identify Sheikh Farid with the Persian Sufi practitioner Sheikh Fariduddin Attar.³⁷ However, some sources describe him as Sheikh Fariduddin Shahr Ganj, buried in Punjab's Pak Pattan, although detailed evidence supporting this is lacking.³⁸ Near the Sixteen City Railway Station in Chittagong, a spring known as Sheikh Farid's Chashma still exists. It is said that Sheikh Farid spent thirty-six years meditating under a tamarind tree at this location. In memory of him, a spring was created here. Local Muslims visit Sheikh Farid's Chashma to pay their respects.

Shah Mohsen Auliya (d. 1397), a renowned Sufi who came to spread Islam from Tush, Iraq, was born in 1300. His father was Hazrat Syed Ahmad Sufi, and his mother was Syeda Sanwara.³⁹ His ancestors were descendants of Hazrat Abdul Qadir Jilani.⁴⁰ In his childhood, he completed the recitation of the Holy Quran under the guidance of his father.⁴¹ His father initiated him into the Qadriya Tariqa, and he later pursued higher education at the Nizamiyya Madrasa in Baghdad.⁴² Shah Mohsen travelled from Baghdad to Chittagong by sea in the early 1300s. He was a follower of the Qadriya Tariqa.

³² Rahman, "Introduction of Baro Awlia of Chittagong", 4.

³³ Salim, "Sufi-Awliyas of Chittagong", 7.

³⁴ Muhammad Isa Shahedi, "Gateway of Islam Chittagong", *Alokito Bangladesh* (8 May 2024), 3.

³⁵ Abdul Karim, *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal* (Dhaka: Jatiya Sahitta Publication, 2007).

³⁶ Bangladesh National Information Broadcasting (BNIB), "Bayezid Bostami Shrine" (Access 18 May 2024).

³⁷ Rahman, "Introduction of Baro Awlia of Chittagong", 3.

³⁸ Karim, *Cattagramme Islam O Oitijjo* (Islam and Tradition in Chittagong), 107.

³⁹ Karim, *Cattagramme Islam O Oitijjo* (Islam and Tradition in Chittagong), 90.

⁴⁰ Mosrur Zunaid, "Shrine of Mohchen Aulia: 700 Years of Tradition Ors", *mosrurzunaid.com* (20 May 2024).

⁴¹ Mofizur Rahman, "Introduction of Baro Awlia of Chittagong", *www.mmritbd.com* (20 May 2024), 3.

⁴² Ghulam Saklayen, *Sufi Awliyas of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 1996), 111-134.

Muhammad Enamul Haq considers him a contemporary of Pir Badr Shah. A stele at Mohsen Auliya's shrine, inscribed in Togra script, indicates that he passed away in 800 AH (1935).⁴³ Abdul Karim has documented an ancient manuscript from Chittagong University that lists several Sufis and Pirs, including Shah Mohsen. Furthermore, Abdul Karim notes his name in a 1666 AD document preserved at the Chittagong Collectorate. According to Abdul Karim, Mohsen was well-known among the general populace, and many schools, colleges, madrasas, mosques, and libraries have been established in his name.⁴⁴

Seventeenth-century Mughal historian Shihabuddin Talish's 'Fatiya-i-Ibriya' and poet Muhammad Khan's 'Muktul Hossain' provide evidence that in 1340 or thereabouts, Kadol Khan and his eleven companions, along with thousands of their disciples, defeated numerous tyrannical rulers and integrated Chittagong into the Sultanate of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah.⁴⁵ Kadol Khan played a crucial role in spreading Islam in Chittagong, where his shrine is located north of the city.⁴⁶ Locally, he is known as 'Katal' or 'Kattal Pir,' which influenced the Katalganj region. It is believed that Kadol Khan earned the title 'Katal' (meaning 'beheading') due to his numerous battles with enemies, and the regional pronunciation evolved to 'Katal'.⁴⁷

Pir Badr Auliya (d.1440), also known as Badr Shah, was a prominent Sufi scholar of the 14th century in Chittagong. Among the Twelve Awliya, he is one of the most renowned figures. He is regarded as Chittagong's leader and guardian of the twelve Auliya. Not only is he honoured in Chittagong, but he is also revered throughout Bangladesh. It is said that the city of Chittagong was named "Chattigan" because of the light of his torch that dispelled ghosts and spirits. The name "Chati" or "Cherag" is remembered in the present-day "Cheragi Hill" in Chittagong.⁴⁸ In his book "Chittagong's Awliyas and Mystics", Mahbulul Alam (d. 1981) writes about Badr Shah, stating, "Badr Shah, also known as Badruddin or Badr-e-Alam, was a contemporary of the famous Sufi Hazrat Shah Jalal of Sylhet. Hazrat Shah Jalal's companions, Hazrat Nasiruddin Sipahsalar and Badr Shah, fought against the tyrant Raja Achak Narayan of Tarf."⁴⁹ Badr Shah was indeed one of the renowned twelve Auliya who participated in the conquest of Tarf. He travelled to Chittagong with Hazrat Khaleel and passed away in 1340 AD, buried in a small shrine in Bihar."⁵⁰

Among the twelve Auliya, Badr Auliya is considered the foremost Sufi scholar. He is also regarded as one of the five prominent Awliyas of Bangladesh.⁵¹ Badr Auliya played a significant role in the propagation of Islam in Chittagong, which led to the region being popularly known as "The Land of Twelve Auliya".⁵² According to tradition, Badr Auliya's name is closely associated

⁴³ M. Imran Hossain, "Hazrat Shah Mohchen Auliya came to Chittagong from Arabia by sea", *protidinersangbad.com* (20 May 2024).

⁴⁴ Bangladesh National Information Broadcasting (BNIB), "Rawza Sharif of Shah Mohchen Auliya" (Access 21 May 2024).

⁴⁵ *Daily Al Ihsan*, "Chittagong Conqueror Hazrat Kadal Khan Ghazi Rahmatullahi Alaihi and some historical facts", (13 May 2024).

⁴⁶ Banglapedia (BP), "Kadal Khan Ghazi" (Access 14 May 2024).

⁴⁷ Banglapedia (BP), "Kadal Khan Ghazi" (Access 14 May 2024).

⁴⁸ Banglapedia (BP), "Badr Auliya" (Access 14 May 2024).

⁴⁹ Ismail, "In Search of Pir Badre Alam or Badr Pir", 2.

⁵⁰ Shahjahan Mohammad Ismail, "In Search of Pir Badre Alam or Badr Pir", *m.somewhereinblog.net* (15 May 2024).

⁵¹ Saklayen, *Sufi Awliyas of Bangladesh*, 134.

⁵² Banglapedia (BP), "Badr Auliya" (Access 14 May 2024).

with the settlement of Chittagong.⁵³ The people of Chittagong hold him in deep reverence as their guardian.⁵⁴ Both Hindus and Muslims, as well as Buddhists and Christians, pay their respects to this grave and khanqah. Abdul Karim states, "He was buried in Chittagong."⁵⁵ Every year on the 29th of Ramadan, a grand Urs (annual fair) is held at the mausoleum of Hazrat Pir Badr Shah, attracting devotees from various communities.⁵⁶ This event gathers people from all walks of life, domestic and international.⁵⁷ The mausoleum of Badr Auliya, renowned for its exceptional architecture, is considered by historians to be the oldest structure in Chittagong."⁵⁸

Arab merchants established numerous mosques along the coastal regions from Assam to Malaysia. Over time, these locations became known as "Badr Makkan" due to the influence of Badr Shah Pir (14th century). Badr Makkans were harbour sites used by Arab ships. Merchants, travellers, missionaries, and seekers would stop at these locations, making them places of refuge. Many of these sites still have remnants, such as mosques, seats, and wells, which are respected and honoured by people of all communities and religions. The names of hills, rivers, wells, and other places such as Badr Hill, Badr Khal, Badr Well, and Badr Makkan are still found from Chittagong to Arakan. Several locations have been named in honour of Badr Shah Pir. These include Badr Makam in Cox's Bazar, Badr Patti in Boxirhat, Chittagong, Badrpur in Mothlab, Patuakhali, Mymensingh, and Badrkhal in Chittagong. Additionally, Cheragi Hill in Chittagong is named after him. Furthermore, a type of marine fish found in Chittagong is known as "Badr's Knife," dried fish of this variety is a favourite delicacy among the locals.

The shrine and mausoleum of Shah Omar (14th century) are in the village of Kakara in the Chakaria Upazila of Greater Chittagong. Although his detailed academic information is relatively sparse, the local community regards him as one of the twelve Awliya of Chittagong.⁵⁹ Various social organisations in Chittagong, such as the Hazrat Shah Omar Smriti Students' Association in Kakara Union of Chakaria Upazila, have been named in his honour.⁶⁰

Among the twelve Awliya of Chittagong, Garib Ullah (d. 1770) is one of the notable figures. Originally named Ruhullah, he arrived in Chittagong in the latter half of the 17th century after the Mughal Empire had incorporated the region. He passed away in Chittagong, and his shrine is in Damapara.⁶¹ Initially, Ruhullah was a companion of Dara Shikoh, the eldest son of Emperor Shah Jahan. He later served under Aurangzeb but subsequently travelled to Patna, where he became a disciple of Sufi Rukunuddin. It was during this period that he adopted the name Garib Ullah. The Muslim community in Chittagong reveres Garib Ullah for his philanthropic efforts, particularly his practice of providing financial assistance to those suffering from illness. His shrine continues to be a place of regular ziyarat (visitation) for many Muslims.

⁵³ Saklayen, *Sufi Awliyas of Bangladesh*, 133.

⁵⁴ Talib, *Bangladeshe Islam* (Islam in Bangladesh), 113.

⁵⁵ Uddin, *History of Chittagong*, 49.

⁵⁶ Talib, *Bangladeshe Islam* (Islam in Bangladesh), 113-118.

⁵⁷ Ismail, "In Search of Pir Badre Alam or Badr Pir", 2.

⁵⁸ Karim, *Cattagramme Islam O Oitijjo* (Islam and Tradition in Chittagong), 103.

⁵⁹ Rahman, "Introduction of Baro Awlia of Chittagong", 3.

⁶⁰ MR Mahmud, "Is Hazrat Shah Omar's shrine, Siddhibaba, doing this?", *chakarianews.com* (10 May 2024).

⁶¹ Rahman, "Introduction of Baro Awlia of Chittagong", 3.

Shah Chand Awliya (15th century) is considered one of the twelve Awliya of Chittagong and played a significant role in the propagation of Islam in the region. His tomb and shrine are located on the northern bank of the Shrimati Canal, near Patiya Upazila.⁶² In Chittagong, various educational institutions have been established in his name. In 1928, the Government of Bangladesh founded the Shah Chand Awliya Kamil Madrasa in Chittagong in his honour. This madrasa includes departments for Hifz, primary, secondary, higher secondary, undergraduate (Fazil), and postgraduate (Kamil) studies. Additionally, the madrasa has a Langarkhana (community kitchen) and an orphanage.⁶³

Abdul Karim Sahityabisharad established Shah Sondor Fakir (d. 1632) as a prominent Sufi of Chittagong. Various accounts suggest that he was born in Chittagong. His tomb and shrine are in the Kotwali Upazila of Chittagong. Although detailed information about him is scarce, some of his Sufi poetry is available.⁶⁴

Molla Miskin Shah (17th century) is considered one of the twelve Awliya in Chittagong, although detailed information about him is not readily available in Bangladeshi academic sources. In 1985, Professor Richard Maxwell of the University of Arizona, U.S.A., collected various documents and information about Chittagong. Among these documents is a Mughal edict issued by Emperor Aurangzeb that provides information about Molla Miskin.⁶⁵ He lived in Kadulpur village in the Raozan Upazila of Chittagong, where he propagated Islam among the locals. His descendants are still present in Raozan. Molla Miskin was a lifelong celibate. His shrine and mausoleum are located on the hill west of Kazem Ali High School in Chittagong.

Some essential sufi are considered one of the Twelve Awliya, such as Shah Amanat (d. 1806). He was born in 1680 to an Iraqi Arab-Muslim family. He was a descendant of Abdul Qadir Jilani. His ancestors had migrated from Baghdad to Bihar, India. His father was Hazrat Niyamat Shah, and his close relative was the renowned Sufi scholar Hazrat Monameya Pakbach from Bihar. Shah Amanat's ancestors were Sufis, pirs, and Dervishe's lineage. From a young age, he was dedicated to spreading Islam and engaging in rigorous spiritual practices. Shah Amanat Ullah Khan was a prominent dervish in Chittagong. He arrived in Chittagong from Bihar Sharif in 1793. In Chittagong, he lived in a small cottage and took a position at the district court. The family residing and overseeing the shrine of Shah Amanat claims to be his descendants. They possess a waqf document from Shah Amanat's son, Anwar Khan.⁶⁶

Shah Amanat led an exceedingly modest life. His daily routine involved his court duties and devotional practices.⁶⁷ His spiritual prowess was not widely known until his achievements in spiritual attainment became apparent.⁶⁸ He then left his job and dedicated himself entirely to worship, becoming one of the esteemed dervishes of Chittagong. Shah Amanat is buried in

⁶² Bangladesh National Information Broadcasting (BNIB), "Shahchand Auliya Kamil (M.A) Madrasah" (Access 11 May 2024).

⁶³ *Daily Purbakōna*, "Shahchand Auliya Kamil Madrasa tops Dakhil in Patia Upazila" (11 May 2024).

⁶⁴ Rahman, "Introduction of Baro Awlia of Chittagong", www.mmritbd.com (10 May 2024)

⁶⁵ Rahman, "Introduction of Baro Awlia of Chittagong", 4.

⁶⁶ Huda, *The Awliyas And Shrines of Chittagong*, 107–131.

⁶⁷ Saeyd Rashed Hasan Chowdury et al, "A Critical Analysis of Shah Waliullah Dehlawi's Sufi Influences in the Indian Subcontinent", *Sufiyye* 15 (December 2023), 23-62.

⁶⁸ Abdul Haq Choudhury, *Bondor Shohor Chottogram: Ekti Oitihashik Porjalochona* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1994).

Chittagong in a mausoleum located east of Laldighi.⁶⁹ One day, Shah Amanat's master, Abdur Rahim, advised him to propagate Islam in Chittagong, a prominent South Asian seaport. Following this counsel, Shah Amanat moved to Chittagong.⁷⁰ Upon arriving, he constructed a small cottage in a forest area and began living there.⁷¹ To conceal his identity, he worked as a fan-puller at the court building in Chittagong. (The court building from that era later became known as Mohseniya Madrasa and subsequently Mohsin College).⁷² "Shah Amanat International Airport" in Chittagong has been named his name. It is the second-largest airport in Bangladesh, serving approximately 21% of the country's passengers.

Numerous other Sufi Awliyas from various Arab and Anatolian countries arrived in Chittagong to propagate Islam. Among them was Sheikh Fariduddin Ganjshakar, who spread Islam in Bangladesh's Greater Chittagong and Faridpur regions. In Chittagong, he is known as Sheikh Fariduddin Chashma. His mausoleum is in the Pakpattan district of Punjab province, Pakistan.⁷³ Additionally, Chittagong was graced by the presence of several other Awliyas in thirteenth to eighteenth centuries, including Hazrat Badna Shah, Hazrat Anar Ullah Shahji, Hazrat Yasin Awliya, Hazrat Shahjahan Shah, Hazrat Azizul Haq Al Qaderi, Hazrat Amir Shah, Amiruzzaman Maizbhandari, Hazrat Tak Shah, Hazrat Akbar Shah, Hazrat Nazir Shah, Hazrat Jangi Shah, Hazrat Shah Abdul Baset, Hazrat Khalilur Rahman Shah, and Hazrat Abdul Aziz of Pathantuli, among many others.⁷⁴

5. Contemporary Sufi Practices and Influence in the Chittagong Region

A review from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century reveals that numerous Sufi figures arrived in the Chittagong region, playing significant roles in its social, political, and religious spheres. Syed Ahmad Ullah Maizbhandari (d. 1906) founded the renowned Maizbhandar Darbar Sharif and the Maizbhandari tariqa in Chittagong. His ancestor, Syed Hamid Uddin, propagated Islam in Chittagong after travelling from Medina through Baghdad and Delhi to the medieval Bengal region's former capital, Gour and Patiya. After completing his primary education under his father and in a local rural madrasa, Syed Ahmad Ullah Maizbhandari pursued higher education at the Alia Madrasa in Kolkata. Upon finishing his education, he joined the judicial service as a Qazi in the Jessore region of undivided British India. Subsequently, he resigned and became the Chief Mudarris at Munshi Bu Ali Madrasa in Kolkata. He received the bay'ah from Syed Abu Shahma Muhammad Saleh al-Qadiri Lahori. Adhering to the Qadiri Tariqa, he established a distinct Tariqa known as the Maizbhandari Tariqat.⁷⁵

Hazrat Gausul Azam Shah Sufi Mawlana Syed Ghulamur Rahman Maizbhandari (d. 1937) was a renowned Bengali Sufi mystic and a prominent proponent of Sufism in Bengal. He became the

⁶⁹ Muhammad Obaid al-Haq, *Bangladesher Pir Awliyagon* (Bangladesh's Pirs and Awliya) (Dhaka: Madina Publication, 2007), 94.

⁷⁰ Abul Kasem Bhuiyan, "The great Sufi Hazrat Shah Amanat", *Daily Ittefaq* (19 May 2024).

⁷¹ Muhammad Ghulam Mustafa Mullah, *Hazrat Khwaja Sharaf Uddin Chishti ebong Mayar Proshashon o Proshongika Kichhu Kotha* (Dhaka: Mubeshah Prakashani, 1990), 27.

⁷² Salim, "Sufi-Awliyas of Chittagong", 7.

⁷³ Sayed Mahmudul Hasan, *Muslim Monuments of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 1987), 43.

⁷⁴ Salim, "Sufi-Awliyas of Chittagong", 7.

⁷⁵ Saeed Rashed Hasan Chowdury, *Bangladeṣṣe Islām ve Tasavvuf* (Ankara: Ankara Kalem Neşriyat, 2023), 163-168.

spiritual successor to his uncle, Syed Ahmad Ullah, and assumed the role of the second head of the Maizbhandari order.⁷⁶ Following him, Syed Ziaul Haque Maizbhandari (d. 1988) emerged as a distinguished Sufi mystic within the Maizbhandari tradition. Currently, his son organises international Sufi conferences, serves as the president of the Maizbhandari Academy, and holds the position of managing trustee for the Shahanshah Syed Ziaul Haque Maizbhandari Trust. This trust oversees several schools, orphanages, and social institutions.⁷⁷

Azizul Haque (d. 1961) was a distinguished Islamic scholar, Hanafi Sunni theologian, educator, Sufi mystic, and social reformer from the Chittagong region of Bangladesh. He was the founder and first principal of Al Jamia Al Islamia Patiya and is revered as *Kutub al-Alam* or *Kutub-e-Zaman*. 1924, after completing his *Dawra-e-Hadith*, Azizul Haque pursued higher education at Darul Uloom Deoband and Mazahir Uloom, Saharanpur, in India. He spent nearly nine months practising spirituality under the guidance of Ashraf Ali Thanvi before returning to his homeland. Upon his return, he established a madrasa in his birthplace, Chittagong, to spread the light of knowledge, which has since grown into the second-largest Islamic educational institution in the country.

Hafez Ahmad (d. 1983) was a spiritual figure from Chittagong. His ancestor, Shah Alam Khandakar, migrated from the Arab region and settled in the village of Kalipur in the Banskhali Upazila. In 1972, he initiated the *Mawlid-un-Nabi* (S.A.W.) gathering on the 11th of Rabi' al-Awwal. This event, which spans 19 consecutive days each year, has become a significant contribution to the propagation of Islam in Bangladesh. The 19-day *Mawlid-un-Nabi* (S.A.W.) gathering in Chhunati is a testament to his unparalleled dedication to Islamic tradition and spiritual leadership.⁷⁸

Harun Babunagari (d. 1986) was a renowned Sufi and Islamic scholar from Fatikchhari, Chittagong. He was a prominent proponent of the Deoband movement in Bangladesh and the founder and first Director-General of Al-Jamiah al-Islamiah Azizul Ulum Babunagar. A disciple of Jamir Uddin Ahmad, he was also one of the spiritual successors (*khalifahs*) of Mufti Azizul Haque. In 1924, at just 22, he founded Al-Jamiah al-Islamiah Azizul Ulum Babunagar and served as its principal until his death. Throughout his tenure, he significantly contributed to the institution's growth and the promotion of Islamic education and Sufi practices in the region.⁷⁹

Shah Sultan Ahmad Nanupuri (d. 1997) was a prominent Bangladeshi Deobandi Islamic scholar and spiritual leader. He was the founder and principal (*muhtamim*) of Jamia Islamia Obaidia Nanupur. During his studies at Deoband, he spent seven years under the mentorship of Hussain Ahmad Madani, from whom he took *bay'at* as Naqshbandiyya and Mujaddidiyya on 18 November 1944. Upon returning to Bangladesh, he also received *bay'at* and *Khilafah* from Azizul Haque, the founder of Al-Jamiah al-Islamiah Patiya. He established hundreds of madrasas, including Jamia Islamia Baitul Huda. He focused on practising Sufism based on the Qur'an and

⁷⁶ Hans Harder, *Sufism And Saint Veneration In Contemporary Bangladesh: The Majibhandaris of Chittagong* (London: Routledge, 2011), 11-37.

⁷⁷ Daily Banglapost, "Discussion meeting on Shahanshah Hazrat Syed Ziaul Haque Maizbhandari held at Hathazari Dakshin Madarsha Madunaghat area" (21 May 2024).

⁷⁸ Daily Sangu, "Shah Saheb Kebla Chunti's 38th Ichale Chawab Mahfil Held" (21 May 2024).

⁷⁹ Hafez Ahmadullah - Ridwanul Qadir, *Mashayekh-e Chattagram* (Dhaka: Ahmad Publication, 2018), 121-143.

Sunnah, rejecting traditional Sufism and standing firmly against *shirk* and *bid'ah*. His followers revered him with titles such as 'Shaykh al-Arab wal Ajam'.⁸⁰

Abdul Jabbar (d. 1998), a prominent Islamic scholar and pir from Chittagong, was a leading advocate of mosque-based social services and a staunch opponent of *shirk* and *bid'ah*. He was crucial in establishing Islamic Bank Bangladesh Limited in 1983, serving as a founding director, Vice President, and lifelong Chairman of its Shariah Council. His contributions also extended to founding the International Islamic University Chittagong. As the pir of Baitush Sharaf, Abdul Jabbar established 16 madrasas, 12 orphanages, 60 mosques, a hospital in Cox's Bazar, a high school, and five primary schools. A prolific author, he penned 21 books, leaving a lasting legacy in education, welfare, and Islamic scholarship.⁸¹

Jamir Uddin Nanupuri (d. 2011), a prominent Hanafi Sunni scholar and Sufi practitioner from Chittagong, significantly contributed to the spread of Islam in Bangladesh. As the second Principal of Jamia Islamia Obaidia Nanupur, he was renowned for his eloquent preaching and dedication to Islamic propagation. Initiated into the Chishti and Naqshbandi Tariqas by Mufti Azizul Haque of Patiya, he later received the Khilafah. Jamir Uddin's legacy endures through nearly 500 'Jamiriya Madrasas' and the 'Al Manahil Welfare Foundation,' which actively supports the underprivileged. His efforts continue to illuminate Islamic teachings and welfare in Bangladesh.⁸²

Shah Ahmed Shafi (d. 2020) was an Islamic figure and the founder and serving Amir of Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh. He also served as the Chairman of Befaql Madarisil Arabia Bangladesh. Shafi was the Director General of Darul Uloom Moinul Islam in Hathazari. He received spiritual initiation as a Qadiriyya and Chishti Tariqa from the great leader of the Indian independence movement, Allama Sayyid Hussain Ahmad Madani. He had hundreds of thousands of disciples and two thousand khalifas in India and Bangladesh.⁸³

Nurul Islam Jihadi (d. 2021) was a Bangladeshi Deobandi Islamic scholar, writer, educator, and Sufi. He served as the Secretary General of Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh and the International Majlis-e-Tahafuz-e-Khatme-Nubuwwat Bangladesh. He was also the Director General and Sheikh-ul-Hadis of Al-Jamiatul Islamia Makhzanul Uloom Madrasa. In addition, he was a member of the Shura Council of Darul Uloom Hathazari and Befaql Madarisil Arabia Bangladesh. He was a founding member and patron of Jamia Khatam-un-Nabiyyin in the United Kingdom, along with numerous mosques and madrasas.⁸⁴

Junayed Babungari (d. 2021) was a Bangladeshi Deobandi Islamic scholar, educator, writer, researcher, Islamic speaker, and spiritual personality. He was the former Amir of Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh and served as Sheikh-ul-Hadis at Darul Uloom Hathazari Madrasa. He was also the Vice President of Befaql Madarisil Arabia Bangladesh, Chittagong Noorani Taleem-ul-Quran

⁸⁰ SM Aminul Islam - Samar Islam, *Biographies of Hundred Scholars of Bengal: Maulana Sultan Ahmad Nanupuri* (Dhaka: Bookstore, 2014), 336-338.

⁸¹ Muhammad Jafar Ullah, "In memory of Shah Sufi Maulana Muhammad Abdul Jabbar", *Daily Dainik Azadi* (22 May 2024).

⁸² Mizanur Rahman Raihan, "Maulana Shah Sufi Zamir Uddin Nanupuri", *Daily Ittefaq* (25 May 2024).

⁸³ *Daily Jugantor*, "Allama Shah Ahmad Shafi at a Glance" (23 May 2024).

⁸⁴ Daily Star, "Hefajat Secretary General Nurul Islam Jihadi dies" (24 May 2024).

Board Chairman, and Chief Editor of the monthly *Muinul Islam*. Additionally, he patronised the monthly *Dawatul Haq* and served as Chief Advisor to Insaaf24.com and QawmiVision.com. He was a disciple of the renowned Pakistani Islamic personality Yusuf Binori and received the bay'ah in Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya Tariqa from Abdul Aziz Raipur, the successor to Abdul Qadir Raipur. He led the Hefazat movement in 2013 and was Amir of Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh.⁸⁵

Therefore, Sufi, Awliyas and spiritual leaders came from distant regions such as Arabia, Anatolia, Iraq, and Iran, and from Bangladeshi brought them to spread Islam in Bengal, particularly Chittagong.⁸⁶ Their entire lives were devoted to the propagation of Islam. They travelled from village to village during the day to preach and returned to their khanqahs at night to worship.⁸⁷ Due to their devotion and sacrifices, the people of the towns in Chittagong sought refuge under the umbrella of Islam. Some of these Awliyas spent extended periods in seclusion, engaged in spiritual practices and worship. Consequently, these places have long been renowned as the shrines, hermitages, or dwellings of the Twelve Awliya.⁸⁸

Conclusion

Chittagong's pivotal role in the spread of Islam in South Asia is underscored by the efforts of Sufis, dervishes, and Muslim conquerors who introduced Islamic teachings of humanity, equality, and spirituality. These figures profoundly transformed the region's religious and cultural landscape, fostering unity among the indigenous Bengali population and reshaping their identity through shared Islamic practices.

The "Twelve Awliya" concept highlights the enduring impact of Sufism in Chittagong, reflecting its deep-rooted spiritual traditions and solidifying its position as a critical Muslim region. Despite limitations in accessing comprehensive historical records, this study elucidates the pivotal role played by these Awliya in the propagation of Islam and in establishing Chittagong as a prominent centre of Islamic scholarship and commercial activity.

This research contributes to understanding Chittagong's historical significance and offers a foundation for further exploration of the Twelve Awliya's contributions. Future studies could provide deeper insights by examining their influence in the broader South Asian context and exploring comparative Sufi traditions in the region. Such research would enhance our comprehension of Sufism's legacy in shaping Bangladesh's religious and cultural identity.

⁸⁵ Mahbubur Rahman Nizami, "Brief Biography of Maulana Junaid Babunagari", *Qoumi Pedia* (25 May 2024).

⁸⁶ Saeyd Rashed Hasan Chowdury, "Unveiling Sufi Legacies in Dhaka of Bangladesh: A Chronological Discourse on Islamic Heritage." *Ulumuna* 28/2 (2024), 585-619.

⁸⁷ Dr Saeyd Rashed Hasan Chowdury, "Harmony Amidst Diversity: Exploring Religious Pluralism in Bengal Through the Lens of Sufi Heritage and Its Envoys," *Hamdard Islamicus* 47/4 (2024), 33-57.

⁸⁸ Saeyd Rashed Hasan Chowdury, "The Influence of Sufi-Centric Movements on the Flourishing of Islamic Plurality in the Indian Subcontinent," *Afkar: Jurnal Akidah dan Pemikiran Islam* 26/2 (2024), 375-412.

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