Subjunctive Explorations

The Parodic Work of Pīr Kathā

Gāji and Kālu landed up on the shore of the ocean,
but there was no boat moored there, not even a dinghy.
The two boys sat on the beach pondering their plight.
Together they prayed to resolve their problem:
"Please show your mercy to us, O Stainless Nirañjan!"
In response to Gāji's call, a disembodied voice called out:
"Throw into the ocean that staff you hold in your hand!
It will magically mutate into a boat,
and by my grace will you be guided across."
Heeding these miraculous words from the sky,
Gāji immediately hurled his staff into the ocean
while meditating on the Stainless Nirañjan.
The staff that was cast immediately morphed into a boat.
Giddy with satisfaction, the two brothers climbed in.
They pushed off and floated out into the deep waters.
The pair crossed from one region to the next, where
they finally beached on an island in the Sundarban forest.
Śāhā then called all of the tigers scattered
through the mangrove swamps of the Sundarban.
They came, and each and every one made obeisance,
dropping in submission before the person of Gāji.

—SĀYEB MUNSĪ ĀBDUL OHĀB, *GĀJI KĀLU O CĀMPĀVATĪ KANYĀR PUNTHI*

3.1. NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN
FICTIONAL HAGIOGRAPHY

We can affirm from the unabridged translation in the last chapter that the *Mānikpīrer jahurānāmā* of Jaidi conforms to the generally accepted structure of romance, even in the truncated form of the manuscript which leads up to but does not include the life of Mānik Pīr, its proper subject. As a first step, the rather mechanistic catalogue of motifs is useful to confirm the narrative's participation in the semantics of the genre as outlined by Jameson.[1] It does not, however, address how the story might be expected to execute its mission. To help us move from mode to structure, which points to authorial strategy, Frye instructively contrasts realism with romance: "In realism the attempt is to keep the action horizontal, using a technique of causality in which the characters are prior to the plot—'given these characters, what will happen?' Romance is more 'sensational,' moving from one discontinuous episode to another, describing what happens to the characters 'externally.' The logic of realism is 'hence' and the logic of romance is 'and then.'"[2]

Taken as a whole, Jaidi's tale conforms to the "and then" structure of romance as we meander with Badar Pīr across Bengal and parts of North India, not to mention heaven. But the "and then" strategy is much more pronounced in the considerably longer story of Satya Pīr penned by Kṛṣṇahari Dās, the *Baḍa satya pīr o sandhyāvatī kanyār punthi* with which we started the first chapter. The text presents discrete episodes, which are at best only loosely connected, and which are sufficiently self-contained that—with one exception, the transition from the story of the prostitute to that of Jasmanta the merchant (as we shall see below in chapter 6)—they could be presented in just about any order, especially those that constitute the second half of the book. The only transitions are statements on the order of "*And then* Satya Pīr went to see Main Gidāl," literally articulating the logic of the genre. Much of the changing geographic locale is fictional, though not all, so tracing the arc of his movement does not plot a particularly recognizable passage through contiguous space or measured time; rather, it is his movement itself that establishes the temporality that signals the ongoing segments of his mission, each ordeal completed only to be displaced by yet another circumstance in need of intervention, which by the end of the book is left hanging, incomplete.

The early episodes that take place in Mālañcā, whose king Satya Pīr has been explicitly sent down to chastise, occupy more than half of the book; then we see Satya Pīr interacting with and instructing a number of different figures across this fictional Bengali landscape. Structurally, as the number of episodes multiplies—there are ten altogether in the second section—the narratives become increasingly

---

1. Frederic Jameson, "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre," *New Literary History* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1975): 136–37.

2. Frye, *Secular Scripture*, 47.

attenuated, condensing the formula of confrontation and resolution in a manner that suggests the concept of "and so on and so forth"; once the formula is established, it is left to the receiver of the text to fill in the gaps, which by that time are nearly completely predictable. Not surprisingly, this massive text has no concluding episode that closes out Satya Pīr's work on earth. In his last recorded encounter, his intervention with king Main Gidāl, he successfully stops the ruler from sacrificing young boys to the goddess Kālī. The king has had a dramatic change of heart—the details of how this came about are not recorded—and he recognizes the sanctity of Satya Pīr, proffers his favored offering of *sinni*, and, says the text, remains true to this new morality for as long as he lives. In the last lines, the author writes: "The episode of Gidāl has come to a close. May Satya Nārāyaṇ be merciful to all who can taste its beauty. May those who have listened be rescued by their own changed virtues. This book has finally come to an end, composed through the strenuous efforts of Kṛṣṇahari Dās."[3] This open-ended finale does not provide closure, subtly suggesting that Satya Pīr continues his work in the Kali Age and that there are more stories to be told.

Jameson argues persuasively that both the *semantic mode* and the *syntactical structure* combine to reveal the work of romance, which will require mediation by some magical element,[4] and magical elements abound, often launching each episode in a long succession. Each exhibition of fantastic acts, sometimes in a cluster, resolves conflict and settles the point, which is always some variation of the greatness of God, Āllā, and the power of the friends of God, peppered with quick lessons in morality that connect social-class-specific concerns to a larger, universal ethic. Barbara Fuchs characterizes the succession of these episodic events in the syntactical structure as the *segmented narrative*, wherein each plot is interrupted to advance the others,[5] a strategy that is aptly demonstrated in Badar Pīr's adventures, as translated in the preceding chapter. In Fuchs's terms, this displacement of one narrative by the next, the episodic structure becomes "a textual template for productive longing" which delays resolution or consummation, the delay itself paradoxically producing the text.[6] Each new undertaking is interrupted, redirecting the protagonist's action to another task. In Jaidi's *Mānikpīrer jahurānāmā*, Badar is sent to prepare the way for Mānik, but gets caught up in his preaching. He starts to build a *masjid*, but leaves it unfinished when stalled by God, so he installs another *pīr* to establish a *dargā* there. He marries the princess who will be the mother of Mānik, but fails to impregnate her before heading into the wild to practice his austerities. Then, sometime after forfeiting his celibacy to her in a

---

3. Kṛṣṇahari Dās, *Baḍa satya pīr o sandhyāvatī kanyār punthi*, 220.

4. Jameson, "Magical Narratives," 137–42.

5. Barbara Fuchs, *Romance* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 57–58.

6. It is precisely the ability of this episodic structure to expand or contract to fit the performance or needs of any particular telling that makes the genre so appealing to performers and the audience.

dream, he interrupts his physical austerities and heads back home—and the rest we can only imagine, since the manuscript breaks off.

Though we cannot follow Badar's tale any further from the manuscript at hand, there is another manuscript that starts about where Jaidi's text ends, with a slight modification to the identity of the characters. In Munsī Mohāmmad Pijiruddīn's *Mānik pīr kecchā*,[7] Badar is not the father of Mānik, but his foster father, the position of Madu the gardener in Jaidi's narrative. Badar is Badarjinda Śāh, suggestive of high religious status, but actually a merchant, who finds Mānik and takes him home to his wife, Churāt Bībī. Soon after Mānik's arrival, Badarjinda Śāh goes off on a trading venture and returns only after twelve years. He finds a young man sleeping in the same house with his wife and predictably is outraged at being the cuckold. Without inquiring, and ignoring all attempts by his wife and son to explain, he bundles Mānik into a large chest, bolts the lid, and sets it ablaze, where it burns for three days. By the intervention of Jibril, sent by Āllā to protect Mānik, the young man is kept safe, steps out of the chest, respectfully but forcefully chastises his foster father for his irrationally unjust treatment, and leaves home to begin his own set of heroic adventures as a *jindā pīr* to do the work of God. The reader is made to understand that Mānik, having emerged unscathed from these trials, is now prepared to undertake his mission.[8] The trials of this preparatory period leading to departure can take many forms, but it is also not unusual for these tests to be formulaic, though their resolution may be improvised differently.[9]

7. Munsī Mohāmmad Pijiruddīn, *Mānik pīr kecchā* (Kalikātā: Gāosiya Lāibrerī, n.d. [ca. 1872?]; see Tony K. Stewart, trans., "The Tales of Mānik Pīr: Protector of Cows in Bengal," in *Tales of God's Friends: Islamic Hagiography in Translation*, ed. by John Renard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 312–32; see also a summary in Dineshchandra Sen, *The Folk-Literature of Bengal* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1920), 113–24.

8. A recent high-end comic book version of the birth of Mānik follows the same story line as Pijiruddin's *Mānik pīr kecchā;* see Saswat Ghosh, comp., "The Birth of Manik Pir," in *Folk Tales from India: The Sunderbans*, vol. 1, with illustrations by Dipankar Bhattacharya (New Delhi: Vivalok Comics, 2003), 7–11. The text also includes another story similar to one from Pijiruddin's tale, "Kinu Ghosh and Manik Pir," 12–15.

9. While Mānik Pīr is widely recognized by name, other manuscripts and print editions of his stories are not easily found. Sen summarized the story of Dukhe/Dukhī/Dukhīya in Phakīr Mahammad's *Mānik pīrer gīt;* see Sukumār Sen, *Islāmi bāṃlā sāhitya*, 62–70. Syed Jamil Ahmed has given an English summary and an insightful reading as a tale of subaltern resistance, following Scott; see Ahmed, "Manik Pir as a Subaltern Trickster: Grandiloquent Tales of Extra-Scriptural Imagination," *Depart Magazine*, 9th issue, accessed December 2, 2018, at www.departmag.com/index.php/en/detail/189/Grandiloquent-tales-of-extra-scriptural-Imagination. Beyond a transcription of an excerpt regarding Mānik's skill as a veterinarian in Girīndranāth Dās's reference work, I was unable to locate the *Mānik pīr gān* of Satyen Rāy, though I translated that one passage in Stewart, "The Tales of Mānik Pīr," 314; see Girīndranāth Dās, *Bāṃlā pīr sāhityer kathā*, 1st ed., 418. Roy has provided a summary of another wonderful tale of Mānik and Īsā (= Jesus) who kill a boy for his liver to resurrect another young boy, then go and resurrect the liver donor—it is from a manuscript in the Jaynagar Manuscript Library by Shaikh Hābil titled *Mānik pīrer gān*; see Roy, *Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, 245–48.

While romances in any language are going to have culturally relevant obstacles, the array of challenges fall into recognizable sets that have shaped our understanding of the Quest in hero stories.[10] We can illustrate this with another of the *pīr kathās* (which we shall examine in more detail below) through the perilous trials in the opening sections of the story of Gāji, his brother Kālu, and the maiden Cāmpāvatī. The tale closely mirrors Mānik's own experience: Gāji has decided to begin his mission as a *pīr*, so he informs his father that he is abdicating his future kingship. His father, the king Sekander, is furious and refuses to grant permission to leave. We take up the story when Gāji is twelve years old, as told in *Gāji kalu o cāmpāvatī kanyār puthi* by Abdul Ohāb (Wahab).[11]

Śāhā Sekandar sent for Gājī and spoke to him. "I want you to rule, my child, to sit on the throne in court. To see you deliberate and judge affairs would fill my eyes with tears of joy." Gāji replied, "Listen carefully to what I have to say, dear father. I have no desire whatsoever to rule."

When he heard this, Sekandar Śāhā rebuked him in anger, "Why else were you born on this earth, you unworthy, disobedient son?" to which Gājī replied, "Listen father, please pay attention as I try to explain to you. Do not lecture me about assuming your kingship. I have turned away from that and put behind me this endless intoxication with power and wealth. What pleasure would come my way from the managing of riches and people? When I die to this world, not even the tiniest shred of cloth will accompany me. I will become a *phakir* and pay my respects only to him who imagined and fabricated this universe we call creation. I will become a *phakir* and bow only to him who, with but a tiny word, brought this world into existence." Sekandar Śāhā desperately tried to reason, "Listen my dear child, abandon this notion of becoming a *phakīr* and dedicate yourself to ruling." But Gāji was already a *jindā pīr* and would not listen to his father's argument. When Sekandar Śāhā heard him announce publicly "I will become a *phakir*," he seethed with anger. He issued the order for the executioner to put Gāji to death.

As soon as his courtiers received the order, an executioner was brought. He had decided in advance the way Gāji was to die. The executioner swung the curved blade of his *talwar* sword across Gāji's neck to decapitate him, but Gāji fixed his heart and mind on the Lord Khodā, and He, Āllā, showered his beneficence upon him. Not even a single hair on his head was grazed as Gāji remained serene. Ten times and more did the *talwar* rain down its blows, but Gāji's body never suffered a wound.

10. The worldwide hero and Quest tales are well documented, so not enumerated here. For the hero cycle in Indian narratives, see Véronique Bouillier and Claudine Le Blanc, comp., *L'usage des héros: Traditions narratives et affirmations identitaires dans le monde indien*, Bibliothéque de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études Sciences Historiques et Philologiques Tome 343 (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 2006).

11. Sāyeb Munsī Ābdul Ohāb, *Gāji kālu o cāmpāvatī kanyār punthi* (Kalikātā: Munsī Ābdul Hāmād Khān; repr., Kalikātā: Śrīmahāmmad Rabiullā at Hāmidīyā Press, Es Rahmān aṇḍ Sans printer, 1315 BS [ca. 1908]), 6–10.

Witnessing this, Sekandar Śāhā screamed his anger: "Fit out ten of the biggest most dangerous bull elephants!" The mahouts heard and quickly brought ten such elephants. The Śāhā described precisely what he wanted the mahouts to do: "Stir up the elephants quickly to make them trample Gāji." The mahouts heeded his order and drove the elephants hard. The elephants first wrapped their trunks around Gāji and repeatedly hurled him against the river bank, each time ramming their tusks into his body. The elephants mangled and gored him, over and over and over, but Gāji remained unperturbed, his mind serenely fixed on Āllā. They pulverized and impaled Gāji's body absolutely to no avail; rather, it was they who suffered broken tusks, and when the distal pads of their feet were split, they were left crippled. The elephants made obeisance to Gāji's person and threw off their mahouts who, in a mad dash, barely managed to escape. Though Sekandar Śāhā witnessed this marvel, he once again boiled in a rage.

He then gave the order, "Build a fire pit and stoke it to an inferno, be quick!" The second they heard, his attendants hastened to dig that fire pit. Sekandar ordered them to hurl Gāji into the pit, and the moment they received that directive, they wasted no time in mobbing Gāji. When the flames were roaring high, into the pit they launched him. As he flew deep into the belly of the fire, Gāji's heart remained pure and calm as he remembered his Lord, Prabhu. With his hands pressed together in respect, Gāji called out to the Lord God, Master Creator, Prabhu Kartā, "Please send water to me, for I am your obedient servant." Suddenly cascades of water deluged him as the fire raged all around. Gāji sat calmly in the midst of that fire until after three days it burned itself out. When Sekandar saw this, he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him; he thought to himself, 'My son possesses some kind of magic or sorcery.'

Still not pacified, he issued the order to fetch ten massive boulders to bind Gāji to those massive rocks. "Ah, cast him into the depths of the ocean so that he surely sinks." When they received the decree, they bound Gāji and heaved him into the sea. As he sank into the ocean depths, Gāji meditated on Nirañjan, the Stainless One: "O Lord, Prabhu, come quickly to the aid of your lowly servant." The Lord God, Master Creator, felt compassion for Gāji. The shackles on his limbs sloughed off and by the grace of God, Prabhu, the boulders floated. Gāji perched himself quickly on top of the rocks, and not too much time later he made his way back to the town of Bairāṭ. When they saw Gāji, everyone was flummoxed and filled with awe.

Sekander Śāhā met Gāji and said, 'You have one more chance to convince me that you are a *phakir.*" The Śāhā then picked up one tiny needle and cast it far out into the ocean, after which he beckoned to Gāji and commanded, "Go and fetch that needle!" When he heard this Gāji shivered at the prospect. He eventually made his way to the shores of the ocean. Gāji appealed to God: "Listen, O Lord Prabhu, you are an ocean of mercy. The Supreme Lord, Param Īśvar, you can rescue any and every one. O Lord Prabhu, filled with grace, please hear my petition offered at the tomb of a saint. How will I be able to retrieve the needle from the ocean depths?" And in this fashion did Gāji Śāhā meditate.

At the express command of the Lord Prabhu, Khoyāj arrived there. Khoyāj Khejer said to Gāji, "Tell me what is troubling you." Gāji replied, "Please tell me who you are, then I will tell you my tale of woe." Khoyāj Khejer then revealed his identity, and

as soon as he heard the name, Gāji made obeisance, offering *salāms*. He knelt down, clasped Khoyāj Khejer's feet, and then detailed all of the troubles that made him suffer so. Khoyāj consoled him, "My son, be at peace." The Pīr then called on Śura and Āśvari.[12] They arrived, their bodies the size of mountains. They bowed in obeisance, making *salām*, and inquired of their calling. Khoyāj Khejer spoke, "Listen to our predicament. Śāhā Sekāndar threw a needle into the ocean and I need you to retrieve it. It is to execute this task that I have summoned you." No sooner had they heard than Śura and Āśuri descended into the waters. They drew the waters up and stored them up in the mountains.[13] The ocean was drained dry and only sand was left, so Śura and Āśvari dug, but could not locate the needle. They returned to Khoyāj and spoke to him: "Although we dug and mined the sand, we could not locate the needle anywhere in the ocean floor." So the Pīr took himself into meditation and then understood. "Just as Śāhā Sekāndar threw the needle into the ocean, along came a man of the sea, a merman, who picked it up and then headed onward to the underworld city of Pātālanagar. He gave the needle to his young daughter, a færie, so she could fix up her hair, and so into her hair she wove it." Khejer then instructed them, "Śura and Āśvari, go back again. The needle is pinned in the hair of the young færie who lives in Pātāla; bring it back here straight away." When the two celestials (*danav*) received the command, they headed for Pātāla at once and just as quickly returned with the needle. After Khoyāj vouchsafed the needle into the hands of Gāji, he departed.

Gāji then took it and eventually made his way to his own quarters, whereupon he immediately placed the needle into the hand of his father. Sekāndar looked hard at the needle and contemplated its meaning. Feeling quite gratified, indeed overwhelmed, he embraced Gāji and kissed his lotus face hundreds of thousands of times. Sekāndar spoke. "My dear son, treasure of my heart, I have caused you much grief and suffering. Do not hold a grudge against me for all the suffering, for you cannot possibly fathom what I intended. Look, my beloved son, I have on my tongue a poison pill. Had you died, I would have swallowed the poison. That poison would have eaten up my life right then and there. I take an oath before God, Khodā, to confirm the truthfulness of what I say. Listen, son, to what I now tell you. You are the one and only son I have in these three worlds. You must rule the kingdom with the aid of your ministers and confidants. When I look at you my heart and life are refreshed. My treasured son, you are the lamp that lights my lineage. Please honor my request and rule the kingdom with pleasure and ease. After I have died, only then should you become a *phakir*. I beg you to honor my wishes and calm my heart." And so in this way did Sekāndar make his various arguments and pleas.

Gāji gave no reply and remained with his head bowed. Gāji then properly gave *salām* to his father as the king, after which he sought out his mother, Ajupā, in the women's apartments. He grasped the feet of his mother in deep obeisance and

---

12. The names of these two appear to be versions of the Sanskrit *sura* and *āsura*, the feminine of the latter being *āsuri*, thus demigods and antigods. The conjunct /v/ *bɔphalā* is not pronounced, but rather doubles the consonant to which it is joined, so *āśvari* and *āśuri* (as it is spelled a few lines later) are pronounced in much the same way. Subsequently they are referred to as *danavas*, often glossed as demons, who are foes of the gods but obviously here under the control of Khoyāj Khejer.

13. The line can also be read as "They stacked the waters up like a mountain."

then, with tears streaming from his eyes, he buried himself in his mother's bosom. Seeing her Gāji like this, she broke down in loud lament. "In spite of the wretched misery that has been written on your forehead, my child, you are the defender of the ignorant and the wealth of those bereft. You are the life of my life, the jewel of this wretched woman. Your father has tortured you unmercifully, what more can I say? Please do not leave this house for the world—stay here with me in my quarters day and night! Just to look at you soothes my eyes." The winsome Ajupā then took Gājī to her lap and tenderly fed him specially prepared dishes. When the day came to a close and darkness fell, Ajupā pulled him close and they lay down together.

When she lay on the couch, the queen eventually drifted off to sleep, and as soon as her guard was down, Gājī Śāhā quickly got up. Crying softly to himself, Gājī began to reflect privately on his sad plight: 'In this king's world my father has inflicted great misery on me. I cannot describe the horrors my father has committed. To stay under his dominion is impossible, so this is my vow: I will abandon this land and wander across the world, and in the name of Āllā, I will become a *phakir*.' Gājī then dressed himself in a traditional mendicant's robe woven with gold thread, and cinched a chain of gold around his waist. Gājī picked up a golden staff in his hand and slipped his feet into golden sandals. He pulled a woven bag onto his shoulder and wrapped prayer beads around his ankle as protection against all troubles and fears. After hastily dressing in his *phakir*'s garb, he reverently honored his mother's feet.

Ābdul Ohāb tells of his remorse: Dear mother, your son is now a phakir.

· · ·

The entertainment value in this passage is found in part in the formulaic nature of the succession of ordeals, each one insurmountable until the last, about which even Gājī despairs. The critics are right when they say these tales are indeed amusing, but that entertainment is hardly the end of it. The production and circulation of these lengthy tales bespeak a skill with language and composition in an environment where the majority of the population could neither read nor write. The prolific seventeenth-century author Kṛṣṇarām Dās, who composed the more than two-thousand-line story of Dakṣīṇ Rāy in conflict with Baḍa Khān Gājī in his *Rāy maṅgal*, also composed *maṅgal kāvyas* dedicated to Kālikā, Ṣaṣṭhī, Śītalā, and Kamalā, covering another six thousand lines.[14] The Mahārāj of Bardhamān in the early eighteenth century awarded the title Kaviratna, or "Jewel of Poets," to court poet Ghanarām Cakravartī, author of one of the most popular poems dedicated to Satya Nārāyaṇ, variously titled *Satyanārāyaṇ itihās* or *Satyanārāyaṇ*

14. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, *Kavi kṛṣṇarām dāser granthāvalī*, ed. Satyanārāyaṇ Bhaṭṭācāryya (Kalikātā: Kalikātā Viśvavidyālay, 1958). Haridev also composed a *Rāy maṅgal* and a *Śitalā maṅgal*; see Haridev, *Haridever racanāvalī: Rāy maṅgal o śītalā maṅgal*, ed. Pañcānan Maṇḍal, Sāhityaprakāśikā vol. 4 (Śāntiniketan: Viśvabhāratī [1466 ʙs (ca. 1959)]).

ras sindhu;[15] he also composed the weightiest of all the *Dharma maṅgal* texts,[16] the figure Dharma who is associated on occasion with Satya Pīr. Śekh Khodā Bakhś composed the tale of Gājī, his eventual wife Cāmpāvatī, and his half-brother Kālu, which in the earliest known manuscript dated to about 1750,[17] stretched to more than eighteen thousand lines in fifty-eight *pālās* or sections, the manuscript made up of 664 folios; critically edited by A. K. M. Jākāriyā and published by the Bangla Akademi, it covers 307 imperial octavo double-columned pages. In that same printed edition Jākāriyā included the full edited text of Kavi Hālumīr, titled *Baḍo khān gājīr kerāmati*, which itself covers more than eleven thousand lines.[18]

These *pīr kathās* can not only be imposing in size, their vocabulary can be uncommonly formidable, and their diction not always but often artful. Kṛṣṇarām routinely switches from a narrative Bangla to a formal register when portraying Dakṣiṇ Rāy's direct speech, but shifts registers altogether to a patois we might characterize as pidgin or *kichiri* Hindustani when portraying Baḍa Khān Gāji's tirades.[19] In some instances the authors formally employ *alaṃkār*—an æsthetic standard that is often deemed little more than linguistic pyrotechnics or tricks of the trade, but which even then attests to the technical skill of the author and which is a prerequisite for generating literary expression that invokes the carefully orchestrated experience of emotion (*ras*, Skt. *rasa*). One good example is the *cautriśa* embedded in the *Satyanārāyaṇer puthi* of Caitanya Prasād Poddār Mahāśay, which begins each line with the next consonant in alphabetical order, and in this example, includes further alliteration of that initial character within the same line.[20] Other authors make more than passing attempts to manipulate the standard elements of *rasa* theory in their depictions of the emotional palette

15. Ghanarām Cakravarttī, *Satyanārāṇa ras sindhu*, ed. Praphullakumār Bhaṭṭācāryya and Kālīpad Siṃha (Barddhamān: Barddhamān Sāhitya Sabhā, 1353 ʙꜱ [ca. 1946]), and the considerably older but also nicely edited Dvija Ghanarām, *Satyanārāyaṇ itihās*, ed. Mahendranāth Ghoṣ (Kalikātā: Bhabanīpur Orieṇṭāl Pres, 1292 ʙꜱ [ca. 1885]).

16. Ghanarām Cakravarttī, *Dharma maṅgal*, ed. Piyūṣkānti Mahāpātrā (Kalikātā: Kalikātā Viśvavidyālay, 1962).

17. Ābul Kālām Mohāmmad Jākāriyā, ed., *Bāṅglā sāhitye gājī kālu o cāmpāvatī upākhyān* (Ḍhākā: Bāṃlā Ekāḍemī, 1396 ʙꜱ [1989]), introduction, 77–80. Khodā Bakhś was born in 1698–99.

18. Ābul Kālām Mohāmmad Jākāriyā, ed. This volume includes an introduction of 113 pages as well as the tales of Śekh Khodā Bakhś (1–307) and Kavi Hālumīr (309–510).

19. Baḍa Khān Gāji's speech is always colorful, but for one of the more invective-laden, ear-blistering rants, see Kṛṣṇarām's "Rāy maṅgal" in *Kavi kṛṣṇarām dāser granthāvalī*, 197–98, vv. 373–86.

20. Raghunāth Cakravartī, *Satyanārāyaṇer puthi*, ed. Caitanya Prasād Poddār Mahāśay, 2nd ed. (Noyākhālī: Yogendramohan Poddār, 1315 ʙꜱ [10 August 1908]), 18–21. The introduction states that the book was published in memory of the author's older brother, Lalitmohān Poddār, but was actually composed by the publisher's father, Caitanya Prasād Poddār Mahāśay, who was not acknowledged on the title page. See also the *cautrīśā* by Rādhāmohan Tarkālaṃkār Bhaṭṭācāryya, *Satya nārāyaṇ vratakathā*, 8–9.

familiar to Bangla speakers, from anger and astonishment to friendship and love.[21]
For instance, in Sāyeb Munsī Ābdul Ohāb's version of *Gājī kālu o cāmpāvatī kanyār
punthi*, which we just quoted, he takes ninety couplets (*payār*) to explain Gājī's tri-
als—his father's attempt to behead, maul, burn, and drown him, and then provide
as final proof of his sainthood an impossible test that could only be passed by a
miracle. It is a barebones description of the action, and the emotional tenor is
flat—anger on one side and anguish on the other.

In Śekh Khoda Bakhś's *Gājī kālu o cāmpāvatī*, the same episode stretches
through four chapters (*pālā*) covering just over a thousand lines of text (444 *payār*,
49 *tripadi*).[22] Khoda Baks details the long and angry arguments of the king, who
feels publicly humiliated at the repudiation of kingship by Gājī and vows to bend
him to his will. The blow-by-blow accounts of the torments are explored in detail,
including such things as naming and describing the elephants deployed to tram-
ple and gore Gājī, the most magnificent being the mythical Airāvata (the name
of Indra's mythical white elephant, often depicted as having multiple trunks and
tusks), whom, because of his ghastly effectiveness in battle and execution, Khoda
Bakhś nicknames the Yam Avatār, the Incarnation of Death. The agony and anxi-
ety Gājī feels at his father's unwarranted outrage, and his steadfast commitment
to the command of Āllā to become a *phakīr*, is played out in the most desolate,
gut-wrenching terms. Āllā's compassion is equally moving as he worriedly orders
Jibril's intervention, and his request of Khoyāj Khijr to come to Gājī's aid stirs the
passions. In terms of classical æsthetic theory, not only are the foundational emo-
tional attitudes (*bhāvas*) clearly established, the contributing factors (*vibhāva*), the
ensuing entailments (*anubhāva*), and the involuntary physical responses to the
emotional situation (*sāttvika bhāva*) are mindfully present and in some instances
skillfully portrayed. In a manner consistent with literary strategies in early modern
Bangla, Khoda Bakhś switches from the more pedestrian couplet (roughly equiva-
lent to modern prose) to the more elegant *tripadi*, or three-footed metrical form,
in order to pause the narrative and explore the more intimate emotional worlds of
the King, the Queen, and Gājī. In these small emotion-laden vignettes—traditional
tripadi for intimate emotions and the more lively three-footed *lācāḍī* meter
for the more raucous, such as anger—he opens up the characters' interior land-
scapes as they attempt to cope with Gājī's impending abandonment of the courtly

---

21. The history of *rasa* theory dates back to Bharata; see Sheldon Pollock, trans., *A Rasa Reader:
Classical Indian Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). In Bengal, nearly every author
followed its application to the world of devotional *bhakti* as articulated by Rūp Gosvāmī; see Rūpa
Gosvāmin, *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, edited with Bengali translation by Haridās Dās, with the commen-
taries "Durgasaṃgamanī ṭīkā" of Jīva Gosvāmin, "Artharatnālpadīpikā" of Mukundadāsa Gosvāmin,
and "Bhaktisārapradarśinī ṭīkā" of Viśvanātha Cakravartin, 3rd ed. (Mathurā: Haribol Kuṭīr from Śrī
Kṛṣṇajanmasthān, 495 ɢᴀ [ca. 1981]).

22. Śekh Khoda Bakhś, "Gājī kālu o cāmpāvatī," in *Bāṅglā sāhitye gājī kālu o cāmpāvatī upākhyān*,
ed. Ābul Kālām Mohāmmad Jākāriyā, 81–99.

life, which would generate the desired æsthetic *rasa*, the distilled and unsullied experience of emotion that lies at the heart of accomplished South Asian literary productions. The emotional impact as well as the richness of both physical and even psychological detail, which remains consistent throughout the text, marks this tale as a high literary achievement. Recognition of the emotional intensity of the passage is confirmed by the early-twentieth-century production of the drama *Śāh gāji kālu gītābhinay* by Mahāmmad Kārim Bākhs,[23] whose narrative closely follows that of Khodā Bakhś. The author indicates that, while certain factions at that time condemn the use of song to celebrate *musalmāni* themes, he finds the emotion-laden passages of a number of these narratives too compelling to ignore.[24] Make no mistake: by indigenous æsthetic standards, not all of these tales are up to the mark set by Śekh Khodā Bakhś, but as will become apparent, some tales are simplistic and others not, yet these *pīr kathā* are anything but naïve; they are performing a cultural work that, as will become apparent, is nontrivial.

The formulaic nature of this set of ordeals is of course part of the craft of the storyteller and too often casually denigrated as lacking in originality by those who fetishize novelty as a vital component of serious literature, rather than addressing what the sequence might signal. What becomes clear is that the young Gājī could not be killed by any of the standard executions of the ancient world—beheading, trampling, burning, drowning—nor could he be stymied by the impossible task of recovering an infinitesimally small needle in the infinitely large ocean. The author makes clear that he was favored by God, already a *sūphī* saint following a path similar to that taken by other pious figures across the world and in different religious traditions. The type is immediately recognizable. True to his measure as a friend of God, like Mānik Pīr, Gāji retains the controlled restraint of filial piety in spite of the horrible ordeals—a trait that indexes both humility and self-discipline. That contrast of the wrathful father who, engrossed in the wielding of worldly power, wrongly punishes his son, juxtaposed against the meek respect and submission that the son returns in the face of such torments, encapsulates the recurring tension found in some form in virtually all romances, the tension between evil and good. Not surprisingly, this specific tension likewise surfaces in many hagiographical accounts worldwide: the vagaries of the ordinary world of householders, of kings and courtiers, which stand in fundamental conflict with the religious calling. As a fictional romance-as-hagiography, the tension between worldly and religious pursuits is perhaps the most common form in which each text expresses its religious struggle.[25]

---

23. Mahāmmad Kārim Bākhs, *Śāhā gāji kālu gītābhinay, pratham khaṇḍa* (Jāiyānpur, Rājśāhī: by the author, printed in Kalikātā by Śrī Bimalcaraṇ Cakrabartī at Nāgendra Ṣṭīm Priṇṭiṅg Oyārks, 1326 BS [ca. 1919]).

24. Mahāmmad Kārim Bākhs, 1.

25. The concept of romance-as-hagiography was recognized by Delehaye; see Delehaye, *Legends of the Saints*, 3–4.

3.2. ENTERTAINING ENCOUNTERS THAT SHAPE
THE RELIGIOUS IDEAL

The tales of the fictional *pīrs* clearly fit the entertainment mold easily enough, but equally importantly, they are hagiographies in the treatment of their heroes and heroines—hagiography easily arguable as a subgenre of romance. As hagiographies, they must treat the religious ideal in connection with the *bios* of the protagonist.[26] While the succession of tales marks them structurally, the plot of each distinct episode, which usually takes the form of an encounter with those of different moral or social practices, often traces the development and maturation of the *pīr* or *pirānī* in both personal and religious terms. The growth frequently involves the discovery of the limits of the hero's or heroine's powers and the ethic of their deployment, while the mission tends to explore a world that often turns out to be considerably more complex than the *pīr* or *bibī* may have first imagined. The growth, however, is seldom depicted in psychological terms through any form of interiority, though shifts in the antagonists' moral landscape are not unusual but are, in fact, often the point.

In Jaidi's *Mānikpīrer jahurnāmā*, Badar descends from heaven (*bhest*) fully capable of delivering God's message yet still learning just how that might be executed in the world of Bengal. He fumbles through one encounter after another in a manner that, in spite of the fabulation, hints at a slightly more realist depiction as defined by Frye ("given these characters, what might happen"), on occasion producing completely unexpected outcomes. The effect is to generate a sympathy with the hero Badar, which in turn inclines the listener to pay attention to his religiously oriented action. Through this series of adventures, Badar discovers the nature and limits of his power, which is of course ultimately and always the power of Āllā channeled productively through this servant of God. While trying to cope with each new challenge, Badar is often stymied by the nagging persistence of his own foibles, which often enough place him in precarious situations that require rescue from above, as his encounter with the goddess Gaṅgā entails. He displays extraordinary control over the physical universe in his encounter with the *jogīs* who are performing their austerities at the Triveṇi; they cannot conjure Gaṅgā, so he manages to effect it for them, but only as a demonstration of his *karāmat* or spiritual power once he has been insulted. As a rule, *karāmat* is only marshaled to persuade someone who is skeptical or insulting. Insults require remediation or punishment, while a show of respect reaps rewards. In this encounter, it might appear counter-intuitively that he has rewarded the *jogīs*' insults with the goal they sought—and in fact he does—but he facilitates their ascent to the formless

---

26. Tzvetan Todorov has observed that works do not have to manifest a category or any category, but can manifest several because the categories are intellectual abstractions: they are constructed, while the works are empirical realities. Todorov, *Fantastic*, 22.

brahman, the neuter principle of cosmic unity, which is in the salvific economy of Islam a punishment because they lose their identities and remain outside of heaven. When Badar subsequently decides to find out what this Gaṅgā meditation is really about, he comes face to face with the extraordinary power of the goddess and barely manages to contain her, but contain her he does, corralling her into his mendicant's shoulder bag, courtesy of instruction from an oracle, that is, a voice from the heavens (*ākāśbāṇī*), which gives him instruction through a white fly. While the personal piety of Badar is a necessary precondition to make him a worthy receptacle for it, it is only by remembering God (*jikir, smaraṇ*) that he can manifest the personal power of *karāmat*. When he releases Gaṅgā, it is on the condition that she assist him in bringing the stones to build a mosque (*masjid*). For the goddess to float the stones from the Setubandha on the southern tip of the subcontinent would surprise no one familiar with the mythology of the goddess, but in the cycle of tales dedicated to *phakirs* and *pīrs*, the ability of Badar to harness Gaṅgā to the business of building a *masjid* in a swampy delta area where there is no natural rock bespeaks an extraordinary power that could only be generated by Āllā. Similarly, when the familiar mythological figure Viśvakarma stipulates in his contract to build that *masjid* that he will only work for one night and will stop the moment the sun appears, Badar again demonstrates his control over the physical world and stops the sun from rising. It is at this point that Āllā feels compelled to intervene out of an ostensible concern that the completed structure will be more extraordinary than anything in Mākkā, Medinā, or indeed heaven, which really suggests that Badar has overreached the use of his powers and has to be curbed. The *masjid* remains unfinished as he moves on to other tasks.

The narrative strategy of interrupting one decisive action to commit to another course allows Badar as protagonist to demonstrate his growing understanding of the ways of the world, where and how his God-derived powers can be deployed, and how he comes to embody and convey the religious ideal, a function of nearly every hagiography. The succession of episodes plays out a narrative that ultimately results in the utopian outcome, or at least its promise and vision. Badar's God-given assignment is instrumental to a larger mission; he is to herald the coming of Mānik and to facilitate his descent, but the meandering nature of his efforts—almost all of which result from losing his focus as he discovers and rediscovers why he is there—are almost comical in their repeated misdirection, as he is rescued and nudged back on track time and again by the interventions of Āllā. While on the surface some of Badar's actions appear to be a form of comic relief, likely in anticipated contrast to the work of his son Mānik, they lay a foundation for understanding the world as envisioned by the author Jaidi, that self-contained reality that operates according to its own set of rules. In other narratives, the comic element may be played down, but the work of the protagonist generally accomplishes the same thing.

The molding of Satya Pīr's character in the opening section of the *Baḍa satya pīr o sandhyāvati kanyār puthi*, which covers nearly sixty percent of the text, is a

somewhat more causally connected set of events than the apparently haphazard peregrinations of Badar. Satya Pīr's birth, instruction, and then focused mission on chastising the king of Mālañcā tell the story of a *phakir* finding his way from heaven to earth and then testing his powers through the exercise of a situational creativity. Though the outcomes of Satya Pīr's encounters are relatively predictable, they are not without improvisations that attest to his wit, and more importantly, that mark growth, if not character development (Badar, for instance does not appear to have any psychological growth, but Satya Pīr does show signs of psychological maturity in the first section—though it should be noted that no *pīr kathā* functions as a fully developed Bildungsroman). Satya Pīr remains in focus and with far fewer digressions than Badar Pīr, but he still has to receive direct instruction about the nature of the world he is to explore and to test through personal experience the limits of what he can do. Like Mānik and Gāji, his (apparent) father, the king, attempts to kill him while he is still in the womb when Satya Pīr's mother is abandoned in the jungle (another method of execution parallel to Mānik's and Gāji's, but indirect, though the threat to the unborn or newborn child is common in hero mythology). While still in that idyllic state of the womb, he wards off sure death by successfully taming wild animals, a hallmark of *sūphī pīrs*.[27] He saves the life and eventually the honor of his mother, initiates the release of a *brāhmaṇ* widow to heaven, and as soon as he assumes his fully human form, seeks out Khoyāj Jendā Pīr or Khoyāj Khijir, the elusive and ancient *pīr*, former guide to Alexander in his search for the fountain of eternal life, and who reigns over Bengal's waters.

Satya Pīr takes instruction from Khoyāj, then after five years visits his mother to reveal to her his survival and reassure her of her instrumental function in his mission, which he then formally launches. Through that mission he quietly establishes a protocol of proper religious action which corrects misperceptions and errors of belief among those he encounters, of course especially first countering the nefarious actions of the ignoble King of Mālañcā, whose execrable treatment of *phakirs* prompted Satya Pīr's descent. It is through actions such as these, often heavily symbolic, that Jaidi and other authors of these fictional hagiographies shape the broad outline of the religious ideal. Interactions with people, with opponents and the wayward, demonstrate the truth of Satya Pīr's calling, not preaching per se; or if he does preach, the authors simply tell us he preached, but do not provide the content apart from his pointing out small-mindedness and bigotry based on social issues, such as matrimonial exclusion, purity and pollution, and sartorial transgressions. Humiliation as a function of power drives many of the lessons he metes out. The contours of the religious ideal are never formulated in explicit theological or doctrinal terms, but are rather signaled through images and actions. Even the

---

27. In an interesting structural inversion, these fictional *pīrs* and *bibīs* often resort to the company and counsel of wild animals, taking the jungle or forest as their natural habitat for practicing their spiritual goals, while the civilized urban worlds are for them a kind of godless wilderness filled with conflict.

occasional overt interjections of the narrator—for instance the short observations about the reputed nature of heaven and hell that Kṛṣṇahari Dās inserted in the birth narrative of Satya Pīr—tend to take the form of a very generalized and generalizable instruction in morality rather than theology. Even the lessons from the most famous teacher of teachers, Khoyāj Khijir, to the just-manifest Satya Pīr are conveyed in the most general terms. The simple report of Khoyāj Khijir's role as teacher of Satya Pīr, the image that establishes the latter's significant relationship to the ageless *shaykh*, signals a superior religious achievement, for only the most extraordinary *sūphī* saints have over the last millennium had the privilege of being instructed by Khijir.[28] Instruction is reported, but seldom with more than the simplest religious or ethical propositions that are short on specific content. There is a reason this is so.

3.3. THE *PĪR* IN A SUBJUNCTIVE WORLD

We have argued that the fictional narratives of the *pīrs* are not subject to the truth question, but as Pierre Macherey has argued, the autotelic nature of the fictional narrative does establish reflexively its own truth,[29] and in that sense each of these narratives is of necessity true, but according to its own standards (the same can be said of myth). In the case of the narratives of the fictive *pīrs*, this means that the worlds they inhabit are ones of the authors' own making; they cannot portray directly the ordinary world of things, but can only mimic. These narratives can only give the impression of reality. Macherey writes:

> The autonomy of the writer's discourse is established from its relationship with the other uses of language; everyday speech, scientific propositions. By its energy and thinness literary discourse mimics theoretical discourse, rehearsing but never actually performing its script. But in that evocative power, by which it denotes a specific reality, it also imitates the everyday language which is the language of ideology. We could offer a provisional definition of literature as being characterised by this power of parody. Mingling the real uses of language in an endless confrontation, it concludes by *revealing* their truth. Experimenting with language rather than inventing it, the literary work is both the analogy of knowledge and a caricature of customary ideology.[30]

28. Hugh Talat Halman enumerates more than a dozen of the great Sufi saints who received instruction from the ageless al-Khiḍr (as he is known in Arabic), including al-Bisṭāmī, al-Ḥallāj, al-Jīlānī, Ruzbihān Baqli, Ibn ʿArabi, and others; see Halman, *Where the Two Seas Meet: The Qurʾānic Story of al-Khiḍr and Moses in Sufi Commentaries as a Model of Spiritual Guidance* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2013), 195–247. The Alexander story is in the following chapter of Halman, 248–58.

29. Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1978), 44. On 45, he continues: "The writer is able to create both an object and the standards by which it is to be judged." He adds, "The text alone has a truth, which it alone can express" (47).

30. Macherey, *Theory of Literary Production*, 59; emphasis in the original. The implications of this argument are extended for several more pages, 59–65.

Following Macherey, fictional writing cannot then articulate overt theology or advocate specific doctrines; were it to do so, it would become simply normative propaganda and not fiction at all. Fictions can only operate with partially formed or incomplete *simulacra* of ideologies, or in the case of the *pīr kathā*, of theologies and doctrines. A dogmatic or doctrinal position would be characterized as a Bakhtinian *monologic*, speech aimed at the listener in an attempt to close out alternatives, ossifying the narrative through a propagandistic discourse of ideology (not its simulacrum), seeking to limit, to control potential meanings.[31] But the fictional tales of the *pīrs* do not participate directly in that theologically or doctrinally conditioned world; rather, they *comment on it.* By virtue of their fictional quality, they are *dialogic* in character, inviting participation by the listener, who will in that interaction be provoked to imagine the world incompletely described, and that incompleteness or the disruption of expectations compared with the known world impels the imagination to exploration. The language it adopts is itself recognizable, but orients itself toward the listener with a specific conceptual horizon, toward the specific world of the listener, where it introduces new elements, sometimes totally novel, into his or her discourse.[32] This marks the subjunctive quality of these fictions, inviting the listener or reader to explore possibilities that are closed off in the familiar religious discourses of history, theology, and law; to investigate and invent meaning is one of the most important functions of all fiction.[33] The activity is *dialogical*, for it addresses the listener in a heteroglossic environment, where multiple communities operate within overlapping discursive realms, where different conceptual horizons are brought into interaction through suggestion. The protagonists of these stories operate in worlds of possibilities, often indeterminate realms that do not offer a systematic statement of what should be, but what might be. This fictional world is inevitably a partially constructed world (since no fiction can go so far as to address systematically how a complete world should look).[34]

31. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 270–71.

32. Bakhtin, 282–91.

33. For those unfamiliar with this commonplace, in a standard reference J. Hillis Miller writes about the essential nature of fiction generally: "The human capacity to tell stories is one way men and women collectively build a significant and orderly world around themselves. With fictions we investigate, perhaps invent, the meaning of life. . . . Narratives are a relatively safe or innocuous place in which the reigning assumptions of a given culture can be criticized. In a novel, alternative assumptions can be entertained or experimented with—not as in the real world, where such experimentations might have dangerous consequences, but in the imaginary world where, it is easy to assume, 'nothing really happens' because it happens only in the feigned world of fiction." Miller, "Narrative," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 69.

34. In a very compelling and sophisticated comparative analysis of the nature of ritual, a quartet of prominent scholars—taking their cue from J. Z. Smith—argue that one of the underlying features of ritual is its subjunctive mode, in the sense that it offers an ideal world in contrast to the world of

Because fiction establishes its truths with images, rather than philosophical propositions about the nature of reality, it is through the manipulation of images that we will discover the real nature of this exploratory dimension. We can often spot the moment the author moves the protagonist from the indicative to the subjunctive when the listener's expected norms of conduct are violated, when symbolic social hierarchies are transgressed, when the action moves into the realm of the fantastic or the marvelous, or when customary cosmologies and cosmographies seem to be conflated or abandoned.

Jaidi makes no attempt anywhere in the *Mānikpīrer jahurānāmā* to articulate an overt theology or cosmology, but the world Badar navigates often meanders through unrecognized realms and brings together the unexpected. In the very opening lines the author locates Āllā in his heaven (*bhest*), in his court (*darbār*), to which he enjoins Badar to undertake the mission to prepare the way for a new descent, the *avatār* for the Kali Age: his name will be Mānik. The spatial orientation of heaven on the order of a Sultanate or Mughal court positions Āllā in a manner not normally encountered in the mainstream theological literatures of traditional Islam. The invocation of the concept of *yugāvatār* or *avatār* for the age immediately signals the adoption of a fundamental, but generic *vaiṣṇav*-inspired cosmology. That soteriological function of *avatār*, which has a long history in the *vaiṣṇav* traditions stretching back to the centuries prior to the Common Era, is appropriated for a message tailored to this last age of humanity, as is always necessary—the *avatār* redefines *dharma* (morality, truth, and so forth) according to the needs of the age, and in this Badar and his son Mānik conform to expectation.[35] This *avatār* will "speak to everyone about Haji, Gāji, Māhāmad, Rahim, Karim, Rasul, Paygambar, Ijjat, and Mādār." In the same way the *avatār* concept is invoked as a generic commonplace—in spite of its long elaboration theologically in the *vaiṣṇav* tradition of the nonfictional world—there is no explicit content regarding the work, the names of these figures being sufficient to invoke a set of standards and moral sensibilities; yet in their contentless generality they leave the impression of being apposite to and functioning in some way sympathetically with

---

everyday things, that ideal world being the world *as it should be*. That seems to eliminate any possibility, however, for open-ended exploration of what else might be, which is the form of the subjunctive I see at work in these fictions; precisely because they are fictions, they cannot offer genuine alternatives, but rather can only explore *possibilities*. See Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon, *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), esp. chap. 1, "Ritual and Subjunctive." I am indebted to Nancy G. Lin for bringing this to my attention.

35. One of the great innovations of the *Bhagavad gītā* was the redefinition of *dharma*. Having previously subsumed the concept of *ṛta* as the ordering principle of the cosmos, but extending the sense of order to the moral world, the *avatār* from this point forward redefines *dharma*, making it mutable to the needs of the current age. See Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa, *The Bhagavad Gītā in the Mahābhārata*, trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), chap. 4.

the preexisting standards. Later, when Mānik is actually born, the author in his signature line writes: "Mānik descended (*yavatirnya*) in the home of the gardener Madu." Given the conventions of this scribe, *yavatirnya* is *avatirnya*, which is more conventionally *avatīrṇa*, descended, what *avatārs* do, that is, "cross over" (Sanskrit root *ṭr-*) and down (prefix *ava-*). Both Badar and Mānik, as we know from other texts, meet the forecast of future action inherent in the concept.

Jaidi is hardly alone in appropriating the idea of *avatār*. Satya Pīr is named as the *yugāvatār* in several hundreds of manuscripts, and it is not unusual to see even Muhammad so characterized.[36] Though Badar Pīr is not declared to be the *avatār* of the age, but only the herald, when he meets Dudbibī and she indicates that because of her prior births she can only marry some form of the god Nārāyaṇ, he accommodates her through a miraculous serial revelation visible in her mind's eye which reveals him to be precisely those *avatārs*: she recognizes him as Nārāyaṇ, sporting four arms, then as the *avatār* Rām with Lakṣmaṇ and her as Sītā, and after that as the *avatār* (the word is explicitly used) Kṛṣṇa while she is one of the cowherd women or *gopīs*—each form paired with an identity she has already declared for herself. It is likely to be no coincidence that the name Dudbibī is the "lady of milk," invoking the image of a *gopī*, and the name Badar means "full moon," invoking one of the most common adjectives used to describe Kṛṣṇa and his effulgent beauty, a subliminal suggestion that brings into question the real nature of Kṛṣṇa as God and the cowherdesses as his lovers.

Badar reveals his form as Nārāyaṇ in progressive serial permutations when he instructs Dudbibī to shut her eyes, but later he reverses the process by presenting the figures of Rām and Sītā to the Bādsvā, who, when he shut his eyes, sees they are none other than Badar and Dudbibī. The presence of multiple realms of perception, the unseen realm suddenly seen, challenges the listeners' assumptions about the ordinary world of things—a cosmological issue that will have ramifications for Mānik's advent, indeed our readings of a number of these tales. In the context of the *avatār* of the age, which Badar's revelations confirm, it is clear that the cosmological cycles of the four ages are assumed to be operational. It also signals that some form of reincarnation or transmigration is at work, which in turn implies the laws of *karma*—but that is not explored explicitly as a law of the universe, but implied through offhand remarks. It is a given that is acknowledged by just about everyone, even Mohāmmad, who in the episode with Cāndbibī engineers the latter's karmic retribution to execute God's plan to send Satya Pīr to earth to alleviate the sufferings of the many saints, the friends of God persecuted by the King of Mālañcā. Karmic retribution seems to be little more than an immediate causality; for instance, when the Bādsvā insults Badar, he immediately loses his daughter;

---

36. See chapter 6 of this volume for the details of this expansive literature of Satya Pīr, which features him as the *yugāvatār*. For some of the other appropriations, see Stewart, "Religion in the Subjunctive."

and when the *jogīs* meditating at the Triveṇi cast aspersions on Badar, he instantly demonstrates his superior power by giving them the vision they seek, which triggers their immediate disappearance as they assume multi-armed forms and fly off to the realm of their choosing.

Just as comfortably, Fate is invoked by any number of characters, usually through the expression of having one's situation, usually misery, written on the forehead, which is how the god Bidhātā sets each human life in motion in Bengal, visiting shortly after birth. Bidhātā has made both the gardener and his wife infertile, so the recovery of the baby Mānik is a delight beyond measure, and they dutifully perform the *pūjā* to the goddess Ṣaṣṭhī on the sixth day, during which time Bidhātā is sometimes assumed to deliver his prognostications—seeking the protection of the goddess helps to ensure that it is a positive fate that is indelibly inscribed on the child's forehead. The familiar architect of the universe, Viśvakarma, in this narrative becomes little more than a mercenary craftsman available to anyone with worldly wealth or power to coerce him into cooperation, hardly the noble helpmate of the gods. These and many other simple assertions about the makeup of the cosmos suggest a novel universe, which easily accommodates *musalmāni* and *hinduyāni* constructs in interaction with one another. From a strictly traditional Hindu or Muslim perspective, no such world exists—it is a subjunctive world, a suggestive incorporation of features from both.

The power of Badar Pīr as controller of the natural world is demonstrated over and over again. Using the Mādāri method of quick transport through a mystical utterance, he moves effortlessly around the country and later disappears from the jail where the Bādsvā had imprisoned him. His marvelous control of tigers and his ability to converse with them is one of the telltale marks of the power of the *pīr*. But in each of these displays of his *karāmat*, he invokes the memory of Āllā through *jikir* or repetition of the qualities of Āllā, or remembrance (*smaraṇ*), one of the *vaiṣṇav* equivalents to *jikir*, the real source of his power. The author does not reveal the content of those practices, but simply reports their practice and efficacy.

The ambiguity of Mānik's conception is nothing short of miraculous. The seed, in the form of phlegm transmogrified into an insect in a flower, not only suggests that Āllā has a body that is afflicted in the same manner as humans (he coughs or sneezes, phlegm is expelled)—clearly bypassing the lengthy debates within Islam regarding his corporeal reality (e.g., hand of God, throne)—but it also suggests that Āllā is somehow the father of Mānik. Mānik would then be half god, half human, much as the Pāṇḍava heroes of the *Mahābhārata* with their split parentage (again the *vaiṣṇav* connection). But the flower and its insect do not travel directly to Dudbibī, but appear to be modified or possibly even activated by the touch of Badar, who subsequently orders the flower in the name of God to travel upstream to Dudbibī. Reminiscent of the act of spawning (or the activity of reversing the flow of semen in some Bengali *tantrik* yogic practices), it at least places Badar in the line of transmission as *one* of Mānik's fathers, minimally a surrogate

father, along with Madu the gardener as foster father. The insect has been explicitly given the boon by Āllā that "You will become the prince, son of Dudbibī, with the name Mānik," which subtly suggests that Āllā has only created the means by which Dudbibī will become pregnant, but that it is not his own seed (it is, after all, snot, but it is his bodily substance nonetheless—and any bodily substance shed from a god or goddess is capable of generating life, a commonplace in the mythology of the subcontinent). But after Dudbibī intercepts the flower, she dresses and ornaments herself in a manner fitting for her wedding night. Once prepared, she and Badar meet one another in their dreamworld, another rupture of the ordinary world of things. For this dream connection to be made, however, the ascetic stalwart Badar needs prodding, so Āllā requests Saytān to enter his body and incite him. When he does, Badar is roused out of his meditations, or more appropriately aroused by thoughts of Dudbibī that plague him until they meet in that dream. Dudbibī is clearly already prepared to receive Badar, the power of her longing and her nubile young body poised to procreate, as her maid Mukil has observed more than once, whereas Badar, who has been practicing his austerities, needs a nudge of encouragement to respond, but in the age-old tradition of South Asia asceticism, his seed would be especially potent. Saytān, of course, is famous in the *musalmāni bāṅglā* literature for his constant work inciting humans to indulge their bodily cravings, instigating fornication, profligacy, inebriation, and violence, among other forms of infamous behavior.[37] But Saytān here functions in a manner very similar to the way the *apsarasas* interrupt the meditations of *yogīs* in classical mythology, though he incites the base instincts, rather than presenting the mendicant with an immediate body for gratification. The result leads Badar to enter the same dreamworld as Dudbibī, and in that dreamworld the text explicitly declares that they do what lovers do and conclude by having sexual intercourse. That would then seem to remove doubts about Mānik's parentage, for having a human who was half-god would be difficult in any Muslim context, no matter how fictional, yet the impregnation is still miraculous, having been effected in a dreamworld.

37. There are several texts in Bangla carrying the title of *Iblis nāmā* or *Iblich nāmā* in which Iblis/Iblich or Saytān has a colloquy with Muhammad, describing all the things that he does to incite humans to behave in ways contrary to God's injunctions. See Garīb, *Iblich nāmār puthi* (Kalikātā: Śrī Akṣaykumār Rāy eṇḍ Kompāni, 1287 BS [ca. 1880]); Śrī Jān Ārāmullā, *Iblich nāmār puthi* (Kalikātā: Viśvambhar Lāhā, 1284 BS [ca. 1877]); and Nanā Gājī, *Iblisnāmā*, ed. Khandkār Mujāmmil Hak (Ḍhākā: Khośroj Kitāb Mahal, 1390 BS [ca. 1987]). For more on Iblis and Saytān and the ways they are deployed rhetorically (for they are not automatically synonymous), see Peter J. Awn, *Satan's Tragedy and Redemption: Iblīs in Sufi Psychology*, with a foreword by Annemarie Schimmel, Studies in the History of Religions (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1983), and more recently, Whitney S. Bodman, *The Poetics of Iblīs: Narrative Theology in the Qurʾān*, Harvard Theological Studies 62 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Divinity School, 2011).

3.4. IRONY AND PARODY IN *PĪR KATHĀ*

It is easy to see why someone schooled in the mainstream perspectives of traditional Islam would find the world of Badar Pīr to be zany at best, for there is little room in those traditional constructions for other deities, however demoted, for notions of transmigration, nor for God to send insects down to impregnate a princess with his special *pīr*, and so forth. It is equally easy to see how someone might interpret this as some form of syncretism—local gods and goddesses blended into the mix of angels, færies, and the Prophet—without taking into account the tale's fictional quality or what syncretism really suggests.[38] Both of those responses hinge on a failure to understand what these fictions do: *fictions allow authors to explore worlds of their own making, freed from the strictures of the legislative authority of theology, law, and history laid down by the mainstreams of Islamic traditions.* Whether it is deliberate or simply part of the art of storytelling, these narratives invariably test-drive ideas that may run counter to the prevailing perspectives which, by virtue of this effort, must not be completely satisfactory in their totalizing rejection of the Bengali world into which Islam entered. Where the discourse of the mainstream Islamic traditions attempts to impose a different cultural standard, to legislate the monologics of cosmology, ritual practice, theology, and social organization, these fictional tales by contrast emerge more organically and internally; the domains they depict are Bengali-inspired worlds, replete with a proximate Bengali geography and recognizable Bengali customs that elude such imposed strictures. As such, these fictional *pīr kathās* parody the depictions found in other mythologies or fictions (religious and semi-epic), for example especially the *maṅgal kāvyas* dedicated to the various goddesses and stray gods (actually poaching on the domain of Dharma Ṭhākur), and they likewise parody the *vaiṣṇav* mythology of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, of Viṣṇu and his many forms. But the parodies are not just of written or oral texts, but of the discursive regimes of religious orientation, including simulacra of doctrines and all manner of ascetic and sectarian practitioners that populate the local landscape, *vairāgīs*, *sannyāsīs*, *padres*, and of course *nāth jogīs*, *śaivas*, and *śāktas* of various ilks. In addition to a specific text or mythology, the object of the parody can be as general as a cultural norm, that is, any of the conventions of cultural expression. Reiterating Macherey and Bakhtin, I observe that *when a fictional narrative mimics a precursor discursive text or convention, it inevitably provides a critique of that which it parodies.* It is in

38. My critique of syncretism and the argument for why it is a problematic concept—primarily because of the inevitably negative entailments of the metaphors used to characterize it—was provoked initially by the important work of Asim Roy and can be found in Tony K. Stewart and Carl Ernst, "Syncretism," in *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Margaret A. Mills and Peter J. Claus (London: Routledge, 2003). Its later expansion can be found in the previously cited essay, Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence."

this critique, both positive and negative, that we begin to uncover how the narratives function and why they remain popular to this day.[39]

A finished literary work (since nothing else can be added) disturbs and reveals the gaps in prevailing ideologies, and in this case, the stories of the fictional *pīrs* function radically differently from their counterparts, the ever-accumulating tales of the historical *pīrs*. The expansion of fantastical material in the latter can at times blur the distinction (as we earlier noted in the struggles of Girīndranāth Dās in *Bāṅglā pīr sāhityer kathā*), leading to the conflation of what are essentially two distinct genres. The tales of the historical *pīrs* are directly involved in and document the propagation of Islam and therefore function in discourses that can only be mimed by the fictional *pīr kathās.* Not surprisingly, then, the hagiographies of prior historical *pīrs* themselves also serve as potential objects of parody by the fictional tales.

It is no accident, I think, that these fictional tales first emerged just after the great movement toward vernacularization was underway in Bengal,[40] the fertile period given official impetus by Sultān Husāin Shāh, who commissioned Bangla translation-cum-retellings of the great Sanskrit epics; soon Bengalis were enjoying Kṛttibās's *Rāmāyaṇ* and Kāśīrām Dās's *Mahābhārat*,[41] among a host of other retellers, the preponderance of which subsequently prompted Saiyad Sultān to write the great narrative of the line of prophets culminating in Mohāmmad in his *Nabīvaṃśa*.[42] This was also the moment when the *gauḍīya vaiṣṇav* literatures

39. While Bakhtin, Macherey, and Genette pointed me in this direction, my fuller understanding of the mechanics and use of parody closely follows Linda Hutcheon, whose comprehensive theory of parody most directly addresses its articulation, function, and pragmatic result. Her structural, semiotic, and post-structuralist approaches resonate strongly with my own approaches to these literatures, and so much of what I argue about parody is much more completely explored in her monograph that is now three decades old but endures as the standard. See Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985; repr., 2000).

40. Sheldon Pollock's work on vernacularization has prompted numerous new studies of the process; among other works, see Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); and Pollock, ed., *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

41. The numbers of manuscripts of these two texts are legion; *Catalogus Catalogorum of Bengali Manuscripts* [*Bāṃlā puthir tālikā samanvay: Saṅkalak o samapādak yatīndramohan bhaṭṭācāryya*], comp./ed. Jatindra Mohan Bhattacharjee (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1978). There are multiple authors over the next few centuries.

42. Saiyad Sultān, who had no connection to any court, explicitly observed that the stories of Rām and Kṛṣṇa were widely circulated in the vernacular Bangla, but because Bengalis did not know Arabic, and only certain elites knew Persian, few knew the stories of Muhāmmad well. He explicitly states that in an effort to remedy this he composed the *Nabīvaṃśa* in the local language; Saiyad Sultān, *Nabīvaṃśa*, ed. Ahmad Sharif, 2 vols. (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1978), 2:479. For a comprehensive study of this text, see Ayesha A. Irani, *The Muhammad* Avatāra: *Salvation History, Translation, and the Making of Bengali Islam* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming), which is a much more focused study based on her encyclopædic dissertation "Sacred Biography, Translation, and Conversion: The

began to flourish and the vast array of *maṅgal kāvyas* were beginning to round out. It was a time of vernacular innovation and literary efflorescence, which is critical, for *parodies must have precursor discursive texts of note to execute their work*. Linda Hutcheon persuasively argues that it is in just such periods of cultural sophistication that parody prospers.[43] There would be a resurgence of *pīr kathās* again in the nineteenth century with the advent and circulation of the stories of Bonbibī and the proliferation of tales dedicated to Satya Pīr, coincident with the so-called Bengal Renaissance, which affected both Hindu *bhadralok* and Muslim authors, but in different ways. Before visiting those, there are important aspects of the mechanics of parody that we must understand before we return to the tales of Badar Pīr and of Satya Pīr to illustrate.

Where Hutcheon observes that parody thrives in periods of cultural sophistication, the reason is that the parodist must rely on the competence of the reader, listener, or viewer to recognize and interpret the parody.[44] No text can function as a parody unless its audience recognizes it as such. In the high literary world, a parodist as a rule is not going to waste time on obscure productions;[45] but the parody of a *pīr kathā* is not so much concerned with a specific text as it is with the ethos embodied in genres, the forms of traditional Indian mythology, the structures of a caste-based world, and so forth. Margaret Rose notes in this regard that "it is not a function of fiction to offer verifiable statements of the world—for the naïve reader to take as true—but to lead the reader to interpret the fiction as, in its turn, an interpretation of the world of the reader."[46] In this more generalized form of parody, that is, where in most instances no specific literary text is named, the *pīr kathā* can easily function as the univocal, so-called entertainment for the masses, while for the more literarily, and in this case, religiously aware recipients, the text, or parts of it, can be understood to deliver a multivocal commentary on the reader's world, but only in part rather than in whole. Not every aspect of the parody need be registered by any one recipient for it to still be parodic; in fact, it would be unlikely that any two readers would have the exact same response. This variability of readings may well also account for a text's ability to function parodically through different eras, as the target understood by one reader may

Nabīvaṃśa of Saiyad Sultān and the Making of Bengali Islam, 1600–Present" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2011).

43. Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, 19.

44. Hutcheon, 19. See also Margaret A. Rose, who writes, "The parodist creates a situation whereby the reader must also relate to himself as an object of the author's discourse if he is to understand the status of other objects represented in the fiction. He must, that is, see his own world through the image of himself, the reader, in the text before him, as a part of a fiction which, as he himself, has taken on a different form than in the world of objects." Rose, *Parody//Meta-Fiction: An Analysis of Parody as a Critical Mirror to the Writing and Reception of Fiction* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 62.

45. Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, 57.

46. Rose, *Parody//Meta-Fiction*, 86.

well have shifted a century or two later, that ability to be revalorized being part of its enduring quality.[47] The tales of Satya Pīr and of Gājī and Kālu would appear to demonstrate such shifts as their audiences changed, accelerated perhaps because of the tendency of parody to escalate its presence as certain culturally preferred "vogues in handling conventions are getting worn out."[48] And it is important here to recognize that parodies are always context-specific, taking forms that are unique to their historical moment, characterized by their interactions with prevailing authoritative discourses;[49] but they should not be seen as parasitic or always negative. They can be value-neutral, they can deliver bitterly scathing critiques which ridicule, or they can elevate a prior discursive text as a standard of contemporary measure. But regardless of the tack, parody dramatizes difference.[50]

The genre of parody (operating intertextually on the structural level) depends on the mechanism—the rhetorical trope—of *irony* (operating intratextually on the immediate semantic level) to deliver its critique of a prior discursive text. Hutcheon argues:

> On the semantic level, irony can be defined as a marking of difference in meaning or, simply, as antiphrasis. As such, paradoxically, it is brought about, in structural terms, by the superimposition of semantic contexts (what is stated / what is intended). There is one signifier and two signifieds, in other words. Given the formal structure of parody . . . irony can be seen to operate on a microcosmic (semantic) level in the same way that parody does on a macrocosmic (textual) level, because parody too is a marking of difference, also by means of superimposition (this time, of textual rather than of semantic contexts). Both trope and genre, therefore, combine difference and synthesis, otherness and incorporation. Because of this structural similarity, I should like to argue, parody can use irony easily and naturally as a preferred, even privileged rhetorical mechanism. Irony's patent refusal of semantic univocality matches parody's refusal of structural unitextuality.[51]

47. This is analogous to Frank Kermode's notion of the "classic"; see Kermode, *Classic*.

48. Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, 36, quoting Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of a Criticism* (New York: Athaneum, 1970), 103.

49. Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London: Routledge, 2000), 163–64; Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, xi, xiv.

50. Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, 60–61.

51. Hutcheon, 54; for the exploration of this semiotic function, see Hutcheon, chap. 3. The *locus classicus* for interpreting literary irony is Wayne Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); for our purposes, see esp. chap. 4, "Essays, Satire, Parody." It should be noted that much of Linda Hutcheon's analysis of irony and irony's role in parody is in conversation with Booth; see Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994). Booth's insistence on determining authorial intention has unfortunately tended to sideline his other arguments about irony that still stand; by arguing that irony is a trope and not a genre, Hutcheon demonstrates how irony is the tool that energizes the genres of parody and satire, so she shifts much of her focus onto the pragmatics of the activity (away from the syntactic and toward the implications of the semantic).

Parody thus involves one signifier, two (or more) signifieds, the former the work of the author, the latter the work of the author and the recipient together, for the encoded second message must be decoded by the recipient for parody to work. Parody requires a critical distance from its target to be effective, and the irony on which it depends generally operates through inversions. In Wayne Booth's terms, the pleasure of irony and parody comes from the awareness of the ambiguity of duplicity, for both author and reader or auditor.[52] It can and does challenge the acceptance of narrow, doctrinaire, or dogmatic views of any particular group, which in the fictional *pīr kathā* would be aimed at both the *hinduyāni* cultural norms that the followers of Islam encountered in Bengal and the attempts by *shariʿā*-bound *mollās* and other conservative *musalmāni* factions to impose the restrictive history-theology-law regimes. This resistance to strictures appears readily in the hierarchical society of early modern Bengal, and is further exacerbated with the divisions that mark the colonial period; Muslim reformers in the nineteenth century were especially targeted by the resurgence of *pīr kathās* in print, and it is at this same time that Hindu reformers became fixated on hagiography again, especially that of Caitanya, which tied into their critique.[53] As Simon Dentith notes, "Strongly stratified societies, for example, where separate classes live in relative social isolation, are very likely to produce mutual parodic characterisations of the social layers, whose manner of speech and writing are very strongly marked by class."[54] Our concern, however, is specifically with the *pīr kathās* and not with earlier *hinduyāni* or later Hindu and colonial forms of parody—which were certainly prevalent—or with parody generally. We have noted that the narratives of the *phakirs* circulated widely and still do today, but we cannot know just how much of the parodic double-voiced content was recognized as parody, though one suspects that average nonliterate audiences would have gleaned more than they are credited for. It is naïve to think that the nonliterate recipient would only hear the text as entertainment, for it is often precisely in the entertaining bits that the parody is on display; if they laugh, it is for a reason, and that reason will often be the parodic content. In high literary modes the explicit uncovering of parody would likely trend within elite circles[55]—and we have already commented upon the sophistication of many of the writers—but because the parodies tend to be fragmented or piecemeal, rather than a tightly focused sustained commentary on a precursor, there will often be an indirect or stealth quality to it and not everyone

52. Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*, 127; also cited in Rose, *Parody//Meta-Fiction*, 89.

53. For this multi-faceted resurrection of the hagiographies of Caitanya, recovering the sixteenth-century texts that write of him as God, the writing of new hagiographies make Caitanya into a cultural hero, a romanticized swadesi nationalist, while others make him out to be modern reformer, and even a humanist emphasizing secular notions of privatized religion. See Bhatia, *Unforgetting Chaitanya*.

54. Dentith, *Parody*, 30–31.

55. Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, 27.

will register it. But if we can see these tales as parodies from this distance, then it is safe to assume that others did.

3.5. MIMESIS AND PARODY IN THE TALE OF BADAR PĪR

The opening of Jaidi's *Mānikpīrer jahurānāmā* presents Āllā in heaven holding court with twelve of his saints in a manner that mimes the gods gathering round in Indra's court to discuss what to do when the world is teetering on the brink of disaster; in various instances, the latter send down an *avatār* of Viṣṇu, or they band together, each providing a weapon to Durgā to slay a demon, or come up with some other novel solution to the problem at hand. As a result of Āllā's consultation with the saints, Badar Pīr is magically summoned. After presenting himself he is outfitted with the appropriate garb and provided with the necessary accoutrements, the signs of his position, given instructions, and sent down to earth to prepare the way for Mānik, who will become the *avatār* of the age, the *yug avatār*. The descent is not by a god or a goddess, but a *phakir*, one of the friends of God; he is not divine, and Mānik, who will follow as the *avatār*, will likewise be a *pīr*. When Badar prepares to depart, he looks into Āllā's mouth and sees the universe, mimicking the well-known act of Yaśodā with the baby Kṛṣṇa or the baby Viśvambhar (Kṛṣṇa Caitanya) and his mother Śacī, and miming a variation of Arjuna's experience with Kṛṣṇa at Kurukṣetra. There can be no mistake that Āllā is God.

Badar begins his mission in Dilli (Delhi) and Lahore, charming everyone with his presence, the women especially smitten with his personal charisma, begging to accompany him, much as Kṛṣṇa might have expected—the reference not made explicitly, but set up by the notion of *avatār*, or descent from heaven—and here Āllā's instruction about avoiding women, coupled with Badar's ascetic practices, signals that he is the structural opposite of the gallant cowherd Kṛṣṇa, inverting the expectation of the *avatār*.

Badar's encounter with the *jogīs* clearly mocks their ineffectual practices, but it is not altogether clear what types of *jogīs* they are, though one might suspect a kind of generic *tantrik* or *nāth* ascetic known for their *haṭha* yogic disciplines. The *jogīs* boast that they have remained transfixed for twelve years, sufficient time for the reeds and grasses to grow from them, but to what end? Badar Pīr conjures the goddess Gaṅgā in an instant and the *jogīs* suddenly ascend to the heavens and sprout additional arms, suggesting just how easy it is for a *pīr* to effect the transformation of humans into *hinduyāni* gods. It is equally reasonable, though, to read the images the other way: the *jogīs* were actually gods posing to test Badar Pīr with their insults and challenges, and he simply saw right through them and returned them to their heavenly domains. Either reading ends at the same place— a demonstration of Badar's superior power. But, utilizing kinship status as older brother to Gaṅgā (the *jogīs* refer to her as mother, Mā Gaṅgā, thereby establishing Badar's relation to them as uncle to nephews), Badar invites her presence, to which

she responds that she does not normally acknowledge the call of a *jāban*. When she does arrive, she very nearly overwhelms him before he is advised by the wind (magically transformed into a white fly summoned by Āllā) to capture her in his shoulder bag. The commentary on the power of the goddess hardly needs elaboration. Badar further underscores his God-given powers by speeding up the growth of fruits and vegetables he planted along the Gaṅgā's banks—a wry commentary on his fecundity in relation to Gaṅgā, especially as they are growing in the waters of the Gaṅgā—and then offers first fruits to Āllā, a gesture that would be familiar to gods and goddesses used to receiving *pūjā*. Though Gaṅgā is powerful enough to float giant boulders from Setubandha up the coast to Bengal in order to provide raw materials to fashion a *masjid*, that divine power is easily commandeered by the *pīr*, another not-so-subtle message. Similar is Viśvakarma's plight. Badar summons him to build the *masjid*, but he attempts to wiggle out of the project by agreeing to work only one night. Doing the work of God, Badar is not to be deterred, so he stops the sun from rising, impelling Viśvakarma to continue to work, though eventually Āllā intervenes lest Badar's action upset the balance between heavenly *bhest*, sacred Mākkā, and earth.

Badar's trip to Dilli is to secure the daughter of the Bādsvā as his wife, to which the king predictably objects and moves to punish him—kings punishing *phakirs* is, as we have seen, a recurring theme. The request to marry a king's daughter, regardless of the family's religious orientation, is always met with fierce rejection if not outright violence—the mixing of social stations (ascetic *phakir* with a worldly princess, who can be *musalmāni* or of caste, either *kṣatriya* or *brāhmaṇ*) marking key tensions that ripple through this *pīr kathā*. Taking the bride by stealth or by outright battle is, of course, one of the traditional Indic techniques for marriage, and here, as we have already noted, the author takes a page from the Arabian Nights where tigers, rather than færies, secrete Dudbibī out of the palace on her bed, which they deposit in the forest.[56] The marriage proper is not, however, effected by the stealth capture as one might expect, but by Dudbibī's consent. It is in the *gandharva* style, one of eight recognized forms of traditional Indic marriage, but—and here is where the inversion comes in—while her father is convinced by his vision of the divine couple to bless the marriage, that marriage cannot be considered official—nor will it satisfy Dudbibī's mother—until it is confirmed in a manner

---

56. Here and in other stories, the tigers that assemble from the forests at Badar's summons provide comic relief as they whine about how tough their lives have become since humans have started encroaching on their forests, an interesting environmental observation. In works as early as Kṛṣṇarām's *Rāy maṅgal* in the late seventeenth century, the tigers are shown to exhibit great bravado, scaring people to death, but whining and crying about their plight in dealing with the seemingly endless advance of humans into their territory; see Kṛṣṇarām Dās, *Rāy maṅgal*, in *Kavi kṛṣṇarāmdāser granthāvalī* (secs. 14–17, pp. 186–95, vv. 237–337), where scores of tigers, male and female, are quoted by name with their complaints.

consistent with the dictates of the local application of Islamic custom, which perforce supersedes local custom.

The four *mollās* who consult their almanacs and calculate the auspiciousness of the union, its sanction by Āllā, and the proper time for it to take place clearly mimic the ubiquitous South Asian *brāhmaṇ* wedding astrologer. The Korān is deployed in much the same way as locally prevalent *jyotiṣa śāstra* (astrological texts), so this activity can also be read as a form of technical one-upmanship, for the Korān was fairly routinely used for bibliomancy, for divination and prognostication of such affairs as weddings and personal concerns. No details are provided in the text of this *kathā*, of course, but there were bibliomantic texts routinely employed during the period of Sultanate and Mughal ascendancy in South Asia, such as *Fa'l-i Qur'ān* (Divination by Qur'ān).[57] The tenor of this parody is playful and not aggressive, for it points to the ways Islamic practices found analogues in traditional South Asian ritual forms, while also signaling that a Korān-based prognostication was necessary to validate the decisions that led to the *gandharva* marriage agreement.

Dudbibī's decision to acquiesce to Badar's request for marriage is based on the revelation of their conjoined identities in past lives. We have already noted the invocation of the mechanism of karmic transmigration, but the specific trope is reminiscent of a common South Asian lovers' story of the ideal husband and wife finding one another in life after life, as attested throughout the epic and *purāṇik* texts for gods and goddesses and in literary works such as Somadeva's *Kathāsaritsāgara*, for various celestials and humans.[58] Badar's display of multi-armed forms, followed by Rām and then Kṛṣṇa, is easily read as revealing his identity to her, and hers to him. But remembering that a fiction cannot produce an authentic theological statement, only its simulacrum, the expression is of necessity vague. Her eyes are closed and she sees Badar as Viṣṇu, Rām, and Kṛṣṇa, with her as the matching counterpart, an expression that could be read several ways:

57. The recognized Persian genre of such texts is *fāl* or *fāl-nāma*. *Fa'l-i Qur'ān* (Divination by Qur'ān) by Sadr Jahan and Ja'far al-Sadiq (880 AH; ca. 1480) contains circular diagrams with topics to be explored, including marriage, that are coordinated with another circular table of random numbers, which then together index a selection of thirty *suras* from the Korān; each *sura* bears fifteen possible interpretations which are narrowed to the one correct reading by a different combination of those original numbers. Similarly, elaborate tables of prognostications were added as codices to the Korān, which would be used in relation to certain letters of the alphabet. The letter would be determined by randomly opening the Korān, counting seven lines down, then identifying the seventh letter across, whose significance would be determined by the table to formulate an answer to the question; for descriptions and color images, see Francesca Leoni et al., *Power and Protection: Islamic Art and the Supernatural* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2016), 21–25. Seeking guidance from God on specific issues (*esteḵāra*) was usually regarded as a licit use of the Korān, but not using it as a device for augury (*tafa'ol*); Īraj Afšār, "Fāl-nāma," *Encyclopædia Iranica* (New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 1999), 9:172–76.

58. Somadeva Bhaṭṭa, *Tales from the Kathāsaritsāgara*, translated with an introduction by Arshia Sattar, with a foreword by Wendy Doniger (London: Penguin Books, 1994).

identity (they are not different from the figures represented), similarity (they are "like" the figures represented), or all true lovers make the divine pair (the Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā principles and their analogous sets are found in all couples, a generic *tantrik* reading). Regardless of how one parses the revelation of images, the god complex in all its forms is displayed by Badar Pīr, who is himself not a god, for there is only one God. Either way, the ancient Indic gods are reduced from their supreme stature and possess no greater power or status than this friend of God. Just as easily, one can apply the permutations to the Bādsvā, who sees the true love of his daughter for Badar and so "sees" Rām and Sītā. But what the father "sees" is the image of the faithful wife, Sītā, not the unmarried *gopī* (not named, but implied to be Rādhā), a gentle suggestion about what constitutes a proper liaison (the *gandharva* marriage more fitting for Rādhā, but the confirmed and validated marriage according to Islamic custom more appropriate to Sītā, which is of course what he and his wife insist is proper). What he saw was what he wanted to see, a liaison that could not be censured by the social customs of the court.

The convoluted manner of Dudbibī's impregnation has already been noted, but the idea of Āllā guiding a particular individual apart from the Prophet to set right the affairs of the populations of India can only point to the recurring activity of the *avatārs* of Viṣṇu, but the *avatār* is not a god. There is no need to rehearse the sequence again, but the obvious reference to the ascetic practices of Badar Pīr being broken in much the same way as the *apsarasas* disrupt the meditations of the *sādhus* of old (our first reading) must be modified to account for the role Saytān, whose nefarious activities are routinely associated with indulging the appetites for self-gratification. Under the direct command and control of Āllā, Saytān actually enters the body of Badar to stir his virility, but Badar's arousal and sexual activity is not illicit because its object is his wife, nor has he broken his ascetic celibacy because the love-making occurs during the enchantment of a dream sequence, not in his waking state.[59] With the actual impregnation coming from the God-commissioned insect crawling into Dudbibī's womb through her nose, her chastity is likewise preserved, quite an inversion of the *apsarasas* impelling the ascetic to actually spill his seed, by which he retrogresses and loses his power, no longer a threat to the gods. The union of Badar and Dudbibī in their dreams is generative to the work of God. The apparent commentary on the difference between licit and illicit sexual activity among ascetics is provocative.

The rest of this prolegomena to the work of Mānik Pīr follows the simple outlines of Quest mythology, as already noted. But there is one last feature that confirms the parodic reading: the two poems inserted in the middle of the narrative. It is a commonplace in Bangla narratives in the premodern period to insert poems or songs as ways of capturing succinctly a fundamental point. Similar to the way

---

59. It should be noted that the text does not use the word *naphs* (Arabic *nafs*) or base instincts, though by way of the action implies it.

the author switches to the three-footed *tripadi* meter to explore more thoroughly the intimacies of profound emotion, the inserted poem or song can go a step further and reveal or provide a commentary on the underlying meaning or point of the story. Sometimes these insertions punctuate, on occasion they anticipate reversals or turning points, at other times they simply illustrate. The first poem inserted just after the marriage has been sanctioned by the *mollās'* calculations is titled "The Dark Lord, Kālā."

> Listen to the name, the virtues of the Dark Lord
>> heard in home after home.
>> I shall write Kālā's own name
>> on the trailing edge of my sari.
> Who brought to this land
>> a moon so dark,
>> that in dancer's disguise has pilfered
>> the honor of this virtuous wife?
> How inauspicious the moment
>> I dipped my foot into the Jamunā's waters.
>> At the foot of the *kadamba*, bent in his careless pose,
>> he played mischief with his flute.
>
> *Phakir Guñjar contemplates his worthless body—*
>> *a hollowed out dead tree*
>> *whose leaves have dropped off*
>> *and floated away.*

In the first surface reading, the title refers to Kṛṣṇa, and the epithet of moon-faced is common enough. He is the cowherd lord who lures the maidens (*gopīs*) to nighttime trysts—the pose of three breaks (*tribhaṅga*), his signature stance as he plays the flute, bent at the knee, waist, and neck—asking the *gopīs* to give up their love, their bodies to his seemingly insatiable appetites. But he has disappeared, leaving the *gopī* to ponder her fate, to ponder her decision to cuckold her husband. She has written Kṛṣṇa's name on the *añcal*, the very trailing end and edge of the sari where the village women keep their valuables tied in a knot, but by writing his name along the edge, that name—when it is written or uttered, manifests the aural dimension of Kṛṣṇa's ontology and therefore makes him present, in much the same way uttering his name in *jap* wraps the mutterer in his aural protection—frames her, embraces her every time she pulls her sari over her head, ironically in a gesture of modesty, emblematic of the predicament for these women who risk everything for this fleeting pleasure. The mood of abandonment and wanting is the well-recognized experience of *viraha*, the exquisite pain of lovers when they separate, but we only witness the woman's agony for an absent Kṛṣṇa. Since a poem generally focuses on one of the basic experiences of love, the expression of *viraha* is expected as the dominant trope of one's relation to the fickle Kṛṣṇa.

According to the *vaiṣṇav* æsthetic classification of Rūp Gosvāmī's Sanskrit *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, the *gopī's* fundamental emotional platform (*bhāva*) is the supreme love (*prema*), which is experienced as erotic engagement (*śṛṅgāra rasa*). In this poem, she exhibits three of the thirty-three transitory emotions (*vyābhicāri*), which are passing indicators of the depth of emotion. She shows hints of shame (*vrīḍā*) for her actions, coupled with a stronger sense of grief (*viṣāda*) over the resulting loss, which seems to be both for her loss of Kṛṣṇa and for her unrecoverable loss of innocence and her standing as a properly faithful wife. The underlying emotional tenor is one of anxiety (*cintā*), fearing what she cannot admit to herself, her unresolved desires, yet unable to maintain a pique or anger because of the depth of her love.[60]

Traditionally, the signature line or *bhaṇitā* is the point where the author inserts himself into the poem's narrative, sometimes retaining his name as a man (and nearly all authors in this tradition are male) but in his assumed identity as the *gopī's* confidante. Phakir Guñjar's name means the buzzing or humming of bees, the bee famous for hovering over and licking the nectar of the lotus (with its culturally obvious sexual associations), and he plays the role of a woman too in order to aid those who love Kṛṣṇa. In this role s/he presents a sympathetic ear, proffers advice or words of encouragement; s/he often vicariously identifies with the *gopī's* plight and berates Kṛṣṇa for his callousness, his fickleness, and so forth. Here s/he seems to be an older woman, most likely a duenna or traditional go-between messenger (*dūtī*) who arranges trysts for her younger friend and Kṛṣṇa. Her lament, however, is from the perspective of one who is no longer able to participate directly in the games of love, whose body has dried up and is no longer ripe for love play, whose beauty has long disappeared like the leaves from a dead tree. Her *gopī* friend is clearly still young and desirable enough to have attracted Kṛṣṇa, who has granted her entry into his endless play (*līlā*). Phakir Guñjar can only participate vicariously, his reportage providing an experienced perspective born of great longing.

The technical flaws in this poem, however, signal a parodic inversion and mark the poem as the work of a poet either not steeped in the *vaiṣṇav* æsthetics of *bhaktirasaśāstra* or, more likely, deliberately subverting the standards. The emotional content of the poem does not display any of the expected indicators (*anubhāva*) by which emotion is conveyed or any of the excitants (*vibhāva*) that prompt the manifestation of emotion, nor does it demonstrate the involuntary responses (*sāttvika bhāva*) to the experience of the emotion. Rather, the poet's heroine talks about the *image* of Kṛṣṇa, which elicits little other than the generalized notion of *viraha*, the searing pain of separation. *Viraha* is perhaps the most

60. As previously noted, the foundational text for devotional æsthetics of *rasa* is Rūpa Gosvāmin's *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*. For the experience of *prema* as erotic love (*śṛṅgāra*), see Rūpa Gosvāmin, *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* 3.4.1–36; for the transitory emotion of grief (*viṣāda*), 2.4.13–20; for shame (*vrīḍā*), 2.4.113–17; for anxiety (*cintā*), 2.4.1136–39.

common emotional depiction of early modern poetry and song in the Bangla-speaking region, and it remains so to this day. Contemporary religious commentators are quick to liken this experience of the lover's absence as a metaphor of the soul yearning for God, a sentiment that clearly resonates in *sūphī* circles as well. But the signature line at the end of the poem ruptures the mood, rather than enhancing it, because it can be read as self-pitying, an attitude that has no place in supreme love (*prema*), nor does it offer hope, only despair where there is no place for the erotic. This mixing of messages would be considered a fatal flaw, and in the vocabulary of the devotional æsthetes within the *vaiṣṇav* tradition, the poem would be characterized as inauthentic and artificial.[61] But can it be any other way?

This song is integrated into a fictional narrative and therefore is itself fictional, rather than expressive of devotion.[62] This particular poem does not appear to exist outside this manuscript. There is no recognized author (*padakartā*) by the name of Phakir Guñjar found in any of the exhaustive compilations of either *musalmāni* authors writing on *vaiṣṇav* themes or the myriad of *vaiṣṇav* authors; the numbers of authors run into the hundreds and the poems into the thousands.[63] But whether

61. It is important to note that this is not an arbitrary value judgment, for there were very exacting measures the *vaiṣṇav* traditions followed to evaluate the quality of literary production. In the hagiographical tradition surrounding Kṛṣṇa Caitanya (1486–1533), the inspiration for the *gauḍīya vaiṣṇav* tradition in Bengal, the ultimate arbiter of the devotional æsthetic was Caitanya's companion in Puri, Svarūp Dāmodar. According to the hagiographies, Svarūp screened every poem, every play, every song to be presented to Caitanya. At one point he censured an unnamed Vaṅga *brāhmaṇ* for writing a flawed drama that depicted inauthentic and artificial emotions, and while the erstwhile dramatist was allowed to stay in the company of devotees, his writings were never read out. In the *Caitanya caritāmṛta* of Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāj, Svarūp is reported to have said, "In the words of indifferent poets there is seeming *rasa* (i.e., the experience of the emotion of love), and it gives me no joy to listen to opposition to the truths. Those who cannot discriminate between *rasa* and that which seems like *rasa* can never gain the shore of the sea of devotional perfection." For the whole story, see Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāj, *Caitanya caritāmṛta*, ed. Rādhāgovinda Nāth, with the commentary *Gaurakṛpataraṅgiṇī ṭīkā* by the editor, 3rd ed., 6 vols. (Kalikātā: Sādhanā Prakāśanī, 1355–59 ᴮˢ [ca. 1948–52], vol. 5, bk. 3, chap. 5, vv. 87–149. For a translation based on the Rādhāgovinda Nāth edition, see Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja, *The Caitanya caritāmṛta of Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja,* trans. Edward C. Dimock, Jr., ed. Tony K. Stewart, with an introduction by the translator and the editor, Harvard Oriental Series 56 (Cambridge: Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University, 1999), 3.5. In another passage Svarūp deduces the devotional worthiness of Rūp Gosvāmī from a single Sanskrit *śloka* the latter had composed. This was, of course, the same Rūp Gosvāmī who later composed the previously cited text of the *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, which became the standard for devotional æsthetics; *Caitanya caritāmṛta*, 3.1.69–82.

62. It is important to note that the corpus of poems in praise of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa were not and demand not to be read as fictions as we understand fiction, even though the subject matter is what many scholars term mythological. These compositions are held within the tradition to be a form of *revelation*, what the poets saw of the eternal *līlā* or play of Kṛṣṇa, either in meditation, dreams, or in their mind's eye. They are then primary documents that serve as a confirmation of the theological position of the group.

63. For *musalmāni* authors writing on Kṛṣṇa's love play, see Jatīndramohan Bhaṭṭācārya, comp./ed., *Bāṅgālār vaiṣṇavbhāvāpanna musalmān kavi padamañjuṣā* (Kalikātā: Kalikātā Viśvavidyālay, 1984).

the poet existed or not is moot because the text is incorporated into a fictional narrative; we have to treat the poet not as a writer of *vaiṣṇav* poetry, but as an allographic figure parodying *vaiṣṇav* poetry, whether the putative author is Jaidi himself, Jaidi's *guru*, or some other unknown figure.

A second reading of the poem, however, suggests how this poem may function to articulate a different parodic message. It suggests a deliberateness on the part of the author Jaidi for inserting this poem the way he did—and because it is the reader or listener who must determine if the product is parody, that determination points to or implies (but may not directly identify) authorial intent.[64] The name for Kṛṣṇa in this poem is Kālā, which is *not* a common epithet for Kṛṣṇa. *Kālā* means black, and *kṛṣṇa* likewise means black, but generally that inky blue-green-black; both indicate dark or darkness, hence the translation of the Dark Lord. But *kālā* as a noun also means Time and Death personified, with unpleasant, indeed dreaded associations.[65] Kṛṣṇa as the moon-faced one is generally referring to a full moon with its brilliant luminescence, but a dark full moon is an oxymoron and does not invoke the positive associations of the epithet of moon-face. If it is truly a dark moon, then there is no moon; it is absent, and suddenly the darkness seems portentous, if not sinister. The cowherd maiden as heroine pines for something that no longer remains: a lord who abandons his lovers and friends. A black moon is absent. The moment of committing to the play of that fickle and unfaithful lord might now seem truly inauspicious indeed—it is not an empty lament, for this shadowy figure pilfered the one thing any woman in the world of romance can claim for her character: fidelity, which here would include virginity. The tone is ominous and bleak. As a critique or parody of the prevailing *vaiṣṇav* theologization of the poetry, the message subtly hints that the *vaiṣṇav* way is itself a potential death trap; to use profane love as a model for love of the divine is dangerous.

Phakir Guñjar's signature line initially looks to be that of a time-worn woman consoling the young *gopī* and wishing herself into her place, but now reduced to

---

For the most comprehensive *vaiṣṇav* collections, see Vaiṣṇav Dās, comp., *Padakalpataru*, ed. Satiśacandra Rāy, with an introduction by the editor, 5 vols., Sāhitya Pariṣat Granthāvalī, no. 50 (Kalikātā: Rāmakāmal Siṃha for the Baṅgīya Sāhitya Pariṣat, 1322–38 BS [ca. 1915–31]). See also Rādhāmohan Ṭhākur, comp., *Śrīpadāmṛtasamudra*, ed. Umā Rāy, with the Sanskrit commentary "Mahābhāvanusārinī ṭīkā" by the compiler (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1391 BS [ca. 1984]).

64. Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, 40, 55, 93.

65. The form *kālā* invokes images of Kālī, who in this literature was often depicted as a bloodthirsty goddess requiring human sacrifice. See also the compelling passage in the *Bhagavad gītā*, which was chosen by Oppenheimer to express the horror of the first nuclear experiment, which he quotes as "Now I have become Death (*kāla*), the destroyer of worlds." For a detailed account of the history of this moment, see James A. Hijiya, "The Gita of J. Robert Oppenheimer," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 144, no. 2 (June 2000): 123–67. Van Buitenen's translation reads *kāla* as Time rather than Death: "I am Time grown old to destroy the world, embarked on the course of world annihilation." Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa, *Bhagavad Gītā in the Mahābhārata*, 11.32a, "*kālo 'smi lokakṣayakṛt pravṛddho lokān samāhartum iha pravṛttaḥ*," 116–17.

vicarious participation. That reading would result from the expectation provided by the figure of the duenna in thousands of well-known poems, but the line ruptures the mood of the *vaiṣṇav* sensibility and hints at something else altogether. By retaining the title of *phakir*, the author signals that he is a mendicant, his body dried up to the sensual world of *rasa*, the basis for the *vaiṣṇav* æsthetic, but which hints at Badar's state. Indeed *rasa*, the distilled experience of love, is tasted, for the literal meaning of *rasa* is sap or juice; not surprisingly, *rasa* also retains an association with semen. As the signature line signals with the image of the dead tree trunk, Phakir Guñjar through his own austerities seems to have abandoned the sensual world, his body desiccated, his *rasa* dried up, just as Badar Pīr did after he left his wife to pursue the mission assigned by Āllā that opened the tale. What is suggested seems again to be the age-old tension between the spiritual exercise of celibacy and the draw of sensual life, whether for self-indulgence or for procreation. It places the control of the *sūphī* ascetic in opposition to the hypersensual indulgence of the *vaiṣṇav* devotee (a not uncommon critique over the last six centuries among many detractors of the *vaiṣṇav* path). Phakir Guñjar's sapless trunk drops one last leaf, foreshadowing the action of Badar Pīr when he drops the flower into the waters to find Dudbibī. It bespeaks a disciplined control, and points to the nearly immaculate conception of Mānik that could only be effected by Āllā Himself by dispatching Saytān to enter Badar's body to arouse the passions. The tension between an ascetic religiosity and a sensual world shadows the worlds of *pīrs*.

That friction between the ascetic demands of the mendicant and the impulse to lawful procreation are captured in the precise moment that Badar Pīr picks up the flower that contains the insect sent by God to inseminate Dudbibī. Consistent with the subjunctive nature of the narrative, which is suggestive rather than overdetermined, there is a well-known *ḥadīth*, with the gradation of *ḥasan* that states, "In this world, women and perfume have been made dear to me, and my comfort has been provided in prayer."[66] Badar has been practicing his remembrance of God, *jikir* (*smaraṇ*), for four months after leaving his wife. The flower—as all the flowers in the story are—is fragrant, but in this case redolent with the touch of Āllā. The beauty of the flower and its perfume interrupt Badar's prayers with memories of his wife. He is momentarily distracted, but weighing the significance of its interruption, he sends it to his wife in the name of God and then

66. Sunan An-Nasâ'I, *The Book of Kind Treatment of Women*, chap. 1, "Love of Women," 3391, trans. Nâsiruddin al-Khattâb, comp. Imâm Hâfiz Abû Abdur Rahmân and Ahmad bin Shu'aib bin 'Ali an-Nasâ'i, edited and referenced by Hâfiz Abu Tâhir Zubair 'Alî Za'ì (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007), 4:191. Additional variants are attested in Wensinck, A. J. and J. P. Mensing, comps., *Concordance et indices de la tradition Musulmane*, Les Six Livres, al-Dārimī's *Le Musnad*, Mālik's *Le Muwatta'*, and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's *Le Musnad*, compiled with an introduction by A. J. Wensinck, vols. 1–8, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 1:405.

resumes his recitations. Āllā Himself has to rouse him from his reveries by the dispatch of Saytān. This allusion to the *ḥadīth* confirms the parodic use of a critical Islamic truism, not in citation that would be appropriate for legal and theological discourse, but through the invocation of images, the semantic currency of fiction.

The second poem by the allographic Phakir Guñjar is much more opaque than the first, but seems to anticipate the next installment of the tale, the adventures of Mānik Pīr. The translation I have provided is provisional because the language is oblique with allusions rather than clear referents:

> Hey, stitch fine garlands with consummate care,
> as the ruby (*mānik*) is carefully strung in the heart.
> All five flowers rest on a single branch, so which flower will bloom?
> What twenty-bud [garland] can be stitched with no thread?
> How can you sew a garland made of rubies (*mānik*) and gemstones?
> Is it possible for a lamp immersed in water to disperse the dark of night?
> O how will I recognize that particular flower?
>
> *Phakir Guñjar sings, contemplating this hollowed,*
> *dessicated trunk, shedding a single petal that floats away.*

The author is clearly playing on Mānik's name, which means "ruby," and the contrast of flowers strung into a garland that will wilt versus the difficulty of stringing a garland of indestructible jewels points to a potential reading—how can the indestructible Mānik be created in a world of flesh and blood? Because of the placement of the poem as Badar is about to take his leave for the city of Cāṭigāñ, it likely presages the miraculous process of Mānik's conception. In traditional Bengal's yogic and Islamic traditions, creation itself is strung, an image with ancient associations.[67] Given the role of stringing in creation, the act of stitching that thread could be interpreted as the act of procreation, but the riddle—how can a fully formed (twenty-bud) garland be stitched with no thread?—suggests the impossibility of impregnating Dudbibī while Badar is absent. Following that image, what then is the thread? Recalling the lines—"The insect crawled out of the lotus stem up her nostril and seated itself in the hundred-petaled navel lotus to take birth. Mānik had entered Dudbibī's womb"—invokes the possibility of the five petals strung on a single branch referencing the *cakras* of *yoga* in the subtle body.[68] Mānik lodges himself in the hundred-petaled lotus, which traditionally suggests

---

67. Going back as far as the Vedas, David White explores the stringing of creation and the following of those strings as part of the yogic mastery of the universe; see White, *Sinister Yogis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

68. See Shaman Hatley, "Mapping the Esoteric Body in the Islamic Yoga of Bengal," *History of Religions* 46, no. 4 (May 2007): 351–68.

the point of enlightenment *mukti*, or by analogy in the *sūphī* path, the highest state of ecstatic experience called *fanā* (Arabic *fanā fi allāh*), which is actualized in the fourth stage (Arabic *maqāmāt*) known as *mārphat* (Arabic *maᶜrifa*), the four stages often aligned with the *cakras*.⁶⁹ More simply, as the *avatār* of the age, Mānik will save humanity. The lamp immersed in the waters would seem to allude to Badar's physical location away from Dudbibī, but also his immersion in his ascetic practices (*tapisya*), which drowns sexual passion the same way water extinguishes the candle. What the reader of the poem is about to learn is that Badar overcomes this paradoxical situation through the dream meeting. Recognizing the flower would then suggest Dudbibī's predicament when she spotted the very flower that Badar had sent on its way upstream. Gañjar Phakir's contemplation of the single dropped petal seems to ruminate on the oddity of the *pīr* being dead to the world (shriveled, dried up), yet magically capable of reproducing, giving us in the process a second reading of the signature line of the first poem: Gañjar Phakir contemplating how Badar Pīr would send the impregnating flower to Dudbibī. It is nothing short of miraculous.

The hermeneutic difficulties this poem poses, however, may well rest on its deployment of a "twilight language" (*sandhya bhāṣā*), which is common to the esoteric *tantrik* traditions utilized deliberately to obfuscate the layers of meaning, and this includes some Bengali *sūphī* texts. In these esoteric poems, the metaphors often index technical terminology involving physiology, stages of ritual *sādhanā* (practice), and so forth, but these technical terms cannot automatically be read as a consistent code because, like parody itself, they are always context dependent.⁷⁰ One might anticipate in this passage a possible critique of the recherché *tantrik* groups, such as *nāths* and *sahajiyās*, the latter a *vaiṣṇav* orientation known for sexo-yogic practices—but that would, I think, be a too easy capitulation, and we have no evidence beyond a vague use of riddles and terminology which are not in the least definitive, especially since the terms are not in common with the poetic and didactic expressions of those groups.⁷¹ Finally, and very seriously, we cannot rule out the possibility that the apparent technical expressions are a kind of pidgin mumbo jumbo, a parody of twilight language, which would, I suppose, make it doubly opaque, well-nigh impenetrable. In much the same manner as the gesture

69. Among the many texts I have examined that articulate these stages are the anonymous "Yoga kalandar," Hājī Muhammad's "Surat nāmā" [alt. Nur jamāl], and Āli Roja's "Āgama," all of which can be found in Āhmad Śariph, ed., *Baṅglār sūphī sāhitya* (Ḍhākā: Baṃlā Ekāḍemī, 1371 ʙs [1964]), on 87–116, 171–91, and 336–43, respectively.

70. For more on the mechanics of *sandhya bhāṣā* and the problem of deciphering the technical language and the epistemological hurdles one faces in attempting to interpret these texts, see Tony K. Stewart, "The Power of the Secret: The Tantalizing Discourse of Sahajiyā Scholarship" in *The Legacy of Vaiṣṇavism in Colonial Bengal*, ed. Ferdinando Sardella and Lucien Wong (London: Routledge, 2019).

71. For the full range of such groups that have been identified in Bengal, see Shashibhusan Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, 3rd ed. (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1969).

toward linguistically unviable Arabic versions of the *shahāda*, which still manage to signify something in that direction, these riddles may not indicate a specific content, but true to their fictional quality, allude to a type of understanding that would always be obscure to the reader or listener, but would be immediately identifiable as part of an esoteric discourse of *sūphīs* and other ascetic groups—expressions intended to mystify because ordinary readers or auditors could never be expected to understand. True to their subjunctive dialogical function, the poems engage the reader or listener, demanding interaction, pushing the imagination to places that it might not ordinarily go. Without the rest of the text, we can only speculate, but that, I think, is precisely what this text intends to make us do.

The story of Badar Pīr, father of Mānik, which constitutes the prolegomena of Jaidi's *Mānikpīrer jahurānāmā*, can be easily read on two levels. The surface narrative points initially to ways in which Islamic perspectives might be expressed in terms of the prevailing *hinduyāni* cosmology that is predominately *vaiṣṇav* in its vision. Āllā and the various traditional Bengali gods and goddesses range through the heavens and around earth, mixing with *avatārs* of various sorts, and with *jogīs*, *pīrs*, *phakirs*, *peris*, *phereśtās*, the *nabī*, and other celestial traffic. The activity is subjunctive in exploring how it all may fit, and it invites the reader to try to imagine how the traditional world of Bengal might accommodate a *musalmāni* outlook. But a closer reading reveals that time and again the naïve perspective of the first reading gives way to a more stringent critique of that traditional Bengali world and its features which are shown often to be artifices. The parodying of the generic *vaiṣṇav avatār* theory, the mocking manner in which Badar Pīr manhandles Gaṅgā and harnesses her to his work, suggest a different world order. Badar's assumption of the identities of Viṣṇu, Rām, and Kṛṣṇa reveals just how limited those gods are, or more importantly, just how powerful this friend of God can be. In this particular text, it may appear that the traditional gods and goddesses have been recognized with equal status to Āllā, but the second reading makes clear that something else is being suggested. This text does not just explore how an Islamic perspective might be incorporated into the preexisting Bengali cosmology, but quite the other way around. Through its symbolic imagery, a generalized Islamic cosmology is made to stretch and bend to incorporate an Indic or *hinduyāni* world, to appropriate it for its own ends. Importantly, there is a subtle shift of register: yes, the various gods and goddesses certainly exist, but no, they are not the equivalent of Āllā, for he has no peer, he alone is God. The traditional gods and goddesses are not even as powerful as the *pīr* or *phakir*; they are hierarchically shifted into a lower cosmological register and made subservient to Āllā and those who people his court in heaven. As Booth persistently asked in *A Rhetoric of Irony* how a reader knows when a statement is ironic, here we have the confirmation: the *repeated* shift from the gods being equivalent to Āllā to everything being subordinated to Āllā, and the appropriation of a *hinduyāni* world into a *musalmāni* cosmology substantiates the reading. As the adventures of Badar multiply to extend the narrative, the broad

strokes of this new cosmology emerge in a grand exploration. This exploration is one of the most important functions of fiction: to investigate and invent meaning in ways that are safe from the strictures of institutional, doctrinaire thought, and here the exercise intimates how the old world order is not displaced, but incorporated into a larger, necessarily vague and incomplete, fictional, but very generically Islamic, cosmological vision.

The exercise in establishing a seeming equivalence of cosmologies and then adjusting it to reflect the "real" structure to be Islamic, speculates and then explores ways that Islam might accommodate and incorporate a Bengali cultural legacy that is primarily *vaiṣṇav* and *śākta*. In this newly constructed world, then, one must rethink what "conversion" might actually mean, if an Islamic cosmology could be stretched to accommodate and then appropriate a *vaiṣṇav* or *śākta* perspective. It hints that there would be no radical break with prior tradition, rather a displacement and reordering, for while doctrine in this scenario may only be a faint impression of the rigorous prescriptions of theology and law, the general perspective on the world is preserved on both sides. In this exercise, it is possible to see how Islam might be made understandable and palatable to its Bengali audience and how that understanding could then be transformed, displaced, and ultimately replaced by an emerging Islam. That new cosmology carries with it expectations, and adjustment to moral sensibilities, wherein the traditional Indic social structure is undercut and a new order put in its place, one where action, not birth, determines standing. While recognizing the limits of fiction to participate directly in that discourse, that the author has something of this in mind seems to be attested in one of his signature lines just at the moment of Mānik's appearance, when he writes, "Mānik descended (*yavatirnya*) in the home of the gardener Madu. May the Hindus chant 'Hari, Hari!' (*hari bol*) for this ranking official among those devoted servants of God (*mamin*)." The expression *Hari bol!* is perhaps the most common affirmation of religious commitment on the part of *vaiṣṇavs* in Bengal, specifically the *gauḍīya vaiṣṇavs* who are the majority *vaiṣṇav* community in the Bangla-speaking world; it is used to affirm and sanction any religious activity they may undertake, it is a mark of auspiciousness, and a way of proclaiming their confederacy. That the author considers his audience may well include those of *vaiṣṇav* persuasion gently links the text back to its context, its historical moment.

That the author may have had an audience in mind that would be familiar with the *vaiṣṇav* habit, if not *habitus*, of uttering the name of Hari at auspicious moments reminds us that we have characterized the text of Badar Pīr (and those like it) as a religious biography, explicitly a hagiography, the life of a saint. But Badar's story is a *fictional hagiography*, which has several unexplored complications. It may seem odd to characterize any hagiography as a parody, because the whole point is to deliver a message in the service of religion, but the structure of hagiography lends itself to just such deployment. As previously noted, I have argued that the narrativized life, the *bios*, is not generally the primary subject, but

the "ostensible" subject, of religious biography.[72] The "real" subject is the *religious ideal*, which is what turns biography into religious biography. In its most basic form, this bicameral structure of religious biography—one life, but two messages (*bios* and religious ideal)—is conceptually parallel to the most basic structure of parody, which in semiotic terms, Hutcheon has characterized as one signifier and two signifieds. Provocatively, Booth uses the same terminology to describe the workings of irony: a "real" subject and an "ostensible" subject. The hagiographical form would seem to be well suited to the task of delivering a parodic critique. Read as hagiographies, the fictional quality of these *pīr kathās* does not change the operational structure, but does place them in a unique position. The historian cannot demythologize the *bios* because there is no history to find; the figure represented in the narrative slips beyond the vanishing point of a history. Similarly, because it is a fiction, the religious ideal can only be presented as a simulacrum, unsystematic, vague assertions presented through images and actions, but not by explicit argument; it too slips beyond the vanishing point of theology at the opposite end of the spectrum. The *bios*, then, functions as a pure parody of the lives of saints and the adventures of gods and goddesses in Bengal, and the religious ideal is a parody of all manner of religious practices and cosmologies relevant to Bengali culture. In the guise of entertainment, these *pīr kathās* deliver stealth critiques. While by most modern literary interpretive standards, contra Booth, it would be impossible to determine authorial intention; but the fact of the parody's existence points to a historical context that lies outside the text's narrative. It is hard to imagine that the author did not deliberately take aim at precursor texts.

Though we have argued that the narrative of Jaidi's *Mānikpīrer jahurānāmā* must be understood to be autotelic, creating its own reality, that autonomy does not mean independence of production;[73] that is, the text is always a product of a particular time and place, in this example Bengal, likely the mid- or late eighteenth century. When it provides a parodic commentary on prevailing ideologies or theologies, it depends on that context in the ordinary world of things and directs that critique to an audience who must be familiar with the shapes and images of the story for it to be comprehended. The text must use a language of rationality rooted in that context if it is to be understood, if its critique is to be accessible. Jaidi did not write *Mānikpīrer jahurānāmā* in a vacuum, and that context alone puts limits on what he might have imagined or pushed his reader and listener to imagine—so we now turn to the *conditions of possibility* for any of the fictive hagiographies of the *pīrs*, the limits operating in the realm of the *imaginaire*.

· · ·

72. Stewart, "Subject and Ostensible Subject."
73. Macherey, *Theory of Literary Production*, 53.