

# SUFI SAINT AZAN PEER AS AN INTERTEXTUAL AND POLYGLOT POET

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## **Abstract**

*Expression of religious content in a diversified state like Assam was not easier for medieval poets or litterateurs. Prominent saints of medieval Assam adapted various methods to preach their religion. Sufi saint Azan Peer composed Zikir to preach Islamic teachings, philosophy and doctrines in Assam at the time. During medieval Assamese period, Muslims were mostly descendants of war captives of various Muslim invasion events and converts from native people. They were unaware of Islamic teachings, its core concepts, and they might not have known Arabic. Azan Peer adapted the Sufi poetic genre and native folk performing style to teach Islamic philosophy and doctrines in a simplified way. He composed religious messages sourced from the Quran and Ahadith in the Assamese language and structured those in the style of folk songs of Assam to make his composition familiar to its native people. In addition, he used various words from other languages, such as Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, etc., which made him a polyglot poet. His command over multiple languages enhanced his intertextuality that helped him to use various verses, lines, and phrases sourced from different other scripts. These artistic expressions enriched his poetry (Zikir) with deeper meanings.*

## **KEYWORDS:**

*Azan Peer, Sufi Saint, Zikir, Polyglot poet, Intertextuality, Assam*

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## INTRODUCTION

The word 'polyglot' refers to the person or individual or litterateur who knows and uses various languages(Hally, 2016). Poets or linguists who use several languages to express their knowledge through their work can be referred to as polyglot poets or writers. Polyglots use their multilingual ability to write, translate or create poems in several languages or weave multiple textual words into a single, multilingual work(Williams, 2017).One of the prominent Indian Sufi poets Abu'l Hasan Yamin al-Din Khusrau aka Amir Khusrau (in the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century),composed his artistic expressions in various language, including Persian, Hindavi,i.e., a progenitor to Hindi and Urdu and other languages(Joshi, 1975). He through blending different languages, cultures and traditions contributed to the rich culture or cultural synthesis and helped bridge linguistic divides at his time. Other Sufi saints, including Chishti Sufi Shaykh Hamid al-Din Siwali used Hindavi words in his *malfuzat* and composed poetry in Hindavi in addition to Persian words(Wahid, 2022). Sheikh Baba Farid of Punjab can also be referred as a polyglot poet as he composed his poems and other literary works in Punjabi, Hindavi and Persian language.Skyakh Rizq-Allah Mushtaqi composed poetry in the HindaviandPersian language(Srivastava, 2022). Bayazid Ansari aka Pir-i-Raushan's trilingual work *Khayr al-Bayan* was written in Persian, Arabic and Pashtu languages(Ali).Religious saint Guru Nanak was a prominent poet in the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century. He was a polyglot poet who used Punjabi and other languages to compose his poetry or hymns for religious teachings. His multilingual poetry collected in the Guru Granth Sahib promotes inter-religious understandings(Grewal, 2024). Great Vaishnavite saint Srimanta Shankardeva can be described as a polyglot poet, as he composed various poetry, songs, and dramas in different languages, including Assamese, Brajavali and Sanskrit. He composed a series of poetry and plays in those languages in order to make religious as well as cultural teachings accessible to a wider audience in Assam.(Neog, 1969)

Sufi poets mostly use vernacular languages of the common or native people to make their spiritual and devotional teachings more accessible and relatable to them.A 17<sup>th</sup> century Sufi saint Azan Peer was among those prominent poets who played the role of a polyglot by composing his Zikirs using words from several languages or employing intertextuality in his work. He composed his Zikirs in the Assamese language but incorporated various words from other languages, including Persian, Arabic, Urdu, and other vernacular dialects of Assam prevalent at the time.

## OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

1. To analyse Sufi saint Azan Peer as an intertextual and polyglot poet.
2. To explore AzanPeer's multilingual ability expressed through his compositions.
3. To investigate the processes of intertextuality included in Azan Peer's Zikir and their sources.

## **DATA BASE AND METHODOLOGY**

This is an analytical study on Azan Peer's process of communication through his works as a polyglot poet and intertextual. The researcher of this paper conducted a qualitative research method. For detailed study on the topic, the present researcher has gone through various primary and secondary sources. The primary source of this paper includes books on Azan Peer's Zikirs collection. Whereas secondary data collected from journals, web documents, and articles serve as supportive evidence that reflect Azan Peer as a great litterateur.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

This paper deals with the multilingual ability of Azan Peer, a famous Sufi saint of Assam. He used intertextuality for conducting religious communication. To understand the concept of intertextuality, the present researcher has studied Mevlude Zengin's article 'An Introduction to Intertextuality as a Literary Theory: Definitions, Axioms and the Originators' and another article co-authored by Khaled Igbaria and Saleem AbuJabertitled 'Religious Intertextuality Throughout Samih Al-Qasim's Poetry'. Also, the present researcher has studied the concept of polyglotism to understand Azan Peer's compositions as polyglot poetry or recognise him as a polyglot poet. For better understanding of the concept, the researcher has studied an article titled 'Polyglottism', written by Thomas J. Hally. Again, another thesis authored by James Williams, titled 'Polyglot Passages: Multilingualism and the Twentieth-Century Novel' was studied, which deals with the multilingualism usage in the twentieth-century novel. Apart from these, primary books on Zikir and Zari have been studied, including 'Asomiya Zikir aru Jari' by Syed Abdul Malik and 'Hazrat Azan Peer' by Muhibul Hussain. These books give knowledge on the concept of Zikir and Zari, Hazrat Azan Peer and his style of composition, etc.

## **AZAN PEER AND HIS LIFE**

Sufi saint Azan Peer was a prominent religious preacher, master and poet. His great works contributed to Assamese literature, which played a tremendous role in the cultural and religious synthesis of Assam. He is regarded as one of the prominent saints of Assam whose work promotes unity and liberalism in the society. All information about him that is available today has been sourced from his Zikirs, or Zikir stanzas that narrate about him. It can be learnt from his composition that he composed Zikirs during the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Malik, 1958). Many scholars and prominent litterateurs of Assam, including Syed Abdul Malik, Alhaj Muhibul Hussain, and S.M. Hussain have mentioned in their works that Azan Peer was a great Sufi saint who came to Assam from Baghdad, Iraq. These 20<sup>th</sup> century writers have mentioned that Azan Peer's original name was Shah Miran who later became popular as

Azan Fakir in eastern Assam and subsequently in the entire state. According to these scholars, Azan Peer came from Baghdad along with his brother, crossed Afghanistan and Pakistan via Khyber Pass and then reached India. He initially stayed at Khwaja Mainuddin Chisti's monastery, and then he travelled to the shrine of Nizamuddin Awliya in Delhi, where he halted for some days. Later he moved to Gaur and then travelled to Hajo where he stayed at Ghiyasuddin Awliya's shrine for a few years and finally reached eastern Assam (Malik, 1958). Mughal chronicler Shihabuddin Talish, who came along with Mir Jumla in 1662 A.D., in his book *Fatiyah-i-Ibriyya* mentioned that Muslims in Assam (eastern Assam) at the time were recognised only by their name and they were not actually performing Islam in its true meaning (Malik, 1958). Considering this statement, it can be assumed that Azan Peer who came to Assam during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, encountered Muslims who were far away from practising Islamic rituals and practices. It can be confirmed through his *Zikir* that people at the time used to keep themselves busy performing *marsiya geet*, *Ojapali*, *naam-kirtan* and took part in other folk performances. So, when he came to preach Islam in this region, he might have faced rejections, or people might not have listened to his teachings. He had been practising the mandatory acts of worship in Islam, in addition to propagating his faith in Assam.

### **INTERTEXTUALITY IN ZIKIR**

*Zikir* comprises various contents like religious messages from the Quran and the Hadith. It also expresses social, environmental and life cycle concepts, etc. Many scholars claim *Zikirs* were composed before Azan Peer by his previous Sufi saints in the region. Even *Zikir* composition continued after him, mainly by his disciples. But the style, pattern and concept of *Zikir* composed by Azan Peer make him a great poet, preacher or litterateur. It is because he composed *Zikir* in the Assamese language in a poetic style, phrasing Quranic verses and some hadiths in a simplified way. *Zikirs* as devotional poetry incorporated religious content borrowed from or alluding to Islamic scriptures and texts to convey religious messages. Also, he imitated the style or form of folk songs of Assam, viz., *Borgeet*, *Dehbichar geet*, *Ojapali* etc (Malik, 1958). Basically he used intertextuality in his composition to make it familiar for his target audience. Intertextuality means the interconnection of texts to former or asynchronous texts either consciously or unconsciously (Igbaria & Jaber, 2017). It reveals or expresses the level of knowledge or understanding of a poet as well as his sources and ability to use those in his composition. The Quran and hadith are the intertextuality sources of Azan Peer but besides these scriptures, he sourced phrases and stanzas from folk songs of Assam such as *Borgeet*, *Dehbichar geet* etc. and also proverbs and riddles popular in Assamese society. He by blending religious concepts with Assamese folk songs or musical styles composed *Zikirs*, which makes him an intertextual poet.

Intertextuality occurs when a poem or song contains different texts or words or phrases sourced from various other texts. It helps shape a text's or composition's meaning with the use of other texts through various compositional strategies, including transliteration, translation, allusion, and pastiche (imitation of the style or feature of another's work of literature or other art)(Zengin, 2016). Azan Peer evoked some Quranic verses or passages partially and used those for his artistic expressions. Also, he evoked or employed religious characters, including Prophet Adam, Prophet Muhammad, angel Gabriel and other religious characters in his Zikirs. For example-

*Allahr bine keo nai aan ou Allahe*

*Awwalote akherote jahirote batinot,*

*Tamamor upore khuda ou Allahe.*

This Zikir stanza expresses one of the Quranic phrases in a simplified way. It says that there is no other god except for Almighty Allah. He is the Supreme Being.

*Adamok poida kore matir kolbud kori*

*Muhammadok poida kori gayabot thole rakhi.*

Here, religious characters including the first Prophet Adam and the last Prophet Muhammad are mentioned. The above Zikir lines were phrased taking help from three verses in the Quran, which prove this statement that Prophet Adam was created with soil, and Prophet Muhammad was created and kept hidden. Also, various hadiths including a hadith narrated by Abu Musa state that God created Adam from a handful of earth or clay or mud.

*Kolimahe bordhon kolimahe bhab*

*Awwale poida hol kolimahe aag*

The Quran mentions the foundational pillar of Islam, i.e., Kalima (declaration of faith), which hadiths have explained its meaning and importance. Azan Peer tried to communicate about basic principles of Islam sourced from religious scriptures or texts. Through the above Zikir stanza, he stated Kalima is the ultimate wealth; it was created first, and it is the first and foremost of everything else.

*Namazot tero faraz Shariyate koi,*

*Bhitorot xat faraz bahirot soi.*

This Zikir couplet expresses the concept of thirteen *faraid* or *farz*, i.e., mandatory actions to be performed for Namaz so that it is considered as valid, including six internal pillars and seven external

conditions. This information is sourced from Ahadith. Azan Peer through Quranic intertextuality was able to deliver complicated messages in a simplified way.

Also, he includes combining a few stanzas straight from folk songs of Assam in his compositions to fit into his context of disseminating religious, social messages etc. He used allusions from other writers' work and deployed them to serve his own purposes. Some Zikir stanzas are similar to particular stanzas of some folk songs of Assam. He adapted texts of other folk songs of Assam that were reinterpreted in a new form.

Borgeet-

*Jodumoni oi ram, odhome tumar naam dake,*

Zikir-

*Odhome loilu odhome lou Allah r naam.*

Borgeet narrates as the wicked invokes Lord Rama's name, and Zikir expresses the inferior invokes the name of Allah. The meaning is the same but their view towards their faith is different, i.e., both associate God with the term as per their religious faith. In the case of language, thought and rhythmic concern, Zikir is similar to Borgeet and Ghosa, but the expression of words and characteristic expression of Zikir do not resemble these two repertoires.

Dehbichar geet-

*Dehar Bisar koru pran Bandhav*

*dehar bichar koru*

*Xoidhyoi Baikuntha xoidhyoi Brahmanda*

*dehate bisar dhoru*

Zikir-

*Xate Asmane xate jomine*

*akol hoi melile puli,*

*Ruhore Bhitorot ulal xoidhyo xakshi*

*Ulaise Puli meli*

The above two stanzas define similar concepts but have quite different connotations. In Dehbichar Geet, it states a cosmological idea found in Hinduism, i.e., fourteen heavens and fourteen universes

can be found inside the body referring to a metaphorical understanding of learning about these realms through spiritual practice or self awareness. Whereas, the Zikir stanza states spiritual belief of human body parts will bear witness to the actions they performed or did during their life on the earth. Although the concept of fourteen witnesses inside the body or soul is not found in Islam, a few Quranic verses express that some body parts will act as witnesses to testify to their actions on the earth on the Day of Judgement.

Dehbichar *geet*-

*bate bate jaba mur dangi nesaba*

*beidhat nokora roti,*

*xatu xatu purukh norokot poribo*

*Jibor hobo adhugoti.*

Zikir-

*Xeiti namor jijona mumine*

*xodai kori ase roti,*

*Mawor xatpurukh bapor xatpurukh*

*Xiu pai jabo goti*

It can be observed from analysing these two repertoires that these have similar configurations that resonate with each other. Dehbichar geet stanzas warn people to continue worshipping without any obstacle; otherwise, their ancestors will suffer in hell. While in the Zikir stanza, it states people who worship and remember the name of God every day, their ancestors will also get a reward.

Aai Naam-

*Ki dia pujim mai choron tumar*

*Ji fule pujim maixiu ful chua*

Zikir-

*Kinu di pujim moi tumak khuda*

*Tamul di pujim xiu base khua*

Aai Naam or devotional folk song about the goddess of pox is one of the folk songs of Assam. Here, the above lines express a prayer to the goddess of pox, asking what one should offer for worship as the flower taken for worship itself is or not holy. In Zikir lines it expresses devotion, asking God (Allah) what he should offer, whether with betel nuts as it is a remnant or not pure or not worthy of worship.

Bihu Geet-

*Sainu sai buliba baat hera senai dhon*

*Sainu sai buliba baat.*

*Dehar bhitor ase kholaboma*

*Pisoli poriba tat*

Zikir-

*Kobo lagise bhikhari Azane*

*Sai sai buliba baat.*

*Horiror bhitorot ase khola boma*

*Pisoli poriba tat.*

Though these two stanzas are almost similar, the context of both is completely different. In Bihu songs love expressions are conveyed, and in Zikir religious expression is communicated.

Again he tries to share esoteric or Sufi mystical concepts or processes to attain proximity with the divine Allah.

*Uthoro mukamor maje kun kun mukame jole;*

*tel nai holita nai xodai prodip jole.*

This line expresses Sufi belief in Muqam or spiritual stages on their journey to reach closeness to God. The above Zikir lines express that among eighteen stages, which states illuminate, and without oil and wick, the lamp illuminates always.

Some riddles and proverbs prevalent in Assamese society were also used in some Zikir. For example- *Riddles in Zikir- 'Pani more piyaho, agni more jarot; khuda rasul lukai ase mominor arot'. 'Panore puhari panoke besile panere marile sati, marolit bindhile ghune' etc.* Proverbs: Gojmuri gai, 'monoke bandhiba, monoke satiba, monoke nidiba lai. Obujon monoke bujabo nuwari jenegojmuri gai.' It tells

people to control their mind, make the mind calm or soothed, and not to stimulate their mind; unable to make understand stubborn mind like *gojmuri gai*.

## **AZAN PEER AS POLYGLOT POET**

The saint adjusted Islamic teachings and messages and adapted to the local regional environment of Assam at the time. Universal concepts of Islam were vernacularised, contextualised or localised by him in his time. He by challenging Arabic and Persian linguistic dominance (that most Sufi saints or poets followed for disseminating their messages) composed religious concepts of Islam in the vernacular language of Assam. He composed Zikir in the vernacular language to disseminate core Islamic beliefs, concepts, and ideology among Muslims in Assam at the time (Malik, 1958). He contributed to Assamese literature and Islamic religious literature. Azan Peer played the role of a cultural mediator who presented Islamic philosophy in the context of Assamese culture to grab the attention of common people. It helped him preach his religion to a region having diversified group with their own set of culture, tradition and rituals different from one another. This was his great strategy to use vernacular language to preach a religion that most people are unaware of its core concepts and practices and beliefs. The holy book of Islam is the Quran, which was revealed in Arabic, a language that was not known by Muslims of Assam during the early medieval period. So, it would have been otherwise difficult for Azan Peer to preach Islam in Arabic or Persian, and therefore he used the Assamese language to make religious concepts available in a native language or a common language familiar to the masses. Azan Peer simplified important Quranic verses in his Zikir to teach Muslims regarding those. He also composed Zikir on Sufi themes. The saint composed Zikirs in the Assamese language, integrating various words from different languages including Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and other native dialects of Assam. (Malik, 1958)

Azan Peer used various words from various native dialects, viz. Kamrupiya, Goalparia: *khaya daya, huka, dhuka, kopal, songi, toribo, korom, hela, bhikhari, bharjya, horibo, firia, dhorot, urumi, maroli, dhuka* and many others. He also used Arabic words including *Allah, nabi, rasul, mumin, murshid, munafiq, fakir, shariyat, arash, akherat, bihista, atash, jahir, batin, daria, azrael, firishta, sijda, rab, haq, ilim, alim*. In addition, Persian words used in Zikir include *nasib, gunahgari, dariya (darya), fariyad, khak, Peer (pir) and many more*. Again, Urdu words such as *tute, bondegi, dosti, chiz, paida* and many other are found in Zikir.

His excellence in intertextuality can be seen through his works. He used words from different languages, transformed those words and fitted them into his poetry stanzas or lines framed in the Assamese language. It requires great command over different languages to combine them together to

form a new language for poetry that enriched cultural and religious synthesis in Assamese society. The standard and quality of his work made Azan Peer a polyglot poet. Apart from using words of different languages, he also used riddles, proverbs, and idioms prevalent in Assamese society at the time.

## **ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

The famous Sufi saint Azan Peer was one of the great poets or litterateurs who had contributed to Assamese literature through his compositions, i.e., Zikirs. He composed Zikir mainly to communicate Islamic concepts, traditions, teachings, and doctrines to Muslims of medieval Assam. Apart from preaching Islamic rituals in its original text, i.e., Arabic via practising *namaz* (prayer), Azan calling, Quran recitation etc., he composed Zikir in the Assamese language and recited it in congregations or assemblies. His target group, Assamese Muslims were far from practising basic religious rituals and practices, and they were unaware of important teachings of Islam. So, he adapted poetic expressions of religious concepts like prominent Sufi saints and adapted the style of Neo-Vaishnavite saint Srimanta Sankardeva's Borgeet and other folk songs of Assam. It helped him to reach wider masses, as his Zikirs communicated messages in their native language and even they could relate to some stanzas of Zikir, which Azan Peer might have borrowed from some folk songs of Assam popular at the time. The saint used some stanzas from folk songs of Assam either with small or major alterations in between his Zikir stanzas. He also used riddles, proverbs, and idioms that native people used at the time to make Zikirs more interesting to them. Apart from these, Azan Peer used various words from the Arabic language taken straight from the holy Quran and also used Persian and Urdu words to compose Zikirs. He integrated foreign words into his composition, transliterating them into Assamese to spread Islamic tenets and Sufi principles in Assam at the time. Such excellence in using different languages to compose Zikir made Azan Peer a polyglot poet.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Polyglots are those individuals who inherently engage with intertextuality by understanding different linguistic and cultural contexts they know; they shape words and concepts by weaving multiple textual words into a single, multilingual work. They are able to move between languages or different intertexts. Sufi saint Azan Peer was a polyglot poet whose expression is inherently intertextual, as he was constantly engaging with different linguistic and cultural traditions of multiple languages. Azan Peer as a polyglot poet employed intertextuality or brought words from multiple languages and cultural frameworks to his work. Intertextuality is one of the phenomena of creative poetic language, which can be found in Azan Peer's Zikir. His intertextuality and polyglotism made his compositions creative and unique, while also sharing some similarities with other folk songs of Assam. It contributed to

blending its meaning and enhancing his poetry (Zikir) due to its reliance on the religious scriptures and also stanzas or lines from folk songs of Assam. Azan Peer used the inclusion of partial verses from the Quran, teachings of Hadith, stanzas from folk songs of Assam, and evoked prominent religious characters in his Zikirs. His ability to use the local language of Assam in his Zikir by integrating foreign words helped him to bridge cultural and religious divides in Assam, which makes him one of the influential figures in the cultural landscape of Assam.

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