

Heavenly Orchestrations

The World of the Legendary Pīrs of Bengal

*I make obeisance to the spectacle of creation,
 its parts strung together like a necklace.
 I pay my deepest respects to Mohāammad, Beloved of God.
 With undivided attention I salute Satya Nārāyan,
 descended (avatār) in the Kali Age.
 At the command of Āllā, he took birth in the world of men,
 wondrously engendered from two different lineages.
 He emerged from the womb of the unwed Sandhyāvātī
 to tend the affairs of the kingdom of Mālañcā.
 His right hand grips a staff,
 a mesmerizing flute sparkles in his left.
 His head is smothered with matted locks,
 a brilliant dot blazes across his forehead;
 a golden sacred thread hangs from his shoulder,
 and a linked chain belt winds around his waist,
 body swathed in a gleaming ochre-colored cloth.
 He wanders back and forth from one region to another,
 dressed in the garb of an ascetic sannyāsī,
 assuming any number of guises and forms.
 Who can fathom the wizardry of this holy pīr:
 one life-giving heart, two distinct physical forms,
 two different names, for two different communities.*

—KRṢṆAHARI DĀS, BAḌA SATYA PĪR O SANDHYĀVATĪ KANYĀR PUTHI

1.1. THE TALE OF THE BIRTH OF SATYA PĪR

Let our story begin with the narrative of the birth of the saint found in *The Great Story of Satya Pīr and the Virgin Girl Sandhyāvatī*.¹ With that laudatory opening and much much more, the author declares the plentiful benefits of paying respect to this *sūphī*² saint. After a rather urgent final personal disclaimer, the hagiographer segues into the story, which begins with a curious exchange among several of the significant occupants of heaven.

Through his mysterious power, Bhagavān Satya Nārāyaṇ is my life's breath. With my mind focused, I pay obeisance to the feet of my *guru*. On my head I place and honor the names of my father and mother as I make a thousand prostrations. All of them together enable me to swim to the farther shore of this ocean of existence. May my *guru* helmsman safely guide me across; may he keep my failures of memory at bay, and grant me wisdom. May the fourteen syllables come together just right to create each metrical line of verse, and enable this hobbled poet to hurdle the mountain. Like so many prolix *brāhmaṇs*, may my writing hand wax like the moon, after which, waving a fan palm frond, may I calm and cool all those gathered to hear.

Among the thousands of people present in this vast audience, Satya Pīr comes to those who call, whether orphans without means or those simply in need of direction. Should all present sing their praises publicly, Satya Pīr will send their troubles far away. When people serve him with respect, offering the custom due, Satya Pīr can become the refuge of every human being. May he grant me the power to sing this song of revelation, so that you too may spread its message. If my public audience

1. Kṛṣṇahari Dās, *Baḍa satya pīr o sandhyāvatī kanyār puthi* (Kalikātā: Nuruddīn Āhmad at Gaosiyā Lāibrerī, n.d.). What follows is a synopsis mixed with translated sections of the first thirty-nine of the printed text's two hundred twenty pages. The undated manuscript copy in my possession suggests a mid- to late-eighteenth-century composition, while, based on the layout, font, spellings, and metrical markers, the undated printed text has the appearance of a late-nineteenth-century production. I am indebted to the late Ābul Kālām Mohāmmad Jākāriyā in Dhaka for allowing me to copy the manuscript of the text from his personal collection.

2. *Sūphī* is of course roughly equivalent in sound and meaning to the word Sufi in English, but as will become apparent, the semantic field of this and other terms does not always perfectly map. I have chosen to transliterate all terms as they are written in Bangla. The names and epithets of all characters in the stories, as well as technical terminology, will be rendered in transliteration that reflects the orthography and in most cases the pronunciation of the Bangla in which it is written. Importantly, God will be rendered as it is written in Bangla, Āllā, rather than the more familiar Allāh used in transcriptions of Arabic and Persian. Other terms such as *phakīr* or *phakir*, *jāban* or *jaban*, *oli* (rather than *aulyā*), or *gāji* (rather than *ghāzi*), and so forth will become easily familiar. The point is to disrupt the assumption of the reader that the terms in Bangla automatically signal the same semantic range they invoke in Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, or other languages. The differences in both denotation and connotation can at times be profound, so the transliteration of the Bangla term will serve to remind the reader that the conceptual world of Islam, while shared historically and transnationally, is neither uniform nor consistent through time or space. Please also consult the "Conventions Regarding Transliteration and Nomenclature" in the front matter for more of the problems of transliteration and the use of English terms.

feels that my song falls flat, I will be humbled, yet even by that uncommonly ordinary exercise of *dharma*, I may still help rescue many among them.

You [Satya Pīr] are a saint (*oli*). If this tale embarrasses you among the society of prophets (*nabī*), then I shall abandon your company and escape to some faraway place; may you have Āllā and the Prophet (*nabī*) eat my head, binding me head-to-toe a hundred times over. With just your two bare hands you are able to subdue Pṛthivī, the Earth Herself. Like a hundred expert warriors armed with bows, accompanied by thousands upon thousands of horsemen of all colors and stripes, you destroy one king's kingdom in order to put another king in his place.

The old king, Mādhāi,³ his favored [queen] Priyāvatī, and their two princes, Śāmsundar and Dāmodar, were among those so chosen. Priyāvatī constantly fussed over her husband, ministering to his needs in both body and spirit. While the king, indeed, did have many fine qualities and served to protect *dharma*, as a rule he proved extremely mean-spirited toward *phakirs*. Whenever one of the *phakirs* of God Khodā appeared in the city, Mādhāi would chain him around the neck and imprison him in a cell. If the *phakir* was deemed to cast an evil eye, he would be blown to bits by the royal cannons; then for thirteen days the king would drink only water and eat only rice in penance. Numerous *vaiṣṇavīs*⁴ and ascetic *sannyāsīs* were always in attendance; they performed ritual *sevā* and *pūjā* worship, for which Mādhāi conferred gifts of great value.

The angel Jibril observed, "O Āllā, Guardian and Nourisher, this king who reigns in the Kali Age is a terrible sinner. He slays God-loving people (*momin*) and chops them to pieces. When he sees one of your *phakirs*, he has him shackled round the neck, and the *phakir* can be heard crying out for help in a loud voice, 'Āllā, Āllā!' Untold numbers of *phakirs* have been securely detained in this way. Tell me Nirāñjan, Stainless One, why are they not being protected?"

Āllā spoke, "Give me a solution, a plan, my beloved Prophet (*nabī*). Whom might we dispatch, to descend and serve as my witness (*gāoyār*)?"

The Apostle (*rachul*) replied, "Āllā, Great Protector, Satya Pīr should descend as the *avatār* in this Kali Age. There is in paradise (*bhest*) a certain Cāndbibī, whose beauty is typical of a heavenly celestial nymph, a *færie* (*hurparī*). Send her down to take birth from the belly of that king's consort Priyāvatī. From the womb of that

3. He would later be called by the epithet *maidānav* or *mayadānav*, the Demon King. It is unlikely a coincidence that his name invokes that of one of the two willfully belligerent antagonists of Kṛṣṇa Caitanya (1486–1533) in Nabadvīp, Jāgāi and Mādhāi, who were redeemed by the intervention of two of Caitanya's closest companions, Nityānanda and Gadādhara, and subsequently became devout *vaiṣṇavs*; see Vṛndāvan Dās, *Caitanya bhāgavat*, edited with Bengali commentary "Nīṭāikaruṇākallolīnī ṭīkā" by Rādhāgovinda Nāth (Kalikātā: Sādhana Prakāśanī, 1373 BS [ca. 1966]), 2.13. For an already somewhat dated translation of the tale, see Tony K. Stewart, trans., "The Rescue of Two Drunkards," in *The Religions of India in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 375–88.

4. The way *vaiṣṇavī* is used in this text, it appears to be grammatically incorrect, but seemingly apposite in construction to *sannyāsī*, that is, a male *vaiṣṇav* or a *vairāgī* rather than a female worshiper of Kṛṣṇa or Caitanya. If we read female worshiper, then it likely signals that women of the king's family and court were highly learned, for *vaiṣṇav* women were often employed by the wealthy to educate daughters in reading, writing, poetics, and so forth.

comely virgin girl will Satya Pīr be born. He shall spring from the mixing of two different communities (*kul*) and will serve both publicly.”

Āllā responded, “What a brilliant plan you have suggested, Apostle (*rachul*). But when he takes on a mortal human form, he must not enter into any marriage. Anything that happens after that, you report to me. Whatever shape he assumes in the ocean of worldly existence, he must retain my name.”

Mohāmmad replied, “So it is decided; that is the strategy we will pursue. I will send Jibril to Cāndbibī.”

And so the angel (*pherestā*) went to call on the Bibī.

While he was sitting there, exactly what kind of *karma* had Mohāmmad brought into play? For in the gateway to heaven he fashioned a venomous serpent with a physical bodily form, and then he had a frog sent as its meal.

Meanwhile Jibril called out, “Bibī, come! Your presence is requested. The honorable Prophet is calling you for a special cause. He would be most pleased were you to come right away,” [which of course she did].

When she arrived and came upon Mohāmmad’s conjured scene, Cāndbibī was stopped dead in her tracks.

The frog was weeping bitterly since it had fallen into the mouth of the serpent. It cried out, “Āllā, please forestall my imminent death!” The frog immediately appealed to her, “Bibī, hear my prayer. Please save me from the jaws of this serpent! If you do not, I am finished. I can only appeal to Āllā for justice.”

But the serpent countered, “Listen, Bibī, consider my position. By the decree of the God of Fate, Bidhātā, has this meal been sent me. I have not eaten in more than a month. If the frog is destined to die to provide my meal, it is by the proclamation of Āllā.”

The situation seemed intractable as each argued his case. Examining the conundrum from every angle, Cāndbibī reasoned through her options and finally resolved to act. Once decided, she promptly snatched the frog from the jaws of the snake and released it into the waters.

Thoroughly confounded, the serpent declared, “Cāndbibī, you have always been a paragon of virtue, so how could you steal the food right out of my mouth?” The snake continued his lamentation: “Because of your actions, I have been denied my life-sustaining meal.”

[Cāndbibī] wasted no time in leaving and hurried on to the court of Āllā, presented herself, and made obeisance. Bibī spoke, “Pāk Nirāñjan, Pure and Stainless One, for what reason have you summoned me?”

Āllā replied, “Listen Bibī, here is why: you must go down to the demonic king Maidānav’s home as the daughter of his queen, Rājārāñī Priyāvatī. When you have taken birth in their home, you will become the royal princess Sandhyāvatī and from your womb will Satya Pīr take birth. I will come down as my own witness and become the embodied descent (*avatār*) of truth (*satya*).”

Cāndbibī replied, “Please listen, Āllā, Stainless One. How will I, a færie, be able to endure the excruciating pain of child bearing? In order for there to be a live birth, a fetus must grow in a woman’s womb for ten months.⁵ In the dark of night, the house

5. Pregnancies are traditionally measured as ten lunar months.

reverberates with her desperate and painful cries, ‘Help! Save me!’ The agony emanating from her womb is not to be endured by the frail likes of me. I am incapable of reproducing as that princess. Please do forgive me, Āllā, for challenging this. How and why am I to descend, Āllā? Why must I suffer the consequences of this singular entry to the world of ordinary human existence? Can you not please send someone else to the demon king’s home?”

The Prophet replied, “You must go by the terms decreed. You will be gracious toward the Master and you will not disobey.”

Turning then to Mohāmmad, Cāndbibī pleaded, “Please listen! What offense have I committed for you to condemn me to a mortal existence? Only those who are flawed and sinful must undergo birth as mortals. Who can send me to the land of mortals to become a *jābanā*?”⁶

By then the weakening snake, near death, had managed to catch up and wasted no time in lodging his complaint. “By what right could Cāndbibī have interfered and stopped me from eating? After more than a month I finally managed to land a frog morsel from the Dāmodar River. But Bibī plucked it right out of my mouth and sent it flying back to the deep.” And with that pitiable lament, the now completely starved snake convulsed, writhed on the ground, and gave up its life.

[Mohāmmad then pointed out to Bibī], “This sin alone is sufficient to send you to hell. Only when you are born into a human clan will that sin and misery be atoned. After thirty-six years will your transgression be expiated.”

As she listened to his words, Bibī lamented bitterly, “In the name of Āllā, what am I supposed to admit about this ersatz transgression of *karma*? I did not know what to do and for this ambiguous, if not deceptive, infraction you are going to dispatch me to the land of the mortals, to be touched, to be handled by a husband who comes from another social group (*jāti*)? I will become infamous in the whole of heaven.”

The Prophet replied, “You *will* become the daughter of the king. But who has decreed that you are to be married? Whether for fame or infamy—that accrues to me. You are imagining miseries for no good reason. What Āllā brings about is for his own satisfaction and reasons. Now you must go and enter into the world of mortals.”

Kṛṣṇahari Dās shares this conversation in accomplished meter. May the hero Satya Pīr fulfill your heart’s desire.

Listen brothers to this gratifying tale. No one can fathom what Khodā does. What is sanctioned and what is nullified, or the way what is previously approved becomes prohibited—who can comprehend the full extent of divine power? Who can reckon what is sin (*pāp*) or what is merit (*puṇya*) in the divine economy? Why a sinner is destined to suffer while another prospers, why a person dies in one house and another lives—no matter how hard one tries, no one can fully explain it. Each individual suffers both sinful and meritorious qualities, and according to those tendencies will an individual habitually return. If a sin be committed while in heaven, then a return

6. Feminine of *jaban* or *jāban* (from *yavana*, lit. Ionian). A general term to designate people not originally from the subcontinent, today nearly always glossed as Muslim, but more accurately should be construed as an ethnic marker.

to the mortal world is in store. If a sin is committed in the world of mortals, then one falls into hell (*dojakh*). Listen carefully now to the natures of heaven and hell.

Has anyone actually seen heaven? What individual can speak of hell? As written in the Korān, there are seven hells. But what are the characteristics described by people who have witnessed heaven and hell? Listen carefully and I will tell you about heaven. Heaven is like the best of our worldly society—whether it is or is not, that *is* what people say. Just imagine, if you will, the one who enjoys the creature comforts, who gets to loll about on a fragrant bed of flowers, to be the one who sleeps in a house adorned with flower blossoms, and always eats ghee and honey. Who gets to own the horses? Who amasses and holds others' debts? Who becomes the merchant trader? He who has become king is the lord (*īśvar*) who takes the wealth of other people, the bounty of this earth, to enjoy for himself. It is said in the book that heaven is something just like that.

Now listen, good people, for now I will describe what is said about hell. Whether it is or is not, understand this *is* what people have authoritatively reported. No one there can see, like one who has fallen into the dark of a deep well. No one can discern whether it is night or day. Deaf and mute, not a sound can slip from anyone's mouth. One has neither legs nor arms, for all of one's limbs rot away. Fixated on begging for food, one must fast without end. To be mired in sin is to live at the foot of a scrub brush, scavenging as a dog or jackal. Understand that this is the nature of hell people describe.

*Listen brothers all as I submit this before you. Focus your attention and listen to the pāñcālī tale of the saint.*⁷

Cāndbibī continues to complain, especially among her closest companions, at which point the entire mechanism for her birth is explained by Mohāmmad, including the precedent that forty *bibīs* have previously been impregnated by flowers sent from heaven for the birth of special *pīrs*. So Cāndbibī descends, and Queen Priyāvatī duly becomes pregnant and gives birth to Sandhyāvatī, much to the joy of the king and his courtiers. A little more than twelve blissful years pass, and Sandhyāvatī blossoms into a stunning beauty. But one night she finds herself restless, inexplicably agitated.

Āllā has instructed Mohāmmad to interrupt Sandhyāvatī's sleep and reveal to her through her dreams that she is actually Cāndbibī, descended from heaven to bear the *phakīr* Satya Pīr. Mohāmmad then explains how, with her hundred companions, she will take herself to bathe in the River Ennar. There, immersed in the waters while bathing, a flower will float toward her and her alone, and it will impregnate her.

But before they can put the plan into effect, they have to get Satya Pīr to agree to the terms and conditions.

Āllā said, "My dear Messenger (*paygambar*), please put our plan into play, for the demon king Mayadānav is truly evil. Whenever one of my *phakīrs* goes to Mālañcā, he ends up chained by the neck and thrown in jail. As a result, the number of heralds

7. Kṛṣṇahari Dās, *Baḍa satya pīr o sandhyāvatī kanyār puthi*, 4–7.

to my majesty is diminishing everywhere on earth. In what fashion will my beloved son-as-witness (*beṭā gāoyār*) pulverize the king?"

The Prophet replied, "Revered Āllā-ji, you are the master of petitioners. There is no one who can fathom your miracle-working power. An ocean of mercy, you exercise dominion over the magic of creation (*māyā*). In your sight, the demon king Mayadānav is no more than a speck of a sesame seed. When you send Satya Pīr, Truth itself (*satya*) will be instituted through his descent (*avatār*)—he will be born from the womb of Sandhyāvati. By following this unique expedient, two separate goals will be achieved. When the witness descends to miserable Mālañcā, the God (*devatā*) of the *hindu* will be the *pīr* of the *musalmān*. He will demonstrate how to serve both communities (*kul*). In the Kali Age, untold numbers of people are conversant with sin (*pāp*), but when they worship Satya, the Truth, their enlightenment will be effected and your majesty and glory will spread throughout the world (*saṃsār*). When that end is reached, may you quickly return him to heaven."

Listening to this plan of action, Āllā was exceedingly pleased. The Stainless One, Nirañjan, called and spoke to Jibril. Āllā said, "Listen carefully, Jibril, to what I say. Go fetch Satya Pīr to my dwelling."

No sooner had he received the command than off he flew. He called on Satya Pīr and escorted him to the presence of Āllā. When Satya Pīr arrived, he offered his profound salutations, "Why have you summoned me, you who are the treasure trove for supplicants?"

Āllā responded, "You must go once more to the world of mortals. The demonic king Mayadānav of Mālañcā perpetrates a reign of endless tyranny. I want you to fly down quickly and assume the task of spreading the noble ritual of revering God (*sevā*). Once you have initiated that ritual service in the city of Mālañcā proper, ensure it is instituted in each and every home."

Because it was the Pure and Stainless One, Pāk Nirañjan, who uttered these words, Satya Pīr replied, "Āllā, I humbly submit to your request. By all means dispatch me to earth, but I must admit that I am very much afraid to undergo the torments of the womb."

Āllā replied, "You will not suffer any of the burning pains of the womb. You will not even be born initially as yourself [in human form], but reproduced as a clot of blood."

Satya Pīr said, "Āllā, you are the great protector of all, please go ahead and send me down to earth. Whatever form you have me take in this birth, I will always be singularly devoted to your feet. In the Kali Age, so many people exist in misery—may they obtain their hopes and desires when they encounter me! May they be released from their dire straits and attain an exalted state of dignity! But tell me, how precisely am I to alleviate this suffering?"

Nirañjan, the Stainless, answered, "Go to earth, and any time you need, simply remember me, and you will succeed."

With that, Satya Pīr responded, "Whenever I fall into trouble, I shall take your name and by that alone may you rescue me."

Hearing this, Āllā promised, "The moment you start to utter my name, your worries will cease. He whom I do not allow to die cannot be killed. You will never suffer death in that earthly river of mortal life. You cannot be drowned, you cannot be

burned by fire. Even if the moon or the sun were to attack you, you would not suffer death.”⁸

Events follow the script as expected. When Sandhyāvātī and her friends splash in the river, Sandhyāvātī mysteriously refuses to come out of the water until she retrieves a most exquisite rose blossom. As it floats upstream, the flower will dodge and flee the grasp of any of the young women who reach for it, always pushing itself slightly out of reach—until, that is, it makes its way to Sandhyāvātī.

The flower suddenly washed into her hands. In a single movement, Sandhyāvātī picked up that special blossom and sniffed its perfume. She breathed Satya Pīr right into her body, and he lodged in her womb. The flower instantly lost its brilliance, lost all color, withered, and died. Suddenly feeling queasy, she hurled the now wilted flower to the ground, but the flower flew from earth up to heaven like [Mohammad] in the night journey (*meṃārāj*).

*Listen now to the rest of the story of Sandhyāvātī. She finished bathing, returned to her group, and headed back to the capital city. Sandhyāvātī, the unmarried princess sans prince, had gotten pregnant. Accepting the command of my guru, I endeavor to make public this tale where Satya Pīr will fulfill every person's heart's desire. I grovel a hundred times over in salutation at the feet of Satya Pīr, for it is at your command that Kṛṣṇahari sings this song.*⁹

The servants are incredulous and then aghast as they try to hide Sandhyāvātī's increasingly obvious pregnancy. Eventually one serving girl informs the queen, who laments the stain on the family name. Sandhyāvātī herself is understandably confused. “I am an unmarried princess. How can I have gotten pregnant when I have never lain with a man? I cannot fathom this strange situation, but whatever is born from my womb will send me to hell, to Yam's perdition.” She reconstructs the events at the river and realizes that she was impregnated the moment she inhaled the fragrance of the flower. “I cannot fathom Khodā's staging of this event.”¹⁰ Her mother seeks to have an abortifacient slipped into the goat's milk Sandhyāvātī drinks every evening, but Satya Pīr, neatly curled up in her womb as he is, divines her plan and calls on God to intervene. God, Satya Nārāyaṇ, sends Jibril, who communicates with Satya Pīr and, through the power of yogic scriptural utterances (*āgam śabda*), magically transforms the poison into a dense, sweet cream. The abortion never happens.

When Queen Priyāvātī is finally forced to tell the king, he goes crazy with all-too-predictable anger. He orders his constable to take Sandhyāvātī into the forest and abandon her. The constable is horrified, for it is too much like Rām banishing the pregnant Sītā to the forest. But banish her he does, and so, after tearful leave-taking and anguish, into the forest they go. Sandhyāvātī is allowed to take two

8. Kṛṣṇahari Dās, 13–14.

9. Kṛṣṇahari Dās, 16.

10. Kṛṣṇahari Dās, 17.

servants with her. On their way they cross the Nur River and go through Haripur, Dioḍi village, Lakṣmīpur, Jayantinagar, then Tripurā. Passing Kadali Dikinī, they reach Nokāgrām. Jayantinagar is the village where Sandhyāvati's brother Śāmsundar lives, but she refuses to visit him out of shame. They pass Thakāgrām, Kalyān town, Dāmihāt, Śaṅkhaṭpur, Sāpinī Pāpinī, and finally Bajarāśahar, until Sandhyāvati can go no further. She asks the constable to erect a shelter there, but he refuses, pushing her forward. Finally, he abandons her on the banks of the Begavati River.

Sandhyāvati and her two servants camp out under the canopy of a massive tree for seven days and nights. Finding no food, they fast. Not a soul appears. At night, terrified, they lie down, their stomachs growling in hunger. At night the tigers prowl and growl, scattering the frenzied deer in every direction. Wild boars, oxen, and all manner of beasts tramp through the forest around them. Finally a female and male tiger couple, drawn by the irresistible smell of human flesh, creep forward for the kill.

But Sandhyāvati spoke first. "O tigress, I am emotionally overwhelmed, for I have come to the forest pregnant. Clamp your jaws around me and eat me so that you may put an end to my burning misery."

The tiger muttered, "Then I think I am going to eat right now." But the tigress snapped and ordered him, "Stand back! Be still! It is not proper to eat pregnant prey."

The tiger ignored her admonition, and with his tail swooped above his head, he pounced, jaws open, ready to kill.

Satya Pīr called out to the tiger from the womb, "You have just forfeited your dotage! I am Satya Pīr. Anyone I curse is instantly turned to ashes."

As soon as he heard the *pīr*'s clarion call, the tiger knew it to be true; he lowered his head in obeisance, and wrapped his tail around his own neck in submission. The tiger and tigress then slunk away, but soon a lion came to see the humans huddled at the foot of the tree. This lord among lions moved forward, ignoring the twenty slithering cobras that had also been attracted and were gnashing their fangs in anticipation.

Satya Pīr called out, "Hey listen, you lord of lions! You may be the king of animals, you may be afraid of no one, and I am sure you can kill a monkey with one swipe of your paw to dine on his flesh. But know now that you are on the sure path of death and destruction. Know without doubt that a single blow from my hand will send you to hell, the abode of Yam!" Registering the menace of those truthful words, the lion king crouched down on the ground with grass between his teeth in surrender. He then jumped up and ran far away, fortunate to have preserved his life that day.

After the lion had been driven off, some bears loped up in quest of a quick kill. The male and female bears circled the tree until Satya Bhagavān called out, "If you know what is good for you, you bears will leave now, otherwise you will be destined for death in Yam's house!" The bears, too, wasted no time in scampering away.

Till the tenth watch did this continue, as Kṛṣṇahari Dās mellifluously sings.¹¹

11. Kṛṣṇahari Dās, 27–28.

It takes the constable seven days to return to the king's court, where he describes the convoluted path they have followed, traveling from one river *ghāṭ* to the next, eventually to reach the Kul Forest where he left Sandhyāvati. The king is pleased to have the business over and done with.

Meanwhile Sandhyāvati and her two serving girls are wracked with hunger and thirst and, remembering the name of God, cry out for help. The Prophet alerts Āllā, who in turn consults with Bidhātā, the God of Fate, and then summons Jibril to descend in the guise of a watchman who seemingly just happens to stumble across them. Jibril provides them with food and water and swiftly returns to heaven.

From inside Sandhyāvati's womb, Satya Pīr meditates on Lokmān Hākim, who in an instant miraculously materializes. He asks Lokmān to construct an impregnable royal palace with ten doors made of iron, each door lavishly decorated with rubies and precious stones, and each equipped with secure lock and key. The building should rise two full stories above the ground floor, and be replete with fresh drinking water and palm trees. He also instructs him to construct seven private bathing *ghāṭs*, and to provide for every want and need of Sandhyāvati and her servants.

Lokmān Hākim diligently sets about his task, constructing the different buildings, including five- and nine-spired temples.¹² Celestial *gandharvas* arrive, and soon the grounds are teeming, seemingly populated by tens of millions. Even Indra with his *vidyādharis* visits from heavenly Indrapuri. The golden citadel is studded with rubies, pearls, and diamonds. When it is completed, after about a day, Lokmān Hākim takes his leave. A palanquin is sent for Sandhyāvati and her servants, who are understandably overwhelmed at their opulent turn of fortune. The place is more lavishly appointed than anything ever seen in Bengal, including her father's citadel. And of course there is a *masjid*, an item not found on her father's palace grounds.

This is the way of Satya Pīr: he gives sons to the childless and riches to the poor; if you but worship him with respect.

Sandhyāvati's time has finally come, a dark night in the month of Māgh. In agony, she laments her inglorious fate for having innocently sniffed a flower.

She eventually gave birth to a clot of blood. What can be said of the *pīr*'s promise? There were no arms, no legs, no head, no ears, no nose, no mouth. Ever so slowly did the clot ooze out, a quivering mass of congealed blood. This was how Satya was born.¹³

12. The *pañcaratna*, literally "five gems," is a typical construction for a temple in Bengal; it has a slightly arched pavilion with one spire (*śikhar*) on each corner, and a central elevated pavilion with a single spire (4 + 1). The *navaratna* or "nine gems" emerged in the seventeenth century, adding another level with four spires (4 + 4 + 1). See David McCutcheon, *Brick Temples of Bengal: From the Archives of David McCutcheon*, ed. George Michell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

13. Kṛṣṇahari Dās, *Baḍa satya pīr o sandhyāvati kanyār puthi*, 32.

Sandhyāvātī laments the cruel work of fate, the double shame of being pregnant and then not delivering a child. “A woman without a child suffers a fruitless life—people will wonder: what kind of tree produces no fruit?”¹⁴ She cannot understand, because everything has been so clear in her dreams that she would bear a son who would be a jewel among men. To be banished because of her pregnancy, which has turned out to be a strange event producing no child at all, angers and confuses her, fueling her grief.

After rehearsing *in extenso* her mind-numbing tragedy, Sandhyāvātī gathers her wits, takes her servant girls, and with resolve carries the clot of blood to the banks of the Begavātī River. Filled with sorrow and remorse, she hurls the mass into its swirling waters. As it begins to sink, a large female turtle rises from the depths and swallows the clot.¹⁵ Sandhyāvātī bathes and heads back to her forest dwelling. The turtle swallows hard, and soon the clot is encased in a leathery egg, with Satya Pīr inside the egg inside her womb. Then Satya Pīr works some more of his magic, and after being ensconced in her belly for only ten watches (about four hours), he is hatched in the shallows, fully formed. He quickly scrambles across a shoal and onto a sandbank. As he looks on, the turtle is transfigured—she becomes a splendid heavenly nymph, a *vidyādhari*. Previously she was a *brāhmaṇ* widow, who, for the offense of eating raw meat, was transmogrified into a turtle, scavenging food on the banks and deep below the surface of the waters. But she also received a boon to ameliorate that offense: she was promised that she would hold none other than the Lord Nārāyaṇ in her womb, albeit for only a span of ten watches. With that promised act, she will be exonerated and dispatched to Vaikuṇṭha heaven—and Satya Pīr has made it so.¹⁶

14. Kṛṣṇaharī Dās, 33.

15. Turtle is *kacchabini*, a generic term which in this context points to sweet water riverine and estuary-dwelling turtles, which grow sufficiently large to swallow a mass the size of a newborn. At the time of the text's composition, it most likely referred to one of the six species of Batagur, all of which are nearing extinction today.

16. The turtle's role in serving as the vehicle for Satya Pīr's birth in the water invokes the image of the cosmogonic sequence of Dharma Ṭhākur as Nirañjan creating the universe out of the void (*śūnyatā*), with the turtle emerging from the primal waters. See Rāmāi Paṇḍit, *Śūnyapurāṇ*, ed. Cārucandra Bandyopādhyāy, with an introduction by Muḥammād Šahīdullāh and Basantakumār Caṭṭopādhyāy (Kalikātā: Satiścandra Mukhopādhyāy from Basumatī Sāhitya Mandir, n.d. [preface dtd. 1336 BS (ca. 1929)]), *Śṛṣṭi pattan*, section 3, vv. 70–103, pp. 18–24. A more recent edition transcribes the text identically; see Rāmāi Paṇḍit, *Śūnyapurāṇ* (*śūnyapurāṇ, saṃjāt paddhati, dharmapurāṇ*), ed. Bhaktimādhav Caṭṭopādhyāy (Kalikātā: Phārmā Ke El Em Prāibhet Limited, 1977), *Śṛṣṭi pattan*, sec. 3, vv. 70–103, pp. 74–76. For more on the association of the turtle with Dharma, see Āśuṭoṣ Bhaṭṭācārya, *Bāmlā maṅgalkābyer itihās*, 6th ed. (Kalikātā: E. Mukhārji āyāṇḍ Kom Prāibhet Limited, 1381 BS [1975]), 621–26. For a history of the speculation regarding the tortoise among worshipers of Dharma, see Frank J. Korom, “‘Editing’ Dharmaraj: Academic Genealogies of a Bengali Folk Deity,” *Western Folklore*, 56, no. 1 (1997): 51–77.

As soon as the turtle is released to heaven, Satya Pīr encounters Khoyāj Jendā Pīr [Khijr], who dwells in those waters. Satya Pīr persuades him to accept him as his student (*murid*). As his teacher (*mursed*), Khoyāj coaches him for five years, after which Satya Pīr is ready to begin his new life's work.¹⁷

1.2. THE MARVELOUS TALES OF SŪPHĪ SAINTS

So begin the miraculous adventures of Satya Pīr, on his mission to meet the spiritual and worldly needs of those who petition and honor him, regardless of their religious orientation. He first goes to the courts of Mālañcā, and afterwards uses his wonder-working power to convince everyone from kings and cobblers to prostitutes and merchants that they share in a common humanity which prospers when the divine is properly acknowledged and suffers when the divine is denigrated. He preaches from the Korān and the *Bhāgavata purāṇa*, lecturing *imāms* and *brāhmaṇs* equally. His immaculate conception, effected through a flower sent to earth by God, signals that he lives a deservedly charmed life. Āllā promises that nothing can kill him, so he survives every peril, even when strapped to the mouth of a cannon, which is fired to no avail. The beginning of the story cues an expectation in the audience that eagerly enters Satya Pīr's fantastic world; it declares a dramatic mode familiar to nearly every inhabitant of the Bangla-speaking regions of the South Asian subcontinent (the region today comprised of the Indian states of West Bengal, northern Orissa, and parts of Assam, and the nation-state of Bangladesh). The sensational exploits of holy men and women of various religious persuasions, their interactions with gods and goddesses, *jinn*s and angels, and a host of other celestial figures are woven into a common romantic thread. Though they circulate in a variety of slightly different but closely related literary and performative genres, these tales can be indexed generically as *kathā*, simply *story*, *tale*, *narrative*, or *fiction*, a vernacular storytelling form that has its roots in ancient Sanskrit literary traditions as much as in Persian and Arabic and related languages such as Avadhī, Hindavī, and what in colonial times was called Hindustānī, but now more recently in Urdu.¹⁸ Like traditional heroic romances everywhere, they inhabit a world where the unthinkable is commonplace. They speak to surviving in the all-too-often hostile climate of Bengal, the vagaries of encountering jungly beasts and serpents, endemic disease, and the predations of unscrupulous rulers and their ever-present

17. Kṛṣṇaharī Dās, *Baḍa satya pīr o sandhyāvatī kanyār puthī*, 33–36.

18. The *pīr kathās*, or stories of the *sūphī* saints, find expression in a variety of genres in addition to *kathā*, including *pāñcālī* (specifically indicated in the preceding passage), *pālāgān*, *jātrā*, *nāṭak*, *kissā*, *kāhīnī*, and so forth; their forms and functions will be described as needed. Significantly, all of these forms are vernacular and half of them unique to Bengal, but one should resist automatically equating the forms directly to their analogues and homonyms in other North Indian languages, because the form and semantic field so designated may not always be identical.

merchants. But apart from the names, is there anything distinctly Islamic or even religious about this entertaining vignette of Satya Pir's birth?

The author invokes Āllā and Mohāmmad, and the angel Jibril, which clearly frames the narrative in nominally Islamic terms. But Āllā is also called by the additional name Bhagavān Satya Narāyaṇ in a terminology that then and today would be instantly recognized as an epithet of the Hindu god Kṛṣṇa. So too the appellation Niraṇjan, the Stainless One; commonly used to invoke Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa or Nārāyaṇ, it also equally serves as one of the most common appellations of Āllā in Bangla literature—a shared descriptor that would seem to capture commonly held notions of highest divinity as formless and pure. In the first lines following the various encomia and supplications, the homey colloquy in heaven (*bhest*) where Mohāmmad queries Āllā just as a minister might his king, jars the traditional images of Āllā's omniscience, his ninety-nine immaculate qualities, and his generally accepted formlessness. The exchange mimics a king's court. Immediately after their consultation, God summons Jibril and then dispatches him on his errands. That court is of course heaven, or *bhest*, but heaven is also called in this text by the common *vaiṣṇav* designation *vaikuṇṭha*. The actions of the characters in that special place likewise seem to challenge most Islamic descriptions of heaven, even veering away from what the author himself, Kṛṣṇahari Dās, shifting into a mildly homiletic mode, outlines in his comparison of heaven and hell. What about the traffic of celestial figures in and out of this courtly heaven? Is fetching a *houri* or *peri* (*hurpāri* as *færie*) a menial task one associates with an angel Jibril, presumably the archangel of the name who, according to the mainstream tradition, significantly shared the Arabic Qur'ān with Muhammad? Is the invocation of Prophet (*nabī*) and Apostle (*racḥul/racchul*) sufficient to call the tale Islamic when Kṛṣṇa and Rām are likewise invoked? Is it within Mohāmmad's character, as we know it from the traditional Arabic *sirā* and *ḥadīth* texts, to devise a scheme wherein an exemplary, quality-laden *færie* would be tricked into committing such a minor, and certainly ambiguous, offense to warrant a thirty-six-year exile on earth? Where in the Islamic tradition do we hear of any character who, having gained heaven, returns to earth, save Mohāmmad's *mī'rāj*, which is explicitly invoked when the turtle that has borne Satya Pir ascends to heaven? Indeed, as the author says, only God knows the mysteries of such action! How often do we hear of any heavenly figure, much less a *færie*, arguing with Jibril or with Mohāmmad about a divine decree? The argument Cāndbibī puts forward centers on the concept of the traditional Indic concept of *karma*, its consequences for rebirth, and who might expect to suffer negatively. What does Fate, especially delivered by the god Bidhātā, have to do with it? Who knew that at least forty other times God had sent down *færies* to give birth to special *pīrs* to do his bidding? And among those forty prior descents, was it normal for Āllā to send a *færie* into the womb of a *brāhmaṇ* queen, and not just as a *færie*, but as a *jabanā* or *musalmāni* woman? Impregnation from sniffing a flower is not an unknown trope in popular Bangla tales, but crediting Āllā with the

instigation seems to put a new twist on it.¹⁹ Can Sandhyāvatī's condition be considered an immaculate conception, or should we consider the nose just another orifice that leads to the womb, reminiscent of the varied ways in which the mythology of the *purāṇik* gods and goddesses of India fantastically procreate? Either way we must ask who, then, is the father. What does Āllā mean when he says he himself will come down as Satya Nārāyaṇ for his *hinduyāni* audience and as Satya Pīr for his *musalmāni* followers? Yet he has Satya Pīr fetched to make the descent in his place, but only with Satya Pīr's consent. Once in the womb, this special *pīr* speaks, commanding wild animals to proceed at their peril, which sends them packing, a variation of the widely accepted belief that *pīrs* and warrior *gājīs* talk to and control animals in the wild, the preferred home of these mendicants. But Satya Pīr also summons Lokmān Hākīm, who executes his bidding without question. Are we supposed to understand that Lokmān Hākīm is the same Luqmān of the Arabic Qur'ān, *surā* 31? How can Lokmān magically appear when called by Satya Pīr to construct a palace deep in the heart of a dense jungle in south central Bengal, and then do it in one day?

The text leaves us with many awkward questions unanswered if we attempt to resolve the actions of its characters with what we know of traditional Islamic history, or attempt to rectify the nature of divinity as described. To force the narrative into the genre classification that aligns with traditionally accepted Islamic religious discourses of history, theology, and law will inevitably do more violence than Procrustes himself could have engineered. *These stories fall outside the traditional strictures of history, theology, and law, and therein lies their secret power and a key to their interpretation.* Though the bulk of the narratives' propagation and circulation is the result of the performances of storytellers and performing troupes, oral literature, with its widely recognized modes of reproduction, maintains the fidelity of the tale. But the tales are not without their physical props and different modes of visual circulation, in both manuscript form and painted image.

Those who worship according to the prescribed ritual form of *sevā* or *pūjā* often sing the tales in the presence of images representing the various *pīrs*, *devs*, and *devīs* who control the powers of protection. But the exploits of these *musalmāni* luminaries and *hinduyāni* heroes and deities are at the same time extolled by singers of tales apart from formal worship.²⁰ Their narratives are illustrated in

19. One popular story (with multiple variants) tells of a king who has no sons, but one stunningly beautiful daughter who plucks a flower from the river and after smelling its fragrance finds herself pregnant; she escapes her father's wrath by fleeing to the forest where she meets a trader, who steals her away, but abandons her son, who is raised by a tigress. The boy eventually recovers his rightful kingdom as inheritance. See eight variants of the story in Ālamgīr Jalil and Sāmīyul Islām, eds., "Āṭkude rājār pālāgān o kissā saṃkalan," in the Bangla Academy journal *Lok sāhitya* 15 (Pauṣ 1385 [January 1979]: 1–197. A variation of this trope will appear again in the story of Badar Pīr, in chapter 2.

20. It should be noted that there are several forms of textual performance that blur the distinction between chanting and singing. Mary Frances Dunham's analysis of *jāriḡān* highlights the performance

painted pictures called *paṭacitra* or *paṭs*, with sequential frames that function much like contemporary cinema storyboards. The visual narratives are produced by a hereditary groups of artisans—*paṭuās*, *paṭidārs*, or *citrakārs* in different parts of Bengal—who paint their tales frame by frame, originally on cloth, but much more likely now on paper. There is textual evidence of this practice of illustration dating back more than two millennia in South Asia, but no example exists today that is older than the mid-fifteenth century.²¹ The *paṭ* illustrations are surprisingly mobile, and it is impossible to tell where certain themes and even painting techniques originated. Today the tales illustrated by these paintings—and the numbers of individuals practicing this art have diminished considerably—constitute much of the repertory of itinerant performers and troupes of actors who stage the dramas in open-air *jātrā*, *pāñcālī*, and *pālagān* performances.²² Historically, the *paṭs* were deployed in those public performances to provide visual context for the actions being described and often enacted; fewer and fewer performances today

of semi-epic ballads, focusing primarily on the Shi'i martyrs of the Karbala narrative, and David M. Kane's analysis of the *syheti nāgri* "melodic reading," called *puthi porā*, demonstrates the way texts form the classical romance and *sūphī* repertoires of *musalmāni* literature; see Dunham, *Jarigan: Muslim Epic Songs of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1997), and Kane, *Puthi Porā: "Melodic Reading" and Its Use in the Islamisation of Bengal* (London: Sylheti Translation and Research, 2017). For a related analysis of the preaching style of contemporary Bangladeshi *imāms*, including analyses of the tonal and melodic patterns adopted while code-switching during the public recitation of different texts and expository styles, see Max Stille, "Poetics of Popular Preaching: *Waz Mahfils* in Contemporary Bangladesh" (PhD diss., Universität Heidelberg, 2016).

21. Today the *paṭs* are of two basic types: *lotāipaṭ*, or scrolls (both vertical and horizontal registers), and *caukāpaṭ*, which are quadrangular in shape (squares or rectangles, usually with a central figure and surrounding registers). For a concise yet technically precise description and taxonomy of the styles of paintings in popular art, not only of the *paṭs* but of clay plates and pots in the same vein, see Nisir Hossain, "Folk Painting," in *Arts and Crafts*, ed. Lala Rukh Selim, Cultural Survey of Bangladesh Series 8 (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2007), 499–510. With the kind permission of the British Museum, the cover and frontispiece of the current volume are taken from one of the oldest extant Bengali *paṭs*, c. 1780, as described by T. Richard Blurton, *Bengali Myths* (London: The British Museum Press, 2006), 67–72. The scroll itself is more than 42 feet long and contains 54 distinct registers, but is incomplete on both ends. Part of the scroll illustrates the stories of Satya Pir, Mānik Pir, the central portion that of Gāji Pir, with several other as-of-yet unidentified tales. The image adorning the cover and the frontispiece of the current book are from this *paṭ*. For illustrations and contemporary ethnography of the tradition in West Bengal, see Frank J. Korom, *Village of Painters: Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal*, with photographs by Paul Smutko (Sante Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2006), and more recently, Amitabh Sengupta, *Scroll Paintings in Bengal: Art in the Village*, foreword by Kapila Vatsyayan (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2012). For the way the tradition has survived into the present, see David McCutcheon and Suhrkumār Bhaumik, *Patuas and Patua Art in Bengal* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1999).

22. See the comprehensive ethnographies of indigenous theatre by Syed Jamil Ahmed, *Acinpakhi Infinity: Indigenous Theatre of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2000) and *In Praise of Nirañjan: Islam, Theatre and Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Pathak Samabesh, Losauk, 2001). See also the recent ethnography by Saymon Zakaria titled *Pronomohi Bongomata: Indigenous Cultural Forms of Bangladesh*, with a foreword by Tony K. Stewart (Dhaka: Nympha Publications, 2011).

are illustrated in this way, though the technique stubbornly survives. The mobility of the paintings goes hand in hand with the itinerant troupe performances in such a way that laces together the disparate rural regions of the Bengali-speaking world into a common or shared cultural experience, the ongoing experience and physical instantiation of the shared cosmologies of the tales.

This convergence is further solidified by the written word, though not usually in the high literary mode of early Bangla belles lettres—another reason for the texts' easy dismissal—though there can be little doubt that many of the authors were acutely aware of and educated in those genres, especially when authors such as Bhāratcandra, Rāmeśvar, Kṛṣṇarām Dās, and Oyājed Ali also composed numerous literary texts. Many of the stories that constitute the central corpus of these performing troupes, the very tales illustrated by the *paṭuās*, date as far back as the late fifteenth century, though most extant today are the product of successive centuries. There are hundreds upon hundreds of such manuscripts housed in contemporary repositories in Dhaka University, the Bangla Academy, the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Calcutta University, the Baṅgīya Sāhitya Pariṣat, Viśva Bhārati in Santiniketan, and a host of other regional repositories in places such as Rangpur, Kumilla, and Chittagong. The stories in these manuscripts became the initial source for large numbers of inexpensive printed texts after the advent of the printing press in India in the early decades of the nineteenth century. By the mid- to late nineteenth century the stories of the gods and goddesses and *pīrs* and *bibīs* flourished in print, mass-produced by small presses, such as Īśāncandra Śil, Viśvambhar Lāhā, and Akṣaykumār Rāy, while presses such as Siddikiyā Library, Gaosiyā Library, and Habibī Press in Calcutta, and Śulābh Jantra in Dhaka specialized in titles that would appeal to a largely *musalmāni* audience. Some new fictional tales in the romance genre, but only incidentally involving *pīrs* and other such figures, were composed as the corpus grew, some clearly for entertainment (in size and function roughly equivalent to the European novella), while others were more overtly didactic. Technically the didactic literature is rightly called *naṣihat nāmā*, or “literatures of instruction,” but the popular fictional romances that were generated in the same physical print form have also been folded into the genre, often as the antithesis of the former.²³ This blurring of genres is a sure indicator of the lackluster acknowledgement of the literature's worth by the colonial administrators who collected these titles for the National Library, Calcutta University, the Asiatic Society in Calcutta, and the India Office Library and the British Library's Oriental Collections in London—those collections yielding the bulk of extant

23. For discussion of the genre of *naṣihat nāmā* as instructional literature, see Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims, 1871–1906: A Quest for Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 82–101; and Sufia M. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity, and Language in an Islamic Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 67–71.

titles today (and they represent only a fraction of what was published).²⁴ The *pīr kathā*, however, retained their distinct identity and remained true to the formulae of romance over the centuries.

It was the older stories, however, that endured, becoming “classics” by their popular repetition in performance and in print; that is, they are the tales that speak to generation after generation because the texts remain relevant and the stories sufficiently malleable to be revalorized, continuing to be meaningful, without having to introduce new features or change plots.²⁵ As testament to their durability, a substantial number of those tales of the *pīrs* are still reproduced in inexpensive chapbooks today, though somewhat less widely circulated than a century ago.²⁶ The classic tales of Baḍa Khān Gāji, Dakṣiṇ Rāy, Mānik Pīr, and Satya Pīr, among others, were printed and reprinted repeatedly for the better part of a century starting around the 1850s and, in this flurry of activity, set the stage for the emergence of new female heroines, such as Bonbibī and Olābibī. The greatest output in print peaked in the last decades of the nineteenth century and spilled over into the first two decades of the twentieth, a production level that curiously seems to have been in direct proportion to the amount of pressure brought to bear by the Salafists, Faraizis, and other Islamist reformers dedicated to eradicating their presence—certainly a circumstantial and statistical correlation worth noting, for it suggests these texts meant something to their audiences they were loath to relinquish. While this literary efflorescence peaked nearly a century ago, it still refuses to succumb to censorship, though the tools of suppression and the money available for it are far greater today. The narratives are numerous and widespread and, when compared to the mythology of their *hinduyāni* counterparts, are no less entertaining in their dynamic and often unpredictable twists of plot. The confluence of visual representation, public performance, and print circulation expresses a world that is distinctly Bengali, but also shares much with other vernaculars in the colonial setting.²⁷

24. For the documentation by the India Office Library of this prodigious literature in the mid- to late nineteenth century, see Tapti Roy, “Disciplining the Printed Text: Colonial and National Surveillance of Bengali Literature,” in *Texts of Power: Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal*, ed. Partha Chatterjee (Calcutta: Samya, 1995), 30–62.

25. My understanding of the classic is very much conditioned by Frank Kermode’s provocative essay; see Kermode, *The Classic: Literary Images of Permanence and Change*, The T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures 1973 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

26. For an introduction to these numerous productions, see Qazi Abdul Mannan, *The Emergence and Development of Dobhasi Literature in Bengal (up to 1855 AD)*, 2nd ed. (Dacca: Bangla Academy, 1974).

27. For a very nuanced reading of the ways in which educated Bengali Muslims fashioned identity through interaction with indigenous literary and cultural traditions, the analogue to the development of *bhadralok* culture, see Neilesh Bose, *Recasting the Region: Language, Culture, and Islam in Colonial Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014). For other perspectives on the creation of Muslim identities, see again Ahmed, *Bengal Muslims*, and Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh*. In a recent

Like their Hindu complements, which extol the material virtues of worshipping the goddess Caṇḍī or celebrate the great feats of the *nāth jogī* Gopīcānd, the tales of the *pīrs* and *bibīs* demonstrate the practical advantages of paying court to these holy figures: they are credited with increasing one's wealth, extending protection from disease, healing livestock, encouraging the resourcefulness of women to keep the world in order, and providing a counter to the many dangers of the jungle. For instance, Olābibī protects her followers from cholera and other water-borne diseases endemic to the swamps and waterways. A simple offering of rice powder mixed with banana, milk, cardamom, and sugar, called *śirṇī* or *śinni*, will satisfy Satya Pīr sufficiently that he will stave off penury, as our author promises in the opening to the tale quoted above. Indeed, if one is sincere and diligent in sharing with others the *pīr's* efficacy, Satya Pīr can help one to amass great wealth. These popular figures mediate the vicissitudes of the world with a goodness and grace that invites, if not subtly induces, their listeners to strive for a better existence through their example. On the surface, the primary characters seem to be functionally equivalent to the various *hinduyāni* gods and goddesses and the ever-present *nāth jogī*, *sannyāsī*, or *vaiṣṇav* ascetic *vairāgī*. It is with these figures that they often interact through a kind of "exchange equivalence," which we will explore further.²⁸ Debabrata Naskar has mapped most clearly the sets of parallel figures that come into play in the southern reaches of the Bangla-speaking world, where most of these stories circulate.²⁹ In four chapters, he examines in turn: the song performances of the goddesses, the *devīpālā* (Śitalā, Manasā, Śaṣthī, Lakṣmī, Caṇḍī, Biśālākṣī, Nārāyaṇī, Durgā, and Santoṣī Mā); the tales of the gods, *devpālā* (Dakṣiṇ Rāy, Pañcānanda, Benākī, Cāṣimahādev, Basanta Rāy, Śani, and Dharma Ṭhākur); stories of the matrons, *bibīpālā* (Bonbibī, Olābibī, Āsānbibī, Sātībī, Naybibī, Āorājbibī, Darbārbibī); and the tales of the *sūphī* masters, *pīr o gājī pālā* (Mānik Pīr, Baḍa Pīr Sāheb, Satya Pīr, Mādār Pīr, Pīr Gorācāḍ, Mobārak Gājī, Baḍa Khā Gājī, Deoyān Gājī, Raktān Gājī, and Hajrat Jāber). These are the figures that populate the religious imagination of the Sunderbans. They are under-

dissertation, Epsita Halder has explored the ways the Karbala narrative was instrumental in defining *musalmāni* group identities and the ways the debates reverberated through the popular press, especially *musalmāni* periodical literatures; see Halder, "Of Blood and Tears: Tracing Self and Community in Karbala Narratives of Bengal (Late 19th to Early 20th Century)" (PhD diss., Jadavpur University, 2017), esp. chaps. 4, 5, and 6.

28. The concept of "exchange equivalence" can be found initially in Tony K. Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter through Translation Theory," *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2001): 261–88. This essay has been twice anthologized, first in *India's Islamic Traditions: 711–1750* (with a faulty title), ed. Richard M. Eaton (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 363–92; and again in *On Figuring Religions: Comparing Ideas, Images, and Activities*, ed. Subha Pathak (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 229–62.

29. Debabrata Naskar, *Cabbiś pargaṇār laukik devdevī: Pālāgān o loksamṣkṛti jījñāsā* (Kalakātā: De'j Pābīlīṣiṃ, 1406 BS [1999]).

stood to interact with one another, and people turn to them whenever they are in need of something that falls within the domain of their personal powers, regardless of overt religious persuasion. The distinctions of formal religion matter not at all; these figures help anyone to navigate the vagaries of basic survival.

With the way religion was politicized and conflated with ethnic and linguistic identities in the nineteenth century, ultimately culminating in the separation of India from Pakistan in 1947 (and which for different reasons led to the division of East Pakistan from West Pakistan to create Bangladesh in 1971), it is easy to see why today the perception of a functional equivalence of recognized Muslim holy figures with Hindu analogues would lead some to try to suppress the tales of popular *pīrs* and *pīrānīs*, *phakīrs*, *gājīs*, *dārveśes*, and *bibīs*. Consistent with fundamentalist impulses in theistic traditions around the world, starting in the mid- to late nineteenth century, reform-minded Muslims attempted to expunge anything deemed a local accretion, though these so-called “local” traditions have long roots in the Bangla-speaking world, in many instances stretching back to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, perhaps further (manuscripts simply do not survive in that climate, with the ravages of mold and mildew, white ants, and floods, so documentation is necessarily limited). The easy accommodation of yogic meditation and magic by *sūphī* practitioners, the similarity of devotional expression between the *vaiṣṇav* chanting the names of Kṛṣṇa in *kīrtan* or *jap* and the recitation of the qualities of Āllā in *sūphī jikir* (from the Persian *zikir*), and the gradual adoption of the Bangla language as a medium for Islamic discourse—these and many more parallel activities insinuated Islam into the culture of Bangla-speaking peoples over the last seven centuries,³⁰ to the point where no matter how zealous the effort, what is local can no longer be extracted without destroying what had grown into a very Bengali Islam. Yet in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that kind of reform is precisely what was attempted, and that effort received reinforcement from unexpected sources.

With the emergence of the printing press in the colonial environment of the nineteenth century, the tales of the legendary *pīrs*, such as Satya Pir and other popular figures, found vigorous competition in the form of inexpensive religious tracts prompted by the growing movements championing reform, many of which decried the general failures of *musalmānī* practitioners to be proper Muslims in the new sense of that term. The legendary *pīrs*, as well as those who had accepted guidance from a living *sūphī* teacher or *mursīd*, soon found themselves attacked directly in many of these publications. These popular printed texts represented a new modality of public discourse within the Bangla-speaking community. Especially evident was the growing vitriol of Muslim reformers who published

30. Richard M. Eaton has mapped out many of these instances; see Eaton, *Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, esp. chaps. 3 and 10. See also M. R. Tarafdar, *Husain Shahi Bengal, 1494–1438 A.D.: A Socio-Political Study*, 2nd ed. (Dhaka: University of Dhaka, 1999).

tracts rife with diatribes against the inherent dangers of worshipping *pīrs* and *phakīrs*. Importantly, little distinction was made between *pīrs* who were living and those who were entombed, or, alternately, those whose existence was historically verifiable and those who seemed to function only in the realm of the Bengali *imaginaire*. Colonial scholars attempting to analyze these popular narratives conflated willy-nilly the historical with the legendary, treating them simply as variations, rather than as the distinct and divergent genres with the different histories they represent.

While foreign and local Orientalist and antiquarian scholars tended on the whole to be dismissive of all stories of this class of religious mendicants, always citing the claims of their miraculous powers and heroic feats as exaggerations aimed to dupe the gullible, the critique from the normative reform-minded factions was much more acerbic and sustained. For instance, one tract writer refers to the misguided worship of “fake” or “fanciful” *pīrs* (*mithya pīr*), and explicitly names Satya Pīr and Pāglāi Pīr as leading contenders to misguide the public.³¹ Clearly the reputation of mendicant *pīrs* was in question, judging from the frequent charges of misconduct and hypocrisy,³² but the critique of charlatan religious functionaries was not limited to Muslims. For instance, the great *vaiṣṇav* and district magistrate, Bhaktivinod Thakur founded the Gauḍīya Maṭh in the late decades of the nineteenth century precisely to make respectable the offices of *vaiṣṇav vairāgīs*, or mendicants, who had so sullied the title *vairāgī* in the eyes of the up-and-coming bourgeois communities who sought to modernize Bengali society.³³ Members of the Brahmo Samaj, the Hindu nationalist Arya Samaj, and the Ramakrishna Mission all took stands against religious frauds and poseurs.³⁴ Reform seemed to be on everyone’s mind, but of course few could agree on what should constitute that reform.

Where there was antipathy towards *pīrs* during this period, it was far greater among the conservative factions of the Islamic community’s self-proclaimed purifiers than among Hindus, especially *vaiṣṇavs*, who often saw the tales of the *pīrs*

31. Sāiyad Śāh Mohāmmad Āli, *Mithya-pīr* (Kochagrām, Dinajpur: by the author; printed in Kalikātā by Mohāmmad Reyājuddin Āhmād at Reyāul-Islām Press, 1325 BS [ca. 1918]).

32. Phajlar Rahmān, *Bhaṇḍa phakīr* (Kalikātā: by the author at Niu Sarasvatī Pres, 1321 BS [ca. 1914]).

33. For Bhaktivinod’s role in reforming the *vaiṣṇavs* of Bengal and the founding of the conservative Gauḍīya Maṭh, see Jason D. Fuller, “Religion, Class, and Power: Bhaktivinod Thakur and the Transformation of Religious Authority among the Gaudiya Vaisnavas in Nineteenth-Century Bengal” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2005). For a more traditional biographical reading in the sub-genre of “life and times,” see Brian D. Marvin, “The Life and Thought of Kedarnath Dutta Bhaktivinod: A Hindu Encounter with Modernity” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1996). For the ways the *bhadralok* communities seized on this sanitizing movement, see Varuni Bhatia, *Unforgetting Chaitanya: Vaishnavism and Cultures of Devotion in Colonial Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

34. The references here are legion, too numerous to mention.

as a site of communal sharing. The *pīrs* served as a point of *equivalence*, both to Hindu deities and to various types of mendicants, in form and in function. As we have already suggested, reformers would see the *pīr kathā* as truly heretical, not Islamic at all, and some castigated the popular worship at the tombs of *pīrs*. One author named Garīb delivered a particularly scornful critique of the powerlessness of the dead *pīr* by arguing that if the *pīr* could not even keep the flies from swarming around the food offerings made at his tomb, how much help could he possibly be to the supplicant?³⁵ This technique of excoriation and mockery, which hinged on emotional sophistry, was not uncommon. Another popular tack that pushed the charlatan profile was to alert the unwary about ostensible religious teachers who were little more than thieves and scam artists, addicted to luxurious living, indulging their taste in elegant foods, milking the unwary of their hard-earned rupees.³⁶ Another author went considerably farther in his indictment by stereotyping *pīrs* and *phakīrs* as drug-addicted home-wreckers in this degraded Kali Age.³⁷ Using the shorthand label of the *mārphati* path, others took a more theological course by attacking as errant the *sūphī* practices that were designed to elevate the individual to a higher realm of consciousness, calling those practices a guaranteed way to perdition.³⁸ As Munsi Nachiraddin Chāheb and Adhin Mahāammad Hādek Orephē argued in *Jālālātāl phokrā*, it was because *mārphati* practices depended on the guidance of a human teacher, usually a *pīr* or *phakīr* serving as *murśid*, that any sober-minded practitioner would see the *sūphī* path as anathema to *śarīyat*. In that Islamist ritual economy, *śarīyat*, it was argued, was founded solely on God's guidance and was the only reliable recourse, whereas the fallible teachings of a mere human (mis)guided the devotee in the *mārphati* tradition. This jointly authored book especially condemned the mendicants' love of food and food offerings, and included an exceptionally pointed diatribe directed at the evil practice of tomb worship as the pathway to Saytān (replete with a drawing on page 13 graphically illustrating the results). Saytān, they allege, is said to corrupt the minds of the *phakīrs* by speaking to them through their meditation, so the belief in the sanctity

35. For this scathing critique of the alleged stupidity of tomb worship, see Garīb, *Iblich nāmār puthi* (Kalikātā: Śrī Akṣayakumār Rāy eṇḍ Kompāni, 1287 BS [1879–80 CE]), esp. the introductory pages, 2–4. Āhmad Śarīph and Anisujjamān both consider the author of this *Iblichnāmā* to be Munśī Garībullāh, not Phakīr Garībullāh, who was the author of *Iusuph jolekhā*, *Jaṅganāmā*, *Sonābhān*, *Satyapīrēr puthi*, and *Āmir hāmājā*, as cited in Garībullāh, *Śāh garībullāh o jaṅganāmā*, ed. Muhammad Abdul Jalil (Dhākā: Bāmlā Ekāḍemī, 1991), 22–23.

36. For a vigorous warning against the corruption of bogus *phakīrs* and *pīrs* in this final cosmic age of degradation, see Ābbās Āli Nājir, *Kalir phakīrēr khelā* (Lakpur: by the author, 1920); for a condemnation of the *bāuls* and other *fakīrs* as immoral and guilty of not practicing a legitimate or proper Islam, see Reyājuddīn Āhmād, *Bāul dhvaṅsa fatwa* (Calcutta: Mohammadi Press, 1925).

37. Mahāammad Āinaddin Sāheb, *Nachihate āhale kali* (Kalikātā: Phasīh Uddīn Āhāammad, Mahāammadī Lāibrerī, 1337 BS [ca. 1930]).

38. Munśī Mohāammad Hāphej Āli Deoyān, *Gupta mārāphat bā nadhihate pherāun* (Kalikātā: Gaosiyā Lāibrerī, Nūruddīn Āhāammad, n.d.).

of the *pīr* not only was grounded in the hubris of human ignorance, but was truly diabolical.³⁹ If it was so among the *pīrs* one encountered in person, how much more serious and damning the critique against the imaginal figures such as Mānik Pīr, Bonbibī, and others in the set of tales we are examining.

Subsequently, these conservative factions found their arguments paradoxically, albeit indirectly, supported by the authors responsible for writing the new histories of Bangla literature. These projects of establishing a nationalist secular literature, no doubt inspired by Dīneścandra Sen's *Bāṅgabhāṣā o sāhitya*⁴⁰ and his subsequent *History of Bengali Literature and Language*,⁴¹ reached their zenith in the first half of the twentieth century. The efforts expanded to multi-volume surveys like those authored by Sukumār Sen, whose text covered nearly three thousand printed pages,⁴² and Asit Kumār Bāndhyopādhyāy, whose monograph was only slightly shorter,⁴³ to name two of the most influential among the many of that generation. The recovery of vernacular literatures, spurred by the nation-building projects associated with the emerging institutions of higher education and the literary academies for the preservation of manuscripts, and so forth, were overtly secular in conception, but in Bengal, heavily influenced by elite Hindu *bhadralok* ideals in their execution.⁴⁴ In these massive and highly influential projects, the tales of the *pīrs* were treated as little more than sources of rural amusement and diversion. "Derivative" was the dismissive characterization of nearly all *musalmāni* literary productivity, largely, I think, because the most sophisticated literary texts were Bangla versions of the heavily allegorical *sūphī* romances or *premākhyān*, a high literary form derived from Avadhī and Hindavī productions (*prem kahānī*) that hark back to the Persian *masnavī* story literatures. Sukumār Sen refused to include

39. Munsī Nachiraddin Chāheeb and Adhin Mahāammad Hādek Orephe, *Jālālātāl phokrā* (Kalikātā: Āli Hānīphī, printed by Mūnsī Golām Māolā Chāheber Moratajābi Pres, n.d. [ca. 1878]). The date on the title page says 1847 BS, which is an obvious misprint (since that would indicate ca. 2440); the date of 1878 CE is provided by the Blumhardt catalogue, which often records the date of acquisition rather than the date of publication, so we can surmise publication would have probably been sometime in the mid- to late 1870s; see James Fuller Blumhardt, comp., *Catalogue of the Library of the India Office, Vol. II, Part IV—Bengali, Oriya, and Assamese Books* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1905). The reference to meditation as the entry point for Saytān begins on p. 41 of the text.

40. Dīneścandra Sen, *Bāṅgabhāṣā o sāhitya*, ed. Asit Kumār Bāndhyopādhyāy, 2 vols. (1896; repr., Kalakātā: Paścimbaṅga Rājya Pustak Paśad, 1986).

41. Dīnesh Chandra Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, rev. ed. (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1954).

42. Sukumār Sen, *Bāṅglā sāhityer itihās*, 7 bks. in 5 vols. (1347–65 BS; repr., Kalikātā: Eastern Publishers, 1383–88 BS [ca. 1976–1981]).

43. Asit Kumār Bāndhyopādhyāy, *Bāṅglā sāhityer itibṛtta*, 4 Vols. [1365–80 BS [ca. 1958–63]; repr., Kalikātā: Modern Book Agency, 1373–90 BS [ca. 1966–1983]).

44. What has customarily been called the Bengal Renaissance might more rightly be styled the Bengal Hindu Renaissance, for Islam and Muslims were decidedly absent from the academic record of it.

his survey of the Bangla *premākhyān* in his multi-volume history of Bangla literature, preferring to keep their study separate in a small format one-hundred-fifty-page monograph titled *Islāmi bānglā sāhitya*, because in his estimation they were poor translations or unimaginative retellings, little more than clichéd copies of their refined forebears.⁴⁵ But stories of Satya Pīr and the other *pīrs* and *bibīs* who populate these tales are several times removed from those allegorical *premākhyān* in their literary quality, and distinctly spotty or even devoid of the allegorical dimension, which no doubt had the effect of marginalizing them even further since the formal allegory was considered to be a higher form of art.⁴⁶

We might not unreasonably further observe that these early scholars constructing the first Bangla literary histories inherited an academic environment conditioned by colonial antiquarian and Orientalist scholars, foreign and local alike, who saw in such tales little more than syncretistic confusions of religion—Islam in unholy alliance with Hinduism—which rendered them both improper and illicit. Linguists, including the venerable polymath Suniti Kumār Caṭṭopādhyāy (in English, Chatterjee), saw the language as a mirror of religious incertitude. He considered the language of these texts to be confused, bastardized, and not proper *Bangla* at all, because it combined Persian (read: alien) elements with a

45. Sukumār Sen, *Islāmi Bānglā sāhitya* (Kalakātā: Ānanda Pābliśars Prāibhēṭ Limited, 1400 BS [ca. 1993]).

46. Aditya Behl's study of the major texts of the Hindavī corpus, which flow out of the Persian tradition starting with 'Aṭṭār's *Conference of the Birds*, confirms just how fundamentally different those allegorical tales are from the set of tales in our study; see Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379–1545*, ed. Wendy Doniger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). In a study completed five decades ago, Mantajur Rahmān Taraphdār compared the Persian *masnavīs*, the Āvadhi and Hindavī *premākhyāns*, and the Bangla retellings of those same four stories found in Behl—*Candāyan* (*Lor Cānd*), *Mrgāvati*, *Padmavati*, *Madhumālati*—and contra Sen's position in *Islāmi bānglā sāhitya*, he found that the Bangla versions constituted new, creative retellings of their intertextual predecessors, not uninspired derivatives. In that analysis, it becomes clear that the overall sophistication and allegorical possibilities of those literary works mark them as fundamentally different from the *pīr kathās* of the current study; see *Bāmlā romāṇṭik kāvyer āoyādhi-hindī paṭbhūmi* (Dhākā: Dhākā Viśvavidyālaya, 1971). Thibaut d'Hubert's recent study of Ālāol's poetics underscores the sophistication of the Bangla romance of *Padmāvatī*, arguably the most accomplished of poets to re/create these allegorical romances; see d'Hubert, *In the Shade of the Golden Palace: Ālāol and Middle Bengali Poetics in Arakan*, South Asia Research (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). Ālāol's use of high-register aesthetic theories from both Indic and Persian traditions contrasts dramatically with the register of the fictional *pīr kathās* of our study, which in some instances do look toward those aesthetics, but which are much more akin in spirit to the Urdu and Hindi traditions documented by Frances W. Pritchett; see Pritchett, *Marvelous Encounters: Folk Romance in Urdu and Hindi* (New York: Riverdale Publishing, 1985), and 'Abdullāh Ḥusain Bilgrāmī, *The Romance Tradition in Urdu: Adventures from the Dastan of Amir Ḥamzah*, trans. Frances W. Pritchett (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). For more on the Urdu *masnavīs*, see Anna Suvorova, *Masnavi: A Study of Urdu Romance*, translated from the Russian by M. Osama Faruqi (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Sanskrit-derived (read: indigenous) Bangla into what became known as *dobhāṣī* (double- or two-language speech).⁴⁷

The combined effect of these different pressures was to relegate the tales to the Victorian and Bengali *bhadralok* elitist (and even more recently, Marxist) curio cabinet of naïve folktales suitable only as entertainment for the masses, stories that came from and still belong in the kitchen. There was among the intelligentsia a palpable ambivalence about folklore and folktales, for they were indigenous, which was good for the emerging notions of nationalist identity, but they were considered naïve and childish, for some an embarrassing part of Bengal's cultural heritage.⁴⁸ The response, whose effects linger today, was to hide these tales from the official record of Bengal's religious and literary production, though after five centuries of circulation they continue to enjoy wide popularity and are performed regularly in dramas and public recitations, as noted above. The most deliberate corrective to the systematic omission of *musalmāni bāṅglā* in literary history was Āḥmad Śarīph's *Bāṅgālī o bāṅglā sāhitya*, which did not appear until 1983, more than a decade after Bangladesh's independence.⁴⁹ The foundational work that led to Śarīph's project was undertaken by Muhammad Śahīdullāh,⁵⁰ Ābdul Karīm,⁵¹ and Enāmūl Hak.⁵² These linguists, historians, and scholars of literature and religion realized that, while all manner of new *musalmāni* literatures could be generated in the high register of Bangla, *sādhu bhāṣā*, it was the older *pūthi* literature that captured the real emotional core of the Bengali Muslim community (*jātiya*), the *bhāv* or emotional core of its literary production.⁵³ They began the process of rehabilitating these and a host of other early *musalmāni* literary forms by establishing

47. Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *The Origin and Development of Bengali Language*, 2 pts. in 3 vols. (1926; repr., Calcutta: George Allen Unwin, 1975), 1:206.

48. In a rather remarkable essay, Giuseppe Flora traces this ambivalence and ambiguity across the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries; see Flora, *On Fairy Tales, Intellectuals and Nationalism in Bengal (1880–1920)*, Supplement no. 1, *Alla Rivista Degli Studi Orientali*, vol. 75 (Pisa: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 2002).

49. Āḥmad Śarīph, *Bāṅgālī o bāṅglā sāhitya*, vol. 2 (Dhākā: Bāṅglā Ekāḍemī, 1390 BS [1983]); see esp. chap. 17. While there is no question that part of the mission of the Bangla Academy in Dhaka was to ensure a new Bangla literary world that included Muslim authors alongside Hindu and secular, it is perhaps notable that Ahmad Sharif was a self-described Marxist (personal communication, Dhaka, June 20, 1988).

50. Muhammad Śahīdullāh, *Bāṅglā sāhityer kathā*, in *Śahīdullāh racanābālī*, ed. Ānisujjāmān, 3 vols. (Dhākā: Bāmlā Ekāḍemī, 1994), 2:1–504.

51. Ābdul Karīm, *A Social History of the Muslims of Bengal, down to A.D. 1538* (Dacca: The Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1959). See also the pioneering sourcebook: *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Bengali Manuscripts in Munshi Abdul Karim's Collection*, comp. Munshi Ābdul Karīm and Āḥmad Sharīf (Dacca: The Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1964). Karīm identified numerous works of previously unknown *musalmāni* poets.

52. Muhammad Enāmūl Haq, *Muhammad enāmūl hak racanāvalī*, ed. Mansur Musā, 5 vols. (Dhākā: Bāmlā Ekāḍemī, 1398–1404 BS [ca. 1991–1997]).

53. Halder, "Of Blood and Tears"; this is one of the central theses of Halder's dissertation.

an archive for manuscripts and for the mass-produced cheap print literature (*baṭ talā*).⁵⁴ Recently, Ābdul Khāyer Sekh completed a dissertation on this popular *puthi* or *pūthi* literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which surveys more than three hundred sixty such discrete texts.⁵⁵ Once widely popular, then repudiated in the face of criticism by the reformers and elites involved in the discovery of the vast Bangla literary heritage (without, however, losing their rural popularity), the texts had come full circle: the Bengali Muslim experience and identity of modern Bengal was captured in the sum of its distinctly religious narratives composed in the earlier *musalmāni bānglā*, reinstating the folk literatures that were the staple of the *musalmāni* population that was largely agrarian. And it is true, just as their critics pronounced, the tales are incredibly entertaining, but that entertainment value is not silliness or slapstick (though one will occasionally run across a vignette that would qualify, especially when the animals talk); rather, the humor likes to turn the-world-as-it-is-known on its head, raising an eyebrow at the pretensions of those in power, poking fun at hallowed institutions, indeed challenging even the gods.

We can identify fairly clearly many of the attitudes that contributed to the previous elimination from the official canons of Bangla literature and culture. But even these much-needed interventions do not address the question of the texts' *raison d'être*, their utility as religious and literary productions. Just what kind of cultural and religious work have these texts done, and have continued to do, that allowed them to thrive for centuries essentially unchanged? How have these texts managed to construct coherent worlds of meaning where *hinduyāni* and *musalmāni* characters share a common perspective? And what does it mean that they do? These and related questions will animate the remainder of this inquiry.

1.3. A PREGNANT AMBIGUITY

The story of Satya Pīr's birth at the beginning of this chapter provides some clues that can serve as a starting point for our investigation of the cultural work shouldered by these tales of *pīrs* and *bibīs*. As we have already seen, Satya Pīr's birth was anything but ordinary, and when things are out of the ordinary, there is often some hidden significance—the uncanny and marvelous are seldom gratuitous. When we talk of cultural work, we are not trying to articulate some goal-oriented agenda

54. Though he did not deem *baṭ talā* publications worthy of inclusion in his influential *Bānglā sāhityer itihās*, Sukumār Sen did write several short essays on these publications, mostly compilations of titles, illustrations, and presses; significantly he identified in excess of three hundred such publishers and printers. The essays were subsequently collected into a single volume by his son Subhadrakumār Sen. See Sukumār Sen, *Baṭ talār chāpā o chabi*, comp./ed. Subhadrakumār Sen, 1984; 2nd. ed. 2008 (repr., Kalakātā: Ānand Pāblišārs Prāibhet Limited, 2015).

55. Ābdul Khāyer Sekh, "'Musalmāni' pūthi sāhitya: Anusandhān o parjālocanā" (PhD diss., Calcutta University, 2015).

(which would, as we shall soon see, remove a text from the realm of the literary and relocate it in religious or political propaganda). Rather, I am keen to trace and explore the contours of these imaginative worlds, the world as these authors envisioned it might or could be. We can surmise that the rootedness of the text of *Baḍa satya pīr o sandhyāvatī kanyār puthi* in Bangla, with its setting in Bengal, would signal that the explorations are of local import—but the nature of that import may not be self-evident. Though this text and others depict an unusual, if not on occasion seemingly outlandish, cosmology according to accepted sectarian and even scientific standards today, I will argue that this represents a predictable exploration of possibilities that occur when the-world-as-we-know-it somehow seems unstable, shifting in directions that give one pause—the *tenor of these stories is one of uncertainty in changing times*. This is not to propose a direct causal connection, that every time the cultural climate shifts, fantastic tales ensue; rather, it is a particular response to a particular historical situation wherein a number of competing factions were laying claim to authority, often with no clear-cut arbiter of cultural standards, prompting exploration of alternatives. The alternatives carry with them concomitant shifts in moral sensibilities. This was the case in Bengal, especially from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries, a region rife with political strain from the shift from Sultanate to Mughal to colonial rule, and the constant influx of foreigners, many of whom brought a new vision of the world from across the seas. *Pīr kathās* emerge as culturally significant literary productions during these times of transition. So let us go back to our initial story of the birth of Satya Pīr and see how the author ruptures the expectations of the normal order of things and what some of the implications may be.

In Kṛṣṇahari Dās's opening, the conversation between Mohāmmad and Āllā centers on the need to send an "*avatār* for the Kali Age." This trope spins out of the classical *vaiṣṇav* construct of the *yugāvatār* or descent for the Age, which by the fifteenth century was a commonplace all across North India to indicate the need for the presence of God or some form of the divine to correct human excesses, to establish new forms of ritual practices that would be easier and more efficacious, and settle the world's uneasiness. Because of the obviousness and universality of the mechanism, no explanation is required for this religiously generic proposition: when the good of the world is under duress, God's intervention is required to reset the course of order. In this opening scene, Mohāmmad indicates that the form and the message will be different, which fits perfectly with the *vaiṣṇav* notion that each time God has to descend or send a celestial figure to earth, the remedy is novel to the situation, commensurate to the nature of the need. Mohāmmad makes clear that the way this *avatār* will differ from prior *avatār*s is his target audience: the single figure of Satya Pīr will serve a dual purpose by taking a dual form, appearing as Satya Nārāyaṇ to *hinduyāni* and as Satya Pīr to *musalmāni* constituencies. The dual form recognizes there are differences among the various communities, but its single source implies that the differences are superficial. With this approach, we

should be wary of attributing contemporary notions of “identity” as most people tend to think of it today in a post-Enlightenment mode, and even more so as it informs contemporary “identity politics” in the subcontinent. When it does begin to skew in that direction—as is hinted in the late-arriving figure of Bonbibī—the stakes are quite different from the overt posturing we associate with the present categories of Hindu and Muslim in identity politics. So how might we interpret this action?

Theologically, there is no argument: the opening simply declares that there is only one God, Āllā, who will assume a dual form as Satya Nārāyaṇ (normally associated with the god Viṣṇu) and Satya Pīr (often assumed to be no more than a saint, though in this case Āllā explicitly declares that He Himself would take on this form, yet in the narrative Satya Pīr is mysteriously separate from him). The assertion of this ontology, which appears to be based on the widespread *sūphī* theological perspective of the unity of God (what could be technically construed as *waḥdat al-wujūd*) subtly underscores the Islamic leanings of the text, but no argument is made, no authority cited, and technical terminology (such as the Arabic phrase noted above) is absent—and this absence of Arabic or Persian technical jargon is an important feature of this and similar texts to which we will have occasion to return. So we must ask: if the text is not arguing for the identity of Viṣṇu and Āllā, but simply assumes it, what is the fuss about Satya Pīr assuming a dual form? In a statement that is repeated by different characters, Kṛṣṇahari Dās notes that dual form is an expedient device to ensure that the *avatār* for the Kali Age is heard: it is one’s social standing, ritual orientation, modes of marriage alliance, and differences in commensal restrictions that distinguish people, one from another. This *avatār* for the Kali Age will not simply address the different communities in image or appearance, but will actualize the non-difference among them by quite literally taking birth in multiple communities (*kul*), but in the same form. So how does he do this if he is born of Sandhyāvatī?

Mohāmmad has designated the færie Cāndbibī to become Satya Pīr’s mother, but Cāndbibī is already safely resident in heaven, *bhest*. She will have to descend to prepare the way, to be born of the queen Priyāvatī in the demonic *brāhmaṇ* king Maidānav’s household. Before her rebirth, Cāndbibī herself wonders how she can be born a *jābanā*, that is, a female *musalmān*, from that parentage. Satya Pīr’s mother—Cāndbibī as Sandhyāvatī—is, then, of mixed descent in this worldly birth, or so it would seem, except that she claims to retain her designation, that is, she self-identifies as a *jābanā*, which is not mixed at all. This is perhaps the first real indicator of what is at stake in this story, for apparently in our author’s view, birth from a *brāhmaṇ* womb does not necessarily produce a *hinduyāni* child, in spite of the several thousand years of conditioning in South Asia regarding the nature of genealogy and birth. Does Sandhyāvatī, formerly the *jābanā* Cāndbibī, appear to be anything other than a *brāhmaṇ* princess? Already, long before the arrival of Satya Pīr, the boundaries between the various communities begin to

dissolve. But whether Sandhyāvātī is both a *jābanā* and a *brāhmaṇ* seems moot when she finally gives birth. Satya Pīr seems to be signaling that the distinctions of social rank are artificial.

Sandhyāvātī gives birth, not to a child, but to a quivering mass of coagulating blood. She is understandably distraught, but assessing the situation with a kind of cool calculation—much as she did when confronted with the frog firmly gripped in the jaws of the serpent and pleading for its life—she reasons her way to a course of action. She takes the congealed mass and hurls it into the waters of the Begavati River, just as she returned the frog to its natural habitat after prying it away from the jaws of the snake. On the one hand, it would appear that she has further compounded her serpent-killing offense in heaven, which damned her to thirty-six years on earth as a mortal. And remember, the author, Kṛṣṇaharī Dās, in his descriptions of human action with respect to heaven and hell, observes that committing an offense (*aparādh*) in heaven sends one to earth, while doing the same on earth sends one to hell. One cannot but wonder how many more lives she will have to suffer for discarding the mass that was to be her son. The author is at pains, however, to note that individuals have predictable inescapable tendencies, so what they have done is what they are likely to repeat in the future—and here Cāndibī seems to have been specially chosen to effect God's larger plan.

The frog that she liberates to the waters of the river was to be food for the snake, its release an apparent act of compassion for the animal that first appealed to her for mercy (the snake could only counter), so in spite of the karmic effect of her decision leading to the death of the serpent, there is some positive result in the rescue of the frog. In a curious inversion of her previous act, when she throws the oozing mass of preformed Satya Pīr—more of an embryonic mass rather than a fetus, based on the description, and not obviously alive—that splodgy mess becomes food for a turtle lurking in the waters of the Begavati River. The potentially negative act inverts her action with the snake and frog with a positive result, though the author does not indicate that that was her intention. By turning the bloody mass into apparent food, Satya Pīr is rescued by the turtle, perhaps ameliorating what could well have been Sandhyāvātī's undoing. The turtle instantly gobbles up the mass, swallows it, and encases it in an egg, gestating it for ten watches (one watch, or *daṇḍa*, is calculated as twenty-four minutes). She lays the egg into the sands of a shoal, whence Satya Pīr emerges fully formed. As a result of that hatching, the turtle becomes his second mother, so at first blush it would seem that one of the communities Satya Pīr will be addressing is the animal kingdom, or at least the riverine ecology. But that turtle is not just any turtle; she has previously been a *brāhmaṇ* widow who was cursed to live as a turtle for the offense of eating the uncooked meat of a cow. In a predictable repetition of her previous act, she has just consumed the raw meat of the embryonic Satya Nārāyaṇ (who will eventually take on the form of a human, but whose ontological status is actually none other than God, Āllā). In this karmic economy, the turtle is granted a major reprieve

of her sentence, with the promise that she will bear none other than God in her womb. As soon as she has fulfilled this duty by birthing Satya Nārāyaṇ, she will fly off to heaven, then called by the *vaiṣṇava* name of *vaikuṇṭha*—and that is precisely what happens. This, then, is the *avatār*'s second birth, ironically (perhaps?) literally making him twice-born, with one mixed *jābanā-brāhmaṇ* mother and one *brāhmaṇ* widow mother, each of whom in her own way abandons or orphans the fatherless Satya Pīr, leaving him to his own devices. The narrative sequence seems to suggest that the former *brāhmaṇ* widow has rescued the *jābanā* mother from further perdition by virtue of completing her pregnancy, but because of the nature of the birth—Satya Nārāyaṇ emerging from the egg buried in the sands—he not only comes from the wombs of two mothers of competing social status, but bears the marks of a chthonic hero, born of Mother Earth, Pṛthivī, as invoked in the author's opening.⁵⁶

The familiar old saw that declares certainty of motherhood, but obscurity regarding the father, holds strangely in spite of the inversion that sees one offspring from many wombs rather than many offspring from a single womb, for each time, the identity and social standing of the mother is made clear. But most immediately for the narrative plot, Sandhyāvati presents a problem, for in the eyes of her servants, her mother, and her father, she is very clearly pregnant (hence the mother), but unmarried, and therefore *prima facie* guilty of a premarital affair and about to issue a bastard. She of course protests her innocence, but no one else can know or believe that she is a virgin. Only she knows for certain that she has never even lain with a man; but who can believe that in the face of her pregnancy? Poignantly, the inchoate bloody mass to which she gives birth seems to beg the question, as she herself notes with bitter irony:

I was born on earth to provide a womb, but I have not given birth to a son. This "child" has no eyes, no mouth, no arms, no legs. Concealed in my womb, it grew inside me for ten months. It left me indelibly stained for all the world and forced me to live abandoned in the forest. There is no father to come forward to acknowledge, for he could not acknowledge truthfully this rubbish born of my womb. Why has Fate, Bidhātā, written my *karma* this way, that I must live lost, deep in the forest, and for what? For whom?⁵⁷

56. Mircea Eliade argued that in the case of chthonic cultural heroes, the Earth was the mother, and the remote Sky God the father. There is a strong resonance here because Āllā in heaven impregnates Sandhyāvati via the rose, then she in turn, by inadvertently feeding the turtle, impregnates the turtle, who deposits the egg in the womb of Mother Earth, Pṛthivī, from whom Satya Pīr/Nārāyaṇ emerges fully formed. See Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958; repr., New York: New American Library, 1963), 239–64. The mythic motif of the relay is also frequently noted by Eliade in a number of publications.

57. Kṛṣṇahari Dās, *Baḍa satya pīr o sandhyāvati kanyār puthi*, 33.

The reader of this text will, of course, have the advantage of knowing what Sandhyāvati cannot yet know, that her apparent stillbirth is actually Satya Pīr. She is understandably confused by the commonly noted amnesia that occurs when heavenly figures undergo birth in the world of mortals; she does not know who she “really” is. Prior to her birth on earth, she in fact astutely appraised the situation as singular—a *jābanā* born of a *musalmān*-killing king’s wife—what we might imagine to be something akin to an existential crisis, except—as is often repeated in Indic tales—that she is oblivious to it once she has descended. She then questions the clarity of the instructions she received in the dream sequence, which impelled her to go to the river and refuse to leave until she retrieved just the right flower, since the result of that simple gesture of smelling the flower has proved so wrongfully fateful. Upon reflection, she is able to identify the precise moment of conception, but questions neither the method nor who is responsible. She feels mysteriously used, but to no end she can fathom. She observes, as many other narrators have routinely observed, “Who can know God’s mysterious ways?” though the audience does already know.

While the audience for this story would be comfortable in the knowledge of Satya Pīr’s descent from heaven, the question of his paternity remains obscure and hangs over the entirety of the Sandhyāvati sequence of episodes. Is it God? Does divine insemination through the fragrance of a flower count as fathering? But Satya Pīr is already a fully formed, functional adult saint passing his time in the heavenly paradise of *bhest* before the descent, and he even observes that this will not be the first time he experiences existence on earth, his previous exploits having earned him that coveted place in heaven. So who, then, are his mother and father? Does it matter? Perhaps more importantly, one might not unreasonably ask how, precisely, a mortal (and to become a saint, one must presume that at some point Satya Pīr was mortal) can be reborn on earth. The operations of *karma* and rebirth, in fact, are commonly accepted in this text, for we may recall that the færie Cāndbibī herself argues that only by committing great offenses (*aparādh*) can one be reborn on earth. But Fate in the form of the god Bidhātā is also inextricably connected, and therefore blamed as well. From the references to reaping the fruits of *karma* and the characterization of the age being one of degradation, the Kali Age, the cosmology seems marked as a traditional Indic, and specifically Bengali, cultural view.

In the end, Satya Pīr, who is a recognized saint—one of the “friends of God,” as they are known⁵⁸—descends from heaven as the *avatār* of the Kali Age and is born directly from God’s impregnation of an unmarried *musalmāni* færie in the form of a virgin girl born of a *brāhmaṇ* queen, and then born a second time from a turtle mother who is a cursed unmarried *brāhmaṇ* widow (both births magnifying Satya

58. See John Renard, *Friends of God: Islamic Images of Piety, Commitment, and Servanthood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

Pir's status as a twice-born (a twice-born twice-born!), yet from the perspective of those around him, twice a bastard, perhaps a not-so-subtle commentary on the "high esteem" in which *brāhmaṇs* are held. Earlier in *bhest*, Āllā told Mohāmmad that He Himself would descend, while the unnamed turtle reported that she too was to bear God, Satya Nārāyaṇ or Nirañjan, not just a saint. The quivering mass to which Sandhyāvati gives birth is described in terms that hint of the famous passage in the *Śvetāśvatāra Upaniṣad* of the ultimate reality of *brahman* (n) assuming the characteristics of God, "grasping without hands, moving without feet, seeing without eyes, hearing without ears . . ." ⁵⁹ If Satya Pir is this ultimate reality as God, what of the paternity of Satya Pir via the turtle mother? It would seem to be God working through Cāndibī herself who impregnates the turtle, suggesting a transsexual paternity, which in turn conflates with gender the already-propheesied birth for two communities. That sequence at least raises the possibility that fathering is instrumental, that it is as much enacted as gendered; and in a karmic economy, gender is always situational because one may well have been another gender in a previous existence, which undercuts claims to blood lineage as the primary marker of identity. The multitude of ambiguities of parentage and genealogy for Satya Pir cannot be insignificant. Satya Pir's dual form is not simply an appearance, but the result of his multiple births from women of different social groups (*kul*), quite literally embodying the boundary-crossing his dual form was intended to address. He rises from within the ranks of those different groups, intent on appearing in whatever form is needed and appropriate to his followers. Here we get one of the first cogent statements of the future work of Satya Pir: *he ministers to the needs of everyone, regardless of social standing—birth does not matter*. Importantly, he is of mixed parentage, born first of an unmarried *jabanā-brāhmaṇ* woman and then from a *brāhmaṇ* widow, both of whom abandon him immediately after birth, leaving him twice orphaned. This *avatār* for the age knows firsthand whereof he speaks and makes clear the object of his later ministrations. As the author Kṛṣṇahari Dās notes in his opening salutations:

... Satya Pir comes to those who call, whether orphans without means or those devoid of guidance. Should all people present sing their praises publicly, Satya Pir will send their troubles far away. When people serve him with respect, offering the custom due, Satya Pir becomes the refuge of every human being.⁶⁰

What the Lord Nirañjan—as Satya Pir and as Satya Nārāyaṇ—offers is not dependent on birth or social distinction, nor does it hinge on any sectarian or doctrinal

59. *Śvetāśvatāra Upaniṣad*, trans. Robert Ernest Hume, 3.19: *apāṇipādo javano grahitā paśyaty-acakṣuḥ sa śnotyakarnaḥ* . . . in *Thirteen Principal Upaniṣads: Original Sanskrit Text with English Translation*, trans. Hume, ed. N. C. Panda, rev. ed., vol. 2 (New Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, 2012).

60. Kṛṣṇahari Dās, *Baḍa satya pīr o sandhyāvati kanyār puthi*, 4.

stance: one need only respectfully petition God (regardless of form) to receive his aid. That in turn suggests that conversion per se is decidedly not at stake; God's good will and assistance is available to everyone regardless and is not affected by the various social strictures that are observed in Bengal's social world. Even offenses that center on food regimes, diet, and commensality do not stop one from successfully serving as an instrument of God's plan and, in the end, prove no bar to entering (in the case of the *brāhmaṇ* widow-cum-turtle) or reentering heaven (in the case of Cāndbibī-cum-Sandhyāvatī), whether that heaven is designated as *vaikuṇṭha* or *bhest*. And calling *bhest* by the *vaiṣṇav* name *vaikuṇṭha* would seem to be perfectly appropriate, for the etymology of *vaikuṇṭha* signals a place where people are devoid or separated from (*vi-*) their ignorance and anxiety (*kuṇṭha*), so people who worship God in whatever form find that as their reward. The breaking down of social distinctions and the futility of maintaining strict genealogical, commensal, and ritual purity will surface again and again as the first line of instruction in the *vade mecum* for personal conduct to allow access to Satya Pīr's helping hand. In laying out his divine plan of action, Āllā puts one final stipulation on Satya Pīr's descent as *avatār*: he will never be allowed to marry. Now it becomes clear why: for him to marry would perpetuate the social distinctions his dual form is designed to undermine—he must not choose sides and father children who would potentially recreate the distinctions he is attempting to efface. Why this is critical will become ever more apparent as we work our way through these cycles of adventure.