

Ibn Battutah's Account of his Meeting with Shah Jalal of Sylhet

Shah Jalal is the patron saint of Sylhet. According to some accounts, he was born in 1271 and died around 1347. He hailed from Turkistan and eventually conquered and settled in Sylhet in present-day Bangladesh. He was instrumental in the spread of Islam in that area and is today considered to be one of the great pioneers of Islam in Bangladesh. Ibn Battutah, the world-famous medieval Muslim globe-trotter, met Shah Jalal in Sylhet and his account of their meeting is as follows:

“Then I set sail, and we were on the high seas for forty-three days, at the end of which period we arrived in Bengal. Bengal is a vast country and abounds in rice. In the whole world I did not see a country where commodities were cheaper than in Bengal. All the same, Bengal is foggy and the Khurasanis call it...full of gifts. I saw rice being sold in the streets of Bengal at the rate of twenty-five ratls of Delhi weight for a silver dinar which was equal to eight dirhams, a dirham of India being equal in value to a silver dirham. As for the ratl of Delhi, it weighted much as twenty ratls of Morocco (Maghrib). I heard the people of Bengal observe that that was a high price in their country. Muhammad-ul-Masmudi, the Moroccan (al-Maghribi), who was a pious man and an old inhabitant of this place and who died at Delhi while staying with me, told me that he had a wife and a servant and that a year's living for all three of them he used to buy for eight dirhams, and that he would buy rice in the shell at the rate of eighty ratls of Delhi for eight dirhams. On being pounded net fifty ratls of rice could be had, and fifty ratls meant ten qintars. I saw a milk cow being sold there for three silver dinars, and it is the buffalo which serves as cow in these parts. I saw fat hens being sold there at the rate of eight for a dirham and young pigeons at the rate of fifteen for a dirham. I saw a fat lamb being sold for a couple of dirhams; and a ratl of sugar could be had for four dirhams – the ratl being one of the Delhi standard. Besides, a ratl of rose-water could be had for eight dirhams....

The first city of Bengal that we entered was Chittagong (Sudkawan). It is a vast city on the coast of the great sea, in the vicinity of which the river Ganges where the Hindus make pilgrimage and the river jun join together and whence they flow into the

sea. On the river Ganges there were numerous ships, by means of which they wage war against the people of Lakhnauti (Laknawti).

He is Sultan Fakhr-ud-din, surnamed Fakhra, an accomplished ruler who loves strangers, particularly the fakirs and Sufis. The dominion of Bengal belonged to originally to Sultan Nasi-ud-din, son of Sultan Ghiyas-ud-din Balban; it was the latter's son Mu'izz-ud-din, who became the sovereign of Delhi. Thereupon Nasir-ud-din, set out to fight his son; they encountered each other on the river Ganges and their interview was depicted as the Liqa-us-s'adain – the meeting of two happy stars. We have already described it, and we have related how Nasir-ud-din abdicated the throne of Delhi in favour of his son and returned to Bengal where he remained until his death. Then his son Shams-ud-din ascended the throne. He also died and was succeeded by his son Shihab-ud-din, and the latter was in course of time overpowered by his brother Ghiyas-ud-din Tughluq, who helped him and took Bahadur Bur prisoner. Bahadur Bur was released by Sultan Ghiyas-ud-din's son Muhammad, when the latter ascended the throne in his turn, on his agreeing to share his dominion with him. But he broke his word and Sultan Muhammad fought with him and killed him and appointed his brother-in-law to the government of this province, but the latter was killed by the army. Now Ali Shah, who was a Lakhnauti, seized the government of Bengal. When Fakhr-ud-din saw that the sceptre had passed out of Sultan Nasir-ud-din's house – he himself being an ally of theirs – he raised a rebellion at Sudkawan and in the rest of Bengal. He consolidated his rule there; but a war broke out between him and Ali Shah. During the winter and in the midst of mud caused by the rains Fakhr-ud-din raided Lakhnauti by water on which he was strong. But when the dry season came, Ali Shah invaded Bengal by land, since he was strong on land.

Sultan Fakhr-ud-din's regard for the fakirs became so profound that he appointed one of them named Shaida as his deputy (naib) at Sudkawan. Sultan Fakhr-ud-din then marched to give battle to one of his enemies; but Shaida revolted against him intending to make him... and he killed the son of Sultan Fakhr-ud-din other than... Sultan had no son. On hearing of this the Sultan retraced his steps to his capital. Shaida and his adherents fled and sped into the city of Sunurkawan which is very strong. The Sultan sent an army to besiege it. Its inhabitants fearing for their lives seized Shaida and sent him to the Sultan's troops. This was reported to the Sultan and he ordered that the rebel's head should be sent. So his head was cut off and sent, and on account of him a large number of fakirs were killed. When I entered Sudkawan, I did not see its Sultan, nor had I sought an interview with him because he had revolted against the emperor of India and because I feared the consequences, if I did so. I departed from Sudkawan for the mountains of Kamaru, which lie thence at a distance of one month's journey. The Kamaru mountains are a vast expanse ranging from China to Tibet (Tabbat), and the musk-producing gazelles are found there. The inhabitants of these mountains resemble the Turks and possess great capacity for strenuous work. One slave from amongst them is worth several times as much as a slave from another stock. They are noted for their devotion to and practice of magic and witchcraft. My object in going to these mountains was to meet one of the saints living there, namely Shaikh Jalal-ud-din of Tabriz... [Shah Jalal of Sylhet]

This Shaikh was one of the great saints and one of the unique personages. He had to his credit miracles (karamat) as well as great deeds, and he was a man of hoary age. He told me – may God have mercy on him – that he had seen Caliph al-Musta'sim

Billah al-Abbasi at Baghdad, and that he was there at the the time of his murder. His companions told me subsequently that he died at the age of one hundred and fifty and that he observed fasts for about forty years...He owned a cow with whose milk he broke his fast. He stood performing prayers throughout the night, and he was thin, tall and scanty-bearded. The inhabitants of these mountains had embraced Islam at his hands, and for this reason he stayed amidst them.

Some of his disciples told me that he called them one day before his death, charged them to fear God and said, 'I shall leave you tomorrow, God willing, and I leave you to the care of Allah, other than whom there is no God. When he performed his Zuhr prayer the following day he expired in the course of its last prostration (sajida). By the side of his cave was then discovered a grave already dug out and equipped with the shroud and hanut. So the dead body of the Shaikh was given an abution and shrouded. Funeral prayer was then recited and he was buried; may God have mercy on him!

When I intended to visit the Shaikh four of his disciples met me at a distance of two days' journey from his residence and informed me that the Shaikh had said to the fakirs in his company, 'A traveller from the est has come to you; go to receive him.' They said that they had accordingly come to receive me under orders of the Shaikh, who knew nothing about me theretofore; yet this had been revealed to him. I went along with them to the Shaikh and arrived at his hospice which lay outside the cave. There was no habitation whatever in its vicinity. The inhabitants of that locality, Musalmans as well as Hindus, come to visit the Shaikh and bring him presents and gifts which the fakirs and visitors consume. As for the Shaikh he contents himself with a cow with whose milk he breaks fast...as we have already mentioned. When I visited him, he rose to receive me and embraced me. He enquired of me about my country and journeys of which I gave him an account. He said to me, 'You are a traveller of Arabia.' His disciples who were then present said, 'O Lord! He is also a traveller of the non-Arab countries.' 'Traveller of the non-Arab countries', rejoined the Shaikh. 'Treat him, then, with favour.' Thereupon they took me to the hospice and entertained me for three days.

The day I visited the Shaikh I saw on his body a mantle of goat's...which I liked and I said to myself, 'Would that the Shaikh had given it to me!' When I saw him with a view to taking leave of him, he rose to the corner of the cave; and removing his mantle he put it on me together with a cap of his own. As for himself he wore a garment with patches all over. The fakirs told me that the Shaikh did not ordinarily wear the said mantle, that he had put it on at the time of my arrival and that he had said to them, 'The Moroccan will desire this mantle, which a pagan sultan will snatch from him and give him and give it to our brother Burhan-ud-din of Sagharj (as-Sagharji) to whom it belongs and for whom it has been made.' When the fakirs told me this, I said, 'I have obtained the saint's benediction and wearing this mantle I shall not go to see any sultan, be he an infidel or a Muslim.' Then I withdrew from the Shaikh.

After a long time since, I happened to visit China (Sin) and went up to the city of Hang-chow-fu (Khansa). My companions were separated from me on account of the huge crowds and I had then on my body the said mantle. While I was in a certain street the vezir happened to pass with great retinue. His eyes fell on me and he called me and caught me by the hand and enquired about my arrival. And he did not leave

me until I had reached the sultan's palace in his company. Then I proposed to withdraw, but he would not let me go and he introduced me to the sultan, who enquired about the Muslim sultans. I replied his queries, and while I did so, he looked at my mantle which he appreciated. The vezir advised me to put it off and I could not do otherwise. The sultan took the mantle; but ordered that I should be given ten robes instead and a well-equipped horse as well as money in cash. My mind was upset on account of this. Then I recalled the Shaikh's words to the effect that the mantle would be seized by a pagan sultan and I was very much astonished at this.

The following year I entered the palace of the emperor of China at Peking (Khan Baliq). Then I went to the hospice of Shaikh Burhan-ud-din of Sagharj. I saw that he was reading a book wearing the mantle. I was astonished at this and turned the mantle sideways with my own hands. He said to me, 'Why do you turn it like this? You know what it is. 'Yes! It is the same mantle which the sultan of Hang-chow-fu (Khansa) had seized from me', I replied. 'This mantle', he said, 'was made for me by my brother Jalal-ud-din who wrote to me saying – the mantle will come to you at the hands of such and such a person.' Then he produced the letter which I read and I marvelled at the firm conviction of the Shaikh. At that time I related to him the beginnings of the story and he said to me, 'My brother Jalal-ud-din was capable of performing even greater things than these. He possessed powers...but he has died. May Allah have mercy on him! The Burhan-ud-din of Sagharj said to me, 'I understand that he performed this morning prayer everyday at Mecca and that he made a pilgrimage every year in as much as he vanished from the people's sight on the days of the Arafa and Id and nobody knew whither he had gone.'

Let us revert to our theme. When I bade farewell to Shaikh Jalal-ud-din I journeyed to Habanq which is one of the most glorious and beautiful cities. It is traversed by a river which springs from the mountain of Kamaru and bears the name of Nahr-u-Azraq. The way to Bengal and Lakhnauti lies through this river, and along the bank of this river to the right as well as to the left there are water wheels, gardens and villages such as those along the banks of the Nile in Egypt. The inhabitants of Habanq are infidels under protection (dhimma) from whom half of the crops which they produce is taken; besides they have to perform certain duties. For fifteen days we sailed down this river passing through villages and orchards as though we were going through a mart. There are innumerable boats there and each boat contains a drum. When two boats confront, each beats its own drum and thus the sailors transmit their mutual greetings. The said sultan Fakhr-ud-din had ordered that no freight should be realized from the fakirs along this river and that provisions should be supplied to those who possessed none. Accordingly, when a fakir arrives in this city he is given half a dinar.

After fifteen days of our voyage in the river as we have related, we arrived in the city of Sunurkawan. It is the inhabitants of this city who had seized a fakir named Shahida on the latter's taking refuge in it. On our arrival there we found a junk bound for Sumatra (Java) which lay thence at a distance of forty day's journey. We embarked on this junk, and after a sailing for fifteen days we arrived in the country of Barahnakar, the inhabitants of which have mouths like those of dogs."

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**Collected and edited by D.N.A.H. Choudhury, '*Hazrat Shah Jalal: Dalil-o-Shakkha*', Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 2004, pp. 580-587.
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