4

Mapping the *Imaginaire*

The Conditions of Possibility

Bonbibī said to Śājaṅgali,
"Whenever anyone in this forest calls me Mother,
I must fly to their rescue.
You do not understand the responsibility
and implications of wielding the power of barakat.
In the low-lying lands of the eighteen tides,
I am the mother of each and every one."

—MOHĀMMAD KHATER, *BONBIBĪ JAHURĀ NĀMĀ*

4.1. THE REALITY OF THE BENGALI *IMAGINAIRE*

As a starting point to better understand the work of the narratives of the fictive *pīrs*, we accepted Todorov's and Macherey's argument that the worlds constructed by those stories are completely self-contained. This remove exempts the tales from evaluation according to the discourses of everyday reality, that is, from the world of truth or falsity. The worlds they depict legislate for themselves all that one needs to know to apprehend the story being told; and of necessity those worlds so constructed are always incomplete, yet fictional worlds are neither incomprehensible nor completely alien to those who produce and consume them. The landscapes, though sometimes truncated and finessed, invoke place-names that are often familiar—Lahore, Delhi, Chittagong, the Sundarbans—though their connection with those historical places is proximate at best. While there are some places cited for which no historical evidence attests to their existence, such as the realm well known to Hindu mythology as Pātālnagar, the land of the *nāgs* that lies underneath the surface of the earth, there are just as many of these tales that draw quite

explicitly on the local geography and history. Bairāṭ is one such site, associated with Śāh Sekander, father of Baḍa Khān Gāji; the coincidence of the name suggests Sekandār Śāh of the Ilyas Shāhi dynasty, who controlled the fort at Bairāṭ in the second half of the fourteenth century. The place-names alternate between an intimate familiarity with the Bengali landscape and fantasy, or perhaps invoking names of places that no longer exist, but the effect is to place distance between the protagonists' various exploits rather than signal some more profound notion such as establishing the borders of a kingdom or a sustained strategy of provocation and control. In more than a few instances, the enumeration of places marks a physical displacement and temporality, the greater the number of places invoked in sequence, the greater the distance in time and space.

The types of figures the tales depict are likewise familiar, no matter how incompletely they are drawn; in fact, the plots depend on the audience understanding the stereotypes they invoke: kings or *bādśās*, various ministers and courtiers, and of course the retinues of *pīrs*, *phakirs*, *bibīs*, *sannyāsīs*, *śāktas*, *śaivas*, *vaiṣṇavs*, *vairāgīs*, *nāths*, *padres*, *turuskas*, *jabans*, *kābulīs*, and so on. While some figures invoke names that resonate with historical figures, such as the famous Śāh Sekandar, the allusion remains just that, an allusion, which temporally translates as "a long time ago." While it is tempting—and this has been done more than a few times by scholars in the last century—these fictional figures should not be construed as depicting historical figures per se. There has been and still is a cottage industry of this type of construal (called euhemerism) that attempts to read mythology and fictional narratives as depicting actual historical events in the world of ordinary things, whereas I wish to argue the opposite: if indeed there is a connection at all, at best a particular historical figure may have provided an inspiration for a character.[1] But the fictional characters do have a special kind of reality and I follow Amie L. Thomasson, who argues that fictional characters are "artifactual," that is, real abstract objects that have been created by their authors

1. The figure of Mukuṭ Rājā in the story of Gāji, Kālu, and the king's daughter Cāmpāvatī provides a good case in point. In an unpublished essay, Benjamin Costa, citing Satiścandra Mitra, reported that Mukuṭ Rājā could be identified as a historical figure known as Mukuṭ Rāy from the village of Lāujāni in Jessore District, somehow identified with the narrative's own depiction of Mukuṭ Rājā's town, which is called Brāhmaṇānagar. His source depicts the historical Mukuṭ Rāy as a zealous *brāhmaṇ* during the reigns of Husāin Śāh and his son Nusrat Śāh of the early sixteenth century, but includes all manner of reportage of the protagonist's conversations with Husāin Śāh about the persecution of Hindus by Muslims (though the author fails to note that those terms were not operational in any significant way at that historical moment), all of which seems to have driven the identification far beyond the evidence in order to recast the narrative in more convenient political terms relevant to the time of Mitra's writing; see Benjamin Costa, "Literature of the Tiger-Cult in Bengal (*Raymangal* et al.)" (unpublished typescript), 2–3; for the specifics, he cites Satiścandra Mitra, *Yaśohar-khulnār itihās*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (Calcutta: Dasgupta, 1963), 429–33; and for the issue of general historicity of Haridev's *Rāy maṅgal*, he cites the introduction *Haridever racanāvalī: Rāy maṅgal o śītalā maṅgal*, ed. Pañcānan Maṇḍal, 129.

and thereby exist as such.[2] Fictional characters are real in the realm of discourse, just as the fictional landscapes are real. Like the general geography, the flora and fauna invoke the familiar topography of Bengal. But in the same way that seemingly official titles often signal generic "court functionaries" or just "the court" rather than precisely distinguished offices, the flora and fauna are often generic. For instance, in the story of Badar Pīr the same flower is called a *padma* lotus and a *kadamba*, two entirely different flowers, but their function was simply to designate the flower dropped by Āllā and then passed along by Badar Pīr as a vehicle for the conception of Mānik Pīr. There is no need to assign such apparent inconsistencies to some scribe's mistake or ignorance or some other equally baseless speculation;[3] importantly, that kind of consistency is not required by these narratives.

The stories, however, are made comprehensible precisely because of their contexts, their framing, which is generated and shared by the people who compose and consume them. Those authors were very real, they lived in a Bangla-speaking world, the Bangla texts they wrote and circulated were and are very real, and there had to have been something in their historical situation that stimulated them to generate those imaginary domains. *The content of the narrative defines its own reality, and that reality need not automatically conform to the world of ordinary things though it does depend on that world for comprehension.* That is an important distinction. The texts' meanderings and explorations—which are often in a subjunctive mood—allow the reader or listener momentarily to escape the discursive strictures of history, theology, and law found in mainstream *musalmāni* society, yet it is against that backdrop that they were generated; indeed, one could easily argue that is precisely the backdrop that made them necessary. They open a space that is not regulated in the ways of those discourses; but that space itself does in fact have strictures.

We seem to have reached an impasse by granting the narratives their autotelic status; there would appear to be an unbreachable gulf between the story-as-fiction and the author in a particular historical moment. It is through understanding the nature of their discourse that these narratives can be properly situated and analyzed for their cultural work. In part, the impasse is a function of the narrative's ontology; that is, characterizations about their "reality" are actually attempts to address their status vis-à-vis that of "things" in the ordinary world. The narratives-as-fictions

2. Amie L. Thomasson, "Fictional Characters and Literary Practices," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43, no. 2 (April 2003): 138–57; and for a more extended analysis, see Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

3. There are seldom sufficient manuscripts to apply the principles of stemmatology necessary for a critical edition, and scribal conventions were not standardized at the time most of these texts were composed. This is, of course, quite apart from the concept of the critical edition which operates on the assumption that there was an original text that can be recovered or largely so, a staple of western scholarship that fetishizes the "original" as inherently more valuable or important, whereas my experience with Bangla texts is that fidelity to an original yields to imperatives of utility and actual use.

stand quite apart as language-dependent and language-mediated realities, a product that *takes its reality purely from discourse*. In evaluating the reality of fictions, epistemologist Nicholas Rescher observes that "discourse alone underwrites no workable distinction between fact and fiction"; rather, *context* is required, which is a standard of measure that lies outside of discourse. "As far as the discourse itself is concerned, a statement's fictionality—like its truth or falsity—is altogether invisible: it is something that cannot be extracted from the statement itself and generally requires us to look beyond discourse as such." As a result, fictions create trouble for theorists because the fiction's internal truth does not correspond "with fact *tout court*, but rather pivots on an oblique, story-mediated correspondence with fact."[4] Narratives-as-fictions take on a different ontological status when talking about "possible worlds."

> What possible world theory needs at this point is not bold metaphysics but ontological minimalism (not to say common sense). As far as we mere humans are concerned, the only possible worlds there are are those embodied in fictions: worlds imaginatively projected through supposition, assumption, or hypothesis. No one knows—or can know—of a possible world that is not realized through the mental artifice of envisioning a scenario of some sort. Neither I nor anyone else can offer an example of a possible world for which there is not a real-world author, a living, breathing producer who conjures up some possibility by a *coup d'esprit*. All of the possible worlds at our disposal are fictional constructs arising from the suppositional thought work of the living, breathing individuals who project them by way of imagination. Accordingly, the question of the ontology of possible worlds does not call for transcendental metaphysics but for a deflationary account that sees such worlds as thought-artifacts produced by and only available through the mental operations of real-world individuals by means of supposition, assumption, hypothesis, or the like.[5]

He goes on to point out that "there are, strictly speaking, no fictional fictions: there are no fictions unless real people really make them up."[6]

4. Nicholas Rescher, "On the Ways and Vagaries of Fiction," in *Nicholas Rescher Collected Papers*, vol. 14: *Studies in Epistemology* (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2006), 89–90.

5. Rescher, 79–80.

6. Rescher, 80. Rescher extends the observation on 93: "A fictional world has no independent ontological status of its own; such status as it has it derives from the real-world actualities of the fictional work at issue." He goes on to say, "Since fictions are thought-projected products of the mind, then insofar as there are fictions there must be minds that think them up. The circumstance that fiction involves intent means that only real authors can produce real fictions. . . . While there is no reality to fictions as such, there certainly are fictions in reality. Like everything else, works of fiction have to exist in the real world in order to exist at all. Fictions have no actual reality in themselves; their only reality is the thought reality projected through the creativity of their authors and the receptivity of their readers." And on 96: "There are no fictional (unreal) things; there are only (real) people's thoughts (ideas, beliefs, assertions) about such things that position their ontological *locus standi* on discourse alone."

The reality of these texts as products of people does complicate, but also actually augments, the simple proposition that the worlds they produce are autotelic. The texts themselves are historical products that take the form of books or performances, and the content of their stories cannot be fully isolated from their genesis. Fictions retain their autotelic status but do maintain some kind of connection to what Macherey calls a "pretext."[7] These texts and their stories do not come into existence *ex nihilo*; rather, they are given birth within specific *contexts*—linguistic, literary, religious, ethnic, geographic, historical—that together *somehow* give them shape. The creators of the tales are constrained by these various contexts, which means that the tales themselves are not produced indiscriminately and without constraints. They serve to critique prevailing cultural norms, wittingly or not, in the manner of all fictions. There can be no question about the reality of that critique because many of these stories are parodies, which means they automatically target a real-life precursor text or event, whether by imitation (mimesis) or some trenchant, often ironic, assessment.

The blanket proposition that the creators of these tales can simply make up anything they want is actually misleading, because *there are limitations on what they can imagine, historically grounded limitations that are both restricting and enabling.* I argue that these limitations define the discursive parameters of the *imaginaire*, which is the realm within which the imagination operates. From this perspective, the discursive arena of any text is the *imaginaire*. This is radically distinguished from Jean Paul Sartre's use of the term wherein *l'imaginaire* was construed as a special act of consciousness; his concept is closer to what I consider in English the "imagination," though they do not map precisely.[8] Nor is it the "social imaginary" as described by Charles Taylor.[9] Rather, as I am using the term, the *imaginaire* constitutes a metaphorical "space" where the imagination is exercised, where imagining can be actualized, the result taking the form of a concrete cultural product, such as the production of a text. I am not proposing to explore the act of imagining, which is a phenomenological inquiry that falls well outside the scope of these observations; rather, I am concerned with the *space* within which the imagination, as it pertains to these texts, operates. Not insignificantly, Casey argues that imagining can only take place in what he calls an *imaginal space*, though the nature of that space is in his reckoning pure possibility; I am arguing here that we can in the production of texts identify certain of the parameters that define that

7. Macherey, *Theory of Literary Production*, 46, 95, and passim.

8. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, trans. Jonathan Webber, revised by Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre (London: Routledge, 2004); Sartre's original text from the 1940 Gallimard edition was simply titled *L'imaginaire*. Similarly, Jacques Lacan's use of the term *l'imaginaire* focuses on the image of the body; see Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press, 1977).

9. See Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaires* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). Taylor builds on the theories of Jürgen Habermas and Benedict Anderson.

space, parameters that both enable and limit possibility.[10] As a locus of human thought, the *imaginaire* is itself structured; it is always historically grounded to particular times and places and, as a result, has observable restrictions and an observable horizon. We might best think of the *imaginaire* as the "realm of possibility" for an author to create some kind of text (whether literary, analytic, scientific, or extended to other cultural forms that are architectural, legal, and so forth). For a text to take shape in this discursive space, a language or languages must be chosen to express the workings of the imagination, and that automatically places strictures on the production, for language inevitably structures thought and determines audience.[11] Similar to language patterns within the *imaginaire*, historical context likewise dictates other structures of authority that place limits on what can be imagined. Culturally grounded accepted practices of expression help to define and thereby limit various modes of discourse, whether social and legal systems, science, theology, or simply what passes as common sense (and here we start to approach Taylor's usage, though in a different modality). At the same time, these constraints should not just be seen as limiting, but *enabling*, for they provide frameworks within which the imagination can be exercised and which define the boundaries against which the imagination can push and expand, can think new thoughts.[12] It is seldom possible to envision a world that runs completely counter to prevailing forms—changes can be wrought, but the structuring itself is seldom,

10. See Casey, *Imagining*, esp. 52, 120. For his phenomenological analysis of space, see Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*. 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). For a critical rundown of the various theoretical approaches to the ways the imagination, imaginary, and fiction intersect, see Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

11. Among the first theorists to assert the notion of the thought-structuring nature of language were Sapir and his student Whorf, though today most consider them to have overstated their position regarding the unthinkability of certain concepts in other languages, though after a rather thorough dismissal, their proposals on key points seem to be receiving a grudging rehabilitation among contemporary scholars. See Edward Sapir, *Culture, Language and Personality*, ed. David G. Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), and Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality* (Boston: MIT Press, 1956). For an interesting but somewhat saucy critique and partial rehabilitation, see Guy Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages* (New York: Picador, Henry Holt, 2010), esp. chap. 6, 129–56.

12. Anders Schinkel, wrestling with Reinhart Koselleck's notions of conceptual history, places the imagination between experience and expectation. He writes, "So the space of experience is also (and if Koselleck did not intend it this way, I will include the meaning myself) the space within which experience may occur; it sets the *limits of possible experience*." That space, which Schinkel leaves unnamed, appears to be a direct analogue to the space within which the imagination itself works, what I call the *imaginaire*, a discursive realm which sets the conditions of possibility for the imagination. Koselleck's formulation, which is heavily conditioned by Dilthey, does not actually lay out what those limitations are or how they come into play. See Schinkel, "Imagination as a Category of History: An Essay Concerning Koselleck's Concepts of *Erfahrungsraum* and *Erwartungshorizont*," *History and Theory* 44, no. 1 (February 2005): 42–54.

if ever, outside of these constraints. At the same time, with each new formulation the shape of the constraint itself can and does shift, often subtly and imperceptibly, and usually in gradual processes,[13] even in major paradigm shifts that are not quick and are often very messy.[14]

This is not to propose some new form of intellectual history but a pragmatic approach to understanding the creative force of these fictional tales of *pīrs* and *bibīs* and how they relate to their historical moment. It is especially focused on what kinds of conversations their authors had with prior authors that prompted them to formulate the tales they did and to what end. In a sense, we are talking about the double-voice of Bakhtin's dialogic process,[15] as authors and their fictional actors give voice to different perspectives, their conceptual worlds in connection to their consumers. The creative exercise of the imagination to produce the content of the narrative situates the fictional product in the context of the author's own historical time and place, yet in connection to the literatures that have preceded it. The author straddles the divide, one foot in the world of ordinary things, and the other in the narrative. The causality and intentionality of the author as divined from the narrative, however, are elusive at best, and any attempt to discern some one-for-one correspondence between an author and his or her fictions lands us automatically in the world of conjecture. But if the fictions are suspended in this realm of the *imaginaire*, and through that suspension connect through the author to the world of ordinary things, how do we map in consistent ways the nature of that suspension? What are the threads of connection? The answer inches us closer to answering what kind of cultural work these texts have been performing for their consumers, which is to move the locus of our inquiry to the fictions' effects on the world of everyday reality.

Some years ago, while mining bibliographical entries for intertextuality, I came across a small article by Jonathan Culler titled "Presupposition and Intertextuality,"[16] in which he articulated a generalizable set of propositions that would help situate any literary form. Upon reflection I have come to realize that these propositions apply much more broadly to virtually any configuration of cultural production across any discourse, from legal and the judicial structures, to architectural trends, religious rituals, and theological or philosophical texts. Culler's observations are not proposed as the basis of a system of interpretation, but rather isolate four features that any hermeneutic exercise should or could productively analyze to place texts into an imaginal landscape, in that process producing their intellectual or

13. Foucault's observations about the nature of historical intellectual shifts are germane here.

14. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

15. Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 324–25 and passim.

16. Jonathan Culler, "Presupposition and Intertextuality," *Modern Language Notes* 91 (1976): 1380–96.

even cultural history. These four features constitute some of the threads that connect the textual product to its various contexts; they help define the conditions that allow for the production of any specific text and can, then, once isolated, guide its interpretation. The fictional texts dedicated to the *pīrs* do not come into existence in a void, though their provenance may often prove fugitive. Following Culler, we can identify two forms of presupposition—*logical* and *pragmatic*—and two forms of intertextuality—*explicit* (or overt) and *implied* (or covert)—that will situate these texts. These factors will in part define a text's generative context, identify at least some of its historical conversation partners, and point to its implied audience, inviting that audience to understand the text according to its own standards of production and consumption. They serve as *constraints* on what can be envisioned by these authors in locatable historical settings, and they serve equally as *opportunities* for these authors to improvise and innovate. This allows us to uncover the terms of a text's initial creation (how it represents "the present"), and, when those texts themselves become one of the conditions of possibility for some future text, we can through these same four features evaluate how the text has been repurposed. As a result, this type of exegesis will allow us to address fruitfully the relationships of seemingly disparate fictional (autotelic) narratives across centuries by different authors and their audiences. These connections may, on the surface, seem to compromise the autotelic status of the narrative, but because they operate on the level of discourse-to-discourse, independence is retained.[17]

17. A nascent version of the application of intertextuality and presupposition appeared in Tony K. Stewart, "Popular Sufi Narratives and the Parameters of the Bengali *Imaginaire*" in *Religion and Aesthetic Experience: Drama—Sermons—Literature*, ed. Sabine Dorpmüller, Jan Scholz, Max Stille, and Ines Weinrich, Transcultural Research–Heidelberg Studies on Asia and Europe in a Global Context (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Press, 2018), 173–95. The text can also be accessed in HTML format online at DOI: 10.17885/heiup.416.

It should be noted that Gérard Genette's terminology for *transtextuality*, most completely developed in *Palimpsests*, provides a brilliant technical classification scheme for the parts of a text and the relationship of one text to another, but would still require further elucidation to address Culler's notions of logical and pragmatic presupposition. Genette narrows Kristeva's first use of the broad term *intertextuality* to quoting, plagiarism, and allusion. Genette's *metatextuality* can be both a form of overt and covert intertextuality as I have used it following Culler—and parody is the most common modality. *Hypertextuality*, as the overlay of one text (*hypertext*) or another text (*hypotext*) through transformation and imitation, does not really operate in any significant way in these *pīr kathās*. *Paratextuality* entails all elements of textual production that exceed the narrative proper— title pages, prefaces, chapter divisions, postscripts, publication encomia, and so forth—elements which are noted when relevant but which are not part of the immediate analysis. And *architextuality* is the genre classification that is a function of reader expectations, which in the *pīr kathās* would be the general features of the romance, with which we have earlier dealt. See Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky, foreword by Gerald Prince (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997); for the extended analysis of paratext, see Genette, *Paratexts*; for more on architexts, see Genette, *The Architext: An Introduction*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, foreword by Robert Scholes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

Logical Presupposition. Every discursive arena is governed by a set of *logical presuppositions*, that is, *rules for conducting discourse*. These include such things as what constitutes a rational argument, how to draw a proper inference, or what is allowable as a "fact" or proof. So the formal nature of logic, such as the mathematical basis of the syllogism, would be included here. It also includes other sources of authority which serve the community in setting the rules for these logical, or at least acceptable, arguments, for instance the role of revelation versus reason in traditional Islamic legal systems, resulting in the liberal application of ratiocination among the inheritors of the *muʿtazilah* traditions, or the absolute denial of anything suggesting local cultural preferences or opinions by the conservative Hanbalite school of law. The *imaginaire* is the realm within which the adjudication of these rules takes place—and, as will become apparent, no one standard ultimately prevailed in any community, regardless of sectarian or social orientation. Because the logical rules of discourse and their contexts were not uniform, language users constantly negotiated among them, often defining and redefining the same terminologies. This negotiation becomes critical when new terms are introduced into the lexicon, such as the Persian or Arabic technical vocabulary which often yields new forms in their crossover to the target language of Bangla. Cosmology is the root of all logical presuppositions (and vice versa), which means that all theological propositions and assumptions automatically fall under this heading, however general; so too such propositions as the laws of physics and cause and effect, for instance, the traditional Indic law of *karma*, which is prevalent throughout these *musalmāni* productions. One of the most important features of these cosmological propositions is the ethical sensibilities they engender, as we shall soon see. The same would apply for the assumptions that govern science, mathematics, and practical applications, such as legal codes, and related bureaucratic and institutional regulation, regardless of provenance.

Pragmatic Presupposition. Every discourse takes certain identifiable shapes by assuming certain structures that Culler labels *pragmatic presuppositions*. As already noted, the first obvious but often overlooked pragmatic issue is language—that the stories of the *pīrs* and *bibīs* were composed and circulated in the vernacular Bangla declares a particular audience that stretches beyond the discourses of law and theology, which operated primarily through Persian and Arabic, or among the Hindu populations through Sanskrit. In literary issues, the choice of textual genre also signals a type of discursive activity that further defines its audience and the issues to be adjudicated; the choice of genre underscores how authors and even communities choose to present themselves. That authors most commonly choose to utilize the *kathā* in *pāñcālī* form to describe these extraordinary exploits of the *pīrs* and *bibīs* already situates the tales in discernible patterns of reproduction and consumption—they are often publicly performed (the texts often include information on musical expression) rather than studied as chirographic or printed texts.

Further, genre is not limited to the outward literary form, but can also be formulated diegetically within the tales themselves. So we can extend this concept of shifts to include structured modes of discourse that populate the narratives. For example in the *Mānik pīrer kecchā* of Munsī Mohāmmad Pijiruddīn Sāheb, the antagonist presents himself initially as a merchant, so the mode of discourse is replete with its own set of rituals and structured venues that intersect with the expectations of trade and protocols of domestic and foreign courts; but when the same character assumes his persona as both householder and itinerant *pīr*, he abruptly shifts to a completely different sets of standards commensurate to that mendicant's calling.[18] The choice of genre or the switching of diegetic frames of authority within the narratives, signals authorial perspectives which reflect historical expectations of discursive negotiation. *In other words, the choice of form conditions expectations in the audiences as much as when the genre for delivery is chosen.*

Overt or Explicit Intertextuality. Many texts, with their incipient vision of like-minded community, frequently explicitly invoke precursor texts; and it is worth remembering that *text* can be more broadly construed as any prior source of recognizable authority as long as it is explicitly named. These precursors signal an *overt intertextuality, an invocation that provides a context for the current story without having to spell it out.* In practice, the naming of another text invokes a prior discursive realm associated with that text, but camouflages the vagueness of detailed content, leaving audiences with the sense of knowing more than what is actually stated, allowing them to fill in blanks according to their own understanding of the applicability of that textual content to the current narrative. Through this, overt intertextuality also serves to obviate, or at least lessen, the need to justify claims through other more explicit means, though references are often bound to the justification of logical presuppositions, as noted above. By invoking the precursor, its power and prestige are directly associated, if not immediately connected, to the present. There are obvious explicitly cited texts, such as the Arabic Qur'ān and the Sanskrit *Bhāgavata purāṇa*, in many of the tales of the *pīrs* and *bibīs*, whose authority is invoked to shore up the position of various characters, to signal affiliation, or even to eliminate dissent by placing the narrative situation in the larger context of prior cultural constructs. The explicit invocation of a text clearly aligns an overtly religious text with tradition, but in a literary text, the invocation points to a more general orientation that acknowledges but does not necessarily promote an explicit perspective on cosmological or other religious issues.

When a protagonist or antagonist encounters any gods or goddesses, such as Nārāyaṇ, Gaṅgā, or Śitalā, or encounters other celestial-ranging figures, such as the Prophet, Phātemā, Jibril, or even Āllā himself, those connections can qualify as

18. Stewart, "Tales of Mānik Pīr: Protector of Cows in Bengal," 319–20.

overt intertextuality if the figure's role in a text-specific event is easily identifiable. But if the divine figure in question is not indexed to a discrete event, but rather is invoked more generally, the reference fades into the grey area between explicit and implicit intertextuality or should be understood to function as an implied intertextuality. I do not wish to draw a hard and fast line between these two forms of intertextuality, because ultimately they depend on the background and perception of the recipient to make the connection; what may be an obvious reference to one reader or listener may completely slip by another.

Implied or Covert Intertextuality. A significant amount of the discourse defining the world of these early modern narratives hinges on *unstated* invocations of precursors, an *implied* or *covert intertextuality. Working through a rhetoric of association, these intertextual connections tend to be vague and often open-ended, pushing the recipient to determine what correspondences are relevant.* Perhaps the most common form is the appearance of a character or event from a prior text. A fictional character from one story may suddenly intrude into another, or in another variation, some historical character may show up in a fictional episode. These appearances are forms of analepses, which are often depicted as, but certainly not limited to, flashbacks; they directly connect the narrative to the plot of a prior tale though that tale is not named. For instance, in the opening sections of the *Baḍa satya pīr or sandhyāvati kanyār puthi* noted in the first chapter above, immediately following Satya Pīr's rather extraordinary birth from the turtle in the river waters, he submits to the mysterious figure of Khoyājā Jendā Pīr or Khoyājā Khijir,[19] with whom he spends the next several years receiving instruction to prepare him for his mission. Khoyājā Khijr is widely associated with safety on the waters and is the patron *pīr* of fishermen and sailors, so one is not surprised to see him appear to the newborn Satya Pīr on the sandbanks of the river. That association with water is likely to be the extent of the connection for most. But for the more astute auditor of this text, Khoyājā Khijir will be recognized as (Arabic) al-Khiḍr, the ageless and enigmatic saint who is considered to be the most accomplished of all of the "friends of God." As a teacher, his instruction is often puzzling to all but the most extraordinarily accomplished *sūphī* adept. His story can be found in the Korān (Arabic Qur'ān, *surāt* 18 *al-Kahf*). In that story, Musā is showing signs of an incipient hubris regarding his abilities as a prophet, so Allāh sends him to al-Khiḍr to demonstrate the profundity of his ignorance of the larger mysteries of the cosmos. In that encounter, three distinct problems are presented, the solutions to which in each case seem completely counterintuitive to Musā. Musā amply demonstrates his impatience and his inability to follow simple instruction without question, which further underscores his inability to see the truth that

19. It should be noted that in *Baḍa satya pīr or sandhyāvati kanyār puthi*, his name is spelled Khoyājā, while in the *Nabīvaṃśa* noted below it is spelled Khoyāj.

al-Khiḍr could see. That story of al-Khiḍr's instruction was, in turn, recorded and amplified by any number of authors compiling the tales of the prophets in Arabic. Of particular interest here are the version recorded in the thirteenth-century collection *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ* or "Stories of the Prophets" by ʿAbd Allāh al-Kisāʾi and the subsequent *ʿArāʾis al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ* or "Lives of the Prophets" by Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammed al-Ṯhalabī,[20] both of which Saiyad Sultān seems to have followed in his sixteenth-century Bangla retelling of the tales of those in the lineage of Mohāmmad, the *Nabīvaṃśa*.[21] For the learned, then, that simple reference to Khoyājā Jendā Pīr imparting esoteric instruction to Satya Pīr linked the tale back through a host of other texts to the Korān/Qurʾān itself, though no text is actually named.

Allusions to both mythical and historical figures provide a rich background through this rhetoric of association, for instance when a king is compared to Rām or when a historical figure is cited to set a tone. The heroine Lālmon in the famous tale *Lālmoner kāhinī* of Kavi Āriph is married to a young prince named Husāin Shāh, invoking the historical figure of the Sultanate king of the same name and all that his enlightened reign stood for.[22] The invocation situates the text historically because it had to have been composed after that legendary kingship to be effective. It also signals what most Bangla speakers see even today as an accommodating cultural perspective, for Husāin Śāh (r. 1494–1519) proved a champion of Bangla literature by commissioning the translation of such texts as *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* into Bangla,[23] celebrating non-*musalmāni* culture—and any number of scholars have casually made that connection. As the hallmark of this reign, wherein communal conflict was minimal, some scholars have actually proposed that Lālmon, Husāin's daughter (conflated with the heroine Lālmon), was responsible for introducing the worship of Satya Pīr, who as the amalgamation of Nārāyaṇ

20. Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Kisāʾi, *Tales of the Prophet* [*Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*], trans. Wheeler M. Thackston, Jr., Great Books of the Islamic World, ed. Sayyed Hossain Nasr (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1997); and Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammed Al-Thalabī, *Lives of the Prophets* [*Arāʾis al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ*], trans. William M. Brinner (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2002).

21. Saiyad Sultān, *Nabīvaṃśa*, 1:670–87. For a complete translation of this passage, see Saiyad Sultān, "Curbing Moses' Hubris: Khoyāj Khijir's Instruction to Musā in the Bengali *Nabīvaṃśa* of Saiyad Sultān," trans. Tony K. Stewart and Ayesha A. Irani (typescript). Other possible sources include texts by Juwayrī and Balʿamī; for more on the full extent of the intertextual relationship of these texts to the *Nabīvaṃśa*, see Irani, *Muhammad* Avatāra.

22. Kavi Ārif, "The Wazir's Daughter Who Married a Sacrificial Goat," in *Fabulous Females and Peerless Pīrs: Tales of Mad Adventure in Old Bengal*, trans. Tony K. Stewart (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 29–50.

23. Dating from the period, see Kṛttibās, *Rāmāyaṇ*, ed. Harekṛṣṇa Mukhopādhyāy, with an introduction by Sunitikumār Caṭṭopādhyāy (Kalakātā: Sāhitya Saṃsad, 1386 BS [1979]), and Kāśīrām Dās, *Mahābhārat*, ed. Maṭilāl Bandhyopādhyay, re-edited by Dhīrenda Ṭhākur (Kalakātā: Tārāc̃and Dās eṇḍ Sans, n.d. [1988?]. These two texts are the most popular Bangla versions of the great epics and have appeared in a myriad of print editions since the early nineteenth century.

and Khodā was and is cherished as Nirañjan, the Stainless. Yet if one looks at the actions of the Husāin Śāh in the *Lālmoner kāhini*, he is the opposite of everything people associate with that *sultān*: brash and imperious, impatient, easily seduced, not to mention having his head lopped off because of his uncontrollable sexual urges. That wayward head is subsequently reattached by Satya Pīr as a direct result of Lālmon's devotion, wherein the text explicitly invokes Behulā, the heroine of the *Manasā maṅgal*, whose devotion brings her husband Lakkhindar back to life.[24] Later Lālmon herself rescues him from the clutches of a witch who had transmogrified him into a ram for her personal pleasure, a variation on the salvific fidelity of Behulā. Yet, the invocation of Husāin Śāh as the historical figure stands.

Mixed forms of intertextuality can occur with completely different referents. For instance, in the opening section of the *Mānikpīrer jahurānāmā*, the hero's father Badar Pīr marries the princess Dudbibī. Prior to the wedding, when the four *mullahs* determine the astrologically precise time for the event, they deploy the Ketāb Korān, which allows them to ascertain Āllā's authorization for the marriage.[25] As previously noted, using the Korān for divination was common across South Asia, but the image of them huddled around their text mimicked their *brāhmaṇ* counterparts who would consult their Sanskrit astrological texts (*jyotiṣa śāstra*) prior to a wedding. The act signaled to the audience that these functionaries were performing the marriage properly according to a culturally relevant prescription—for any audience, regardless of religious practice, would instantly recognize that act in equivalent terms. The explicit intertextual reference to the Korān/Qur'ān combined there with the implicit intertextual reference to accepted marriage practices.

Not coincidentally, parody will almost always utilize the full set of permutations of presupposition and intertextuality, for its power depends on elaborate mimesis. The replication of the form of prior texts or sets of texts (in the larger sense of the concept) will deploy both implicit and explicit intertextual connections, while the rules that govern the action narrated in the tale itself, the plot, will of necessity share presuppositions with its textual predecessor—a significant moment when those autotelic narratives can prove vulnerable to external modification by another later narrative operating within a shared discursive arena. But shared discourse does not automatically signal identical situatedness; rather, those presuppositions can just as easily become the grounds for a critique, the assertion of difference in the mimesis of the parody. That mimesis, however, has a double

24. For an English translation of the basic tale, see Ketakā Dāsa, "The *Manasā Maṅgal* of Ketakā Dāsa," in *The Thief of Love: Bengali Tales from Court and Village*, trans. Edward C. Dimock (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 195–294. For an analysis of Behulā's actions, see Tony K. Stewart, "The Process of Surface Narrative: Corpse Worship," in *Sarpa-saṃskṛti o manasā*, ed. Añjan Sen and Śekh Makbul Islām (Kalakātā: Baṅgīya Sāhitya Saṃsad, 2012), 181–94.

25. Jaidi or Jayaraddhi, *Mānikpīrer jahurānāmā*, 313; see also this volume, chaps. 2 and 3.

effect, for while it functions to relate the text to its precursor text/s, it also ironically preserves the precursor's place in the world of the *imaginaire*, fixing it ever the more firmly in the shared discourse—it is a relationship of structural dependence. As a precondition of comprehensibility, mimicry, whether positive or negative, ensures the stability of the newly created work as well as that of its parodic object. By anchoring itself to what has preceded it, the parody's own effectiveness will depend heavily on the continued relevance of the precursor in an expanded discursive arena, pushing the boundaries of what might be imagined and, as we shall see, shifting the direction of it.

4.2. THE *BONBIBĪ JAHURĀ NĀMĀ* OF MOHĀMMAD KHATER

To demonstrate briefly how these features might be useful for understanding the world of a particular text and how it connects to prior texts in this discursive realm of the *imaginaire*, we will examine the tale of Bonbibī. The saga of Bonbibī is a late-nineteenth-century production, considerably later than all the other texts in this set of fictional stories of *pīrs* and *bibīs*. The origins of the tale are bit fuzzy, but the earliest recorded text is by Bayanuddīn, which was printed in 1284 BS (ca. 1877).[26] The text we will examine was composed a mere three years later in 1287 BS (ca. 1880) by Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb as the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā*.[27] This version of the story has become synonymous with the Bonbibī cycle and has been reprinted with ongoing editorial interventions, some changes as simple as modernizing spellings, but more substantively adding paratextual assertions attributed to the author.[28] The last rendition of the tale was composed by Mohāmmad Munśī

26. Munśī Bayanuddīn, *Bonbibī jahurānāmā* (Sisvādaha: by the author, 1284 BS [ca. 1877]), cited by Sarat Chandra Mitra, "On a Musalmāni Legend about the Sylvan Saint Bana-bibī and the Tiger-Deity Dakshiṇa Rāya," *Journal of the Department of Letters* 10 (1923): 156. For a revised edition of Bayanuddīn's text, see Munśī Bayanuddīn, *Bonbibī jahurānāmā* (Kalikātā: Āfājuddin Āhāmmad, from 337–2 Upper Chitpur Road, 1327 BS [ca. 1920]).

27. The earliest edition of the text I could examine was Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, *Bonbibī jahurānāmā* (Kalikātā: Śrī Rāmlāl Śīl at Niu-Bhikṭoriyā Pres, 1325 BS [?] [ca. 1918?]).

28. The most popular reprint that has flooded the market in the last few decades is Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā: Nārāyaṇīr jaṅga o dhonā dukher pālā* (Kalikātā: Nuruddīn Āhmmad at Gaosiyā Lāibrerī, 1394 BS [ca. 1987]), which was followed by multiple reprints. That reprint also serves as the basis for Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā: Nārāyaṇīr jaṅga o dhonā dukher pālā* (Kalikātā: Nuruddīn Āhmmad at Gaosiyā Lāibrerī, 1401 BS [ca. 1994]), a digitally typeset edition which is virtually identical to the old hand-set reprint version of 1394 BS, but with some careless misreadings of the original text that in several instances change the tenor of the text, whether intentionally or not. A later edition is Mohāmmad Khāter Sāheb, *Bonbibī jahurānāmā: Nārāyaṇīr jaṅga ār dhonā dukher pālā* (Kolkātā: Ji Ke Prakāśanī, 1409 [ca. 2002], reprint 1416 [ca. 2009]). See also the retelling by Samir Rāy, *Banbibī o nārāyaṇīr pālā* (Kāśīnagar, Cabbiś Pārganaṇas: n.p. 1990).

in 1305 BS (ca. 1898),[29] but has not enjoyed the same popularity as Khater's account. All three versions tell essentially the same story with differences primarily in emphasis, phrasing (often paraphrasing of the prior work or works), minor elaborations of combat engagement, and the greater or lesser unraveling of emotion.[30] The story has also taken life in popular dramas, all-night recitations, and other performance genres.[31] Not coincidentally, following Amitav Ghosh's masterful retelling of the tale in the novel *The Hungry Tide*, Bonbibī's saga has now become inextricably linked to the environmental issues at stake in the Sunderban.[32] The popularity of the story has likewise generated a number of articles holding up the narrative as an example of religious tolerance and secularism (which in the current Indian context often refers to the social recognition of pluralism),[33] a position that will be challenged in the next chapter.

. . .

29. See the new edition: Muhammād Munśi, *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā kanyār punthi* (Kalakātā: Osmāniā Lāibrerī, 1393 BS [ca. 1986]).

30. See Sujit Kumār Maṇḍal's summary of the print history: Sujit Kumār Maṇḍal, ed., *Bonbibir pālā* (Kalakātā: Aṇimā Viśvās Gaṅgcil, 2010), 12–13; as he indicates in note 3, he dates all three texts based on arguments put forward by Girīndranāth Dās, Sukumār Sen, Gopendrakṛṣṇa Basu, Āśutoṣ Bhaṭṭācāryya, and Ābdul Karim Sāhitya Viśārad.

31. In his introduction, Sujit Kumār Maṇḍal brilliantly traces the movement of the tale through various performance genres (*kecchā*, *pālā*, *ekani*, *nāṭya gīt*, and *jātrā*) and their relationship to printed texts, both prior texts and those generated as a result of performance; Sujit Kumār Maṇḍal, *Bonbibir pālā*, 1–51. The volume contains transcriptions of the *Bonbibir 'Ekani' pālā*, *Bonbibir pālā*, and *Dukhe jātrā*. Śaśāṅk Śekhar Dās provides a good overview of the place of Bonbibī in Sunderban culture, including the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* and other performance forms, as well as insights into the language and use of the tiger in legends; see Dās, *Bonbibi* (Kalakātā: Loksaṃskṛti o Ādibāsī Saṃskṛti Kendra, Paścimbaṅga Sarkār, 2004, reprint 2018). This text is almost entirely derivative of a much more expansive dissertation, which also includes extensive texts; see Dās, "Bonbibi o grām bāṃlā" (PhD diss., Calcutta University, 1989). See also Girīndranāth Dās, "Loknāṭya bonbibi pālā evaṃ ekai viṣaye duṭi ādhunik nāṭak," *Lokśruti: Loksaṃskṛti viṣayak ṣānmāsik patrikā* 10 (1399 BS [1993]): 83–85.

32. Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (London: HarperCollins, 2004). Ghosh's retelling is delightfully broken up for the purposes of his narrative, leaving the reader anxious to pick up the thread, a gentle labor which adds to the dramatic tension. The Bonbibī entries on the web, blogspots, Facebook, and small texts or pamphlets are too numerous to register, though it should be noted that a number of them synoptically retell the story, for instance see Baren Gaṅgopādhyay, *Bonbibīr upākhyān* (Kalakātā: Nāth Brādārs, 1978), with many responding to Ghosh and the environmental concerns for the Sunderbans. Similarly, the print literature on the environment frequently cites the story; on the whole there is significant repetition in these short tracts.

33. See Ipshita Chanda, "*Bonobibir Johurnama:* A Method for Reading Plural Cultures," *The Delhi Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 2 (2015): 51–62; Shatarupa Bhattacharyya, "Localising Global Faiths: The Heterodox Pantheon of the Sundarbans," *Asian Review of World Histories* 5, no. 1 (January 2017): 141–57; Sonali Roy, "Hindu-Islamic Folk Goddess in Bengal: Bonbibi," *The Appollonian* 4, nos. 1–2 (March–June 2017): 66–74.

The Three Episodes of the Bonbibī jahurā nāmā[34]

A *phakir* named Berāhim is married to Phulbibī, a woman who cannot conceive, a predicament which causes much agony for both. Phulbibī advises Berāhim to make their plight known to *rachul*, the Apostle, whose grace will surely resolve the issue. So Berāhim goes to the Prophet's tomb in Madinā where he humbly petitions for children. Rather than answering directly, the Prophet promises Berāhim he will ask Phātemā, who is resident in heaven (*behest*), why they have had no children.[35]

> With these words Berāhim was consoled and Hajrat himself took off for heaven. When she saw him, Phātemā inquired of the Prophet, "Tell me, my beloved one, why have you come to see me in person?"
>
> Hajrat replied, "O Mā, the reason I have come is this: Why is the house of Berāhim bereft of children?"
>
> Phātemā replied, "Please be seated and wait. The Korān is right there on the throne so I will look it up." And with these words Bibī went to consult the Korān. She soon returned and announced to Hajrat Nabī, the Holy Prophet, "It records that there will be two offspring in the house of Berāhim. But they will not be born of Phulbibī. He must couple with another woman in marriage, then he will have children. Go and give the news to Berāhim."
>
> As soon as he heard, the Prophet returned to his dwelling in Madinā. Remaining invisible, he relayed this to Berāhim in a disembodied voice. "Long have you been beloved of me, an immaculate learned saint (*sāi*). But there will be no children from Phulbibī's womb. Understand that what is required is for you to join together with another in marriage. From her womb will be born a boy and a girl." When he heard this Berāhim was thrilled. He made a thousand *sālāms* in obeisance before *rachul*, the Apostle. Then he took his leave and headed back to his home. Berāhim reported to Bibī all the intelligence that he had gleaned.[36]

Not surprisingly, Phulbibī is furious and tells him to ignore the oracle, but he persists. So as appeasement, she extracts from him a promise that he will grant her one wish, which she will hold in reserve. He agrees. Finally, with her permission,

34. Because of its ubiquity, I am using the hand-set reprint of Khater's 1394 BS [ca. 1987] edition. The initial tale of Bonbibī and Śājaṅgali growing up, visiting Madinā and then coming to the Sunderban where they defeat Dakṣiṇ Rāy's mother, Nārāyaṇī, corresponds to pp. 1–17 in the 1394 BS [ca. 1987] edition and 1–16 in the 1401 BS [ca. 1994] digital imprint; the second tale of Dhonāi and Dukhe corresponds to 18–43 in the 1394 BS [ca. 1987] edition and 16–39 in the 1401 BS [ca. 1994] digital imprint.

35. The visit to the tomb of Muhāmmad mimics a quintessential popular *sūphī* practice in the Bangla-speaking world and the Indian subcontinent of the early modern period. For the early history of the construction, veneration, and multiple controversies around Muhāmmad's tomb, see Leor Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). For a general overview of tomb veneration in Islamic South Asia, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent* (Leiden-Köln: E. J. Brill, 1980), esp. chap. 4.

36. Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā*, 3–4.

Berāhim heads to Makkā, where after searching he comes to the home of one *phakir* named Śāhā Jalil, who has an eligible daughter, Golālbibī. Their marriage is soon arranged.[37]

The couple are married according to custom. Predictably, Phulbibī is mad with jealousy.

> God then determined it was time for the great event of the birth. Āllā summoned Bonbibī and Śājaṅgali, both of whom were residing in heaven, and issued this command: "You will be born to a Bibī named Golāl in the home of Berāhim."[38]

And so they descend into the womb of Golālbibī with the express mission of establishing their auspicious domain in the low-lying land of the eighteen tides where Gāji and Rāy exercise their power.

Phulbibī waits until Golālbibī is about to deliver, then demands her husband keep his promise: the boon she begs is that he abandon Golālbibī in the forest. Berāhim protests but sees no other recourse, for he is an honorable man and cannot break his promise. So Berāhim takes his pregnant second wife Golālbibī and abandons her in the forest.

Golālbibī's cry of distress generates sympathy among the wild animals who come to her aid, tending her as she gives birth to twins: a girl first and then a boy. Understandably distressed, Golālbibī feels incapable of surviving with two children to feed, so after consideration, she abandons her newborn daughter. The wild animals of the jungle—especially the deer—take it upon themselves to raise this little girl, and so she grows into her role as Bonbibī, Mistress of the Forest. After some years, Bonbibī manages to catch up with her brother, Śājaṅgali, who has also survived, and together they soon travel to Madinā, where they become the students or *murids* of one of the descendants of Hāsen.[39] After they have mastered their studies and become themselves accomplished *murśids*, they visit the grave of Phātemā to ask her blessings before launching out into the world. There an oracle, a disembodied voice, directs them to go to the land of the eighteen tides, or the Sunderbans. Before departing, they visit the tomb of the Prophet (*nabī*), where

37. A translation of the wedding section can be found as Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, "Bonbībī, Protectress of the Forest," trans. Sufia Mendez Uddin, in *Tales of God's Friends: Islamic Hagiography in Translation*, ed. John Renard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 301–11.

38. Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā*, 5.

39. This is likely Hashim, Mohammad's paternal grandfather. See ibn Isḥāq, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Isḥāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, trans. A[lfred] Guillaume (1955; reprint: Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1967), 3: "Muhammad was the son of 'Abdullah, b. 'Abdu'I-Muttalib (whose name was Shayba), b. Hashim (whose name was 'Amr), b. 'Abdu Manaf (whose name was al-Mughira)." This identification is based on the opening of Sāyeb Munsī Ābdul Ohāb, *Gāji kālu o cāmpāvatī kanyār punthi*, 1: "Born in the house of Ābdullāh, Ābdul Mataleb was his grandfather, and his father was named Hāsem. His father in turn was Mānnāph, dear to the hearts of all in the community and foremost leader among the Prophet's lineage."

they praise him as "the *guru* of all mendicants (*phakirs*)"[40] and request his imprimatur in their quest to establish the *khelāphat* in that swampy place. His sanction comes in the form of a special headdress, which they accept; they make their obeisances and leave. These headdresses allow them to cover great distances in a flash, and so they end up in the Sunderbans.

When they reach the edge of the swamplands, they are warned of a powerful landlord named Dakṣiṇā Rāy,[41] who controls the fabulous wealth of the place: timber, honey, beeswax, and salt. When they enter the region and Śājaṅgali pauses to give the call to prayer, the sound rolls across those low-lying islands like thunder. Dakṣiṇā Rāy is intimidated by the power of this call, so he quickly orders his second, Sanātan, to investigate. He has immediately realized it was not the voice of his friend Baḍa Khān Gājī, with whom he made peace after a lengthy battle. Sanātan reports back: he has espied a young man and a young woman, both dressed in black cloaks, offering praise to Āllā with hands upraised and their staffs firmly planted in the ground, laying claim to the place in the name of Āllā. Rāy is furious that they did not first approach him for permission to enter his lands, so he summons his army of shape-shifting ghouls (*pret*) and hungry ghosts (*bhūt*) and prepares to show them who is in control. Rāy's mother, Nārāyaṇī, presciently intervenes and advises him not to fight a woman because, even should he win, there will be no victory, but should he lose, the humiliation will be permanent. Rāy concedes and generously allows his mother to fight as his proxy: let a woman fight a woman. Nārāyaṇī gathers her army:[42]

> Hungry ghosts (*bhūts*) emerged from the cremation grounds, appearing as so many messengers of death (*kāl duts*), more than one hundred fifty-six thousand issued forth from secret places. Witches (*ḍākinī*), all fierce viragos, numbered three hundred sixty million and fanned out over the land of the eighteen tides screaming "Kill! Kill!" Once they were assembled, Nārāyaṇī prepared her battle dress, covering herself with glittering ornaments of war. Arming herself with a myriad of weapons, she vainly sashayed down the road atop her royal chariot, confident of victory.[43]

Her hordes advance on Bonbibī and Śājaṅgali from all sides.

The twins are worried, but the elder sister Bonbibī reassures her brother that he need only call on Āllā for protection. He again belts out the call to prayer, which rattles Nārāyaṇī's skittish legions, causing them to scatter in all directions. Bonbibī's own booming roar (*huṃkār*) paralyzes the rest of the demonic masses, and she rains destruction down upon them. Nārāyaṇī rallies and lets fly her arrows, but Bonbibī always sees them coming, so with the *kalemā* wet on her lips, those arrows

40. Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā*, 13.

41. This printed text throughout writes Dakṣiṇā Rāy, rather than Dakṣiṇ Rāy found in Kṛṣṇarām's *Rāy maṅgal*.

42. Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā*, 15.

43. Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, 15.

pass through her body as if she were made of mere water. Nārāyaṇī unleashes her most fearsome weapons: the *ṣaṭcakra*, the *gadācakra*, and finally the ultimate *dharmmacakra*. They roar through the air like angry missiles, but again Bonbibī tastes the *kalemā*, plants her staff, and the fiery weapons fizzle out. Nārāyaṇī then strikes hard at Bonbibī, but she remains untouched as the gleaming sword turns into harmless flowers by the grace of Phātemā. Bonbibī and Nārāyaṇī proceed in hand-to-hand combat for the rest of the day, neither one getting the upper hand, until Bonbibī feels herself giving way. She petitions Khodā for help from his perch in heaven, and through an intermediary he grants her the additional power (*barakat*) she needs. "The *barakat* that was to be found in heaven, Khodā summoned and commanded to descend to the aid of Bonbibi."[44] With this reinforcement of power, Bonbibī mounts and then sits on the chest of Nārāyaṇī, squeezing from her the very breath of life until she capitulates and begs for mercy.

> "Spare me my life, please do not kill me. I will ever be your loyal servant. Through the region of the eighteen tides, all those who exercise power will become your loyal and obedient followers. From this day forward you rule as *rājā* and we are your subjects. You have become the master. Please pledge to forgive and protect us and we will be your loyal vassals. We will flawlessly execute your every order." As she listened to this prayer of heartfelt contrition, being naturally beneficent, Bibī did not crush and dismember her, but spared her.[45]

Nārāyaṇī ingratiates herself with Bonbibī, whom she diligently serves. After that, when Śājaṅgali gives the call to prayer with Dakṣiṇā Rāy present, all the inhabitants of the forests respond with gifts. Bonbibī is heard to say, "Sister, listen to what I decree: We will divide up and share the land of the eighteen tides. No one need ever suffer again. Now go back to your own homes."[46] In this manner, Bonbibī assumes control of the low-lying land of the eighteen tides. She marks a number of locales as her own, where she begins the production of honey and beeswax. She imposes order and consigns responsibility for clearly demarcated regions to other vassals; Dakṣiṇ Rāy is made responsible for maintaining the area of Kēdokhāli.[47]

Everything works smoothly until a trader named Dhonāi arrives to collect honey and wax. Dhonāi and Monāi are two brothers from Bārij Hāṭi in Huglī who trade in goods from the low-lying lands of the eighteen tides. The months of spring are the ideal time to collect honey, and Dhonāi has convinced his reluctant brother that the latter needs seven boats to take advantage of the opportunity. As he outfits and then mans his boats, Dhonāi finds he is one hand short, so he importunes his

44. Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, 16. It is interesting to note that *barakat* here is personified and given explicit instruction.

45. Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, 16.

46. Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, 17.

47. Vivalok Comics faithfully retells the first half of the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā;* see Saswat Ghosh, comp., "Banbibi," in *Folk Tales from India: The Sunderbans*, 22–27.

young, and quite poor, nephew Dukhe in an effort to recruit his help. Dukhe's widowed mother is initially opposed, for she has no one else to look after her. Dhonāi's assurance that he will keep Dukhe safely on board the ship at all times, coupled with the prospect of his amassing substantial wealth, is persuasive, but when he follows with a pledge to arrange Dukhe's marriage to his own daughter upon their return, she entrusts Dukhe to his care. She advises him that if he ever finds himself in trouble, he need only silently think on Bonbibī and she will come to his aid.

Dhonāi, with Dukhe on board, heads south, but when the ships enter the low-lying regions, they bypass the area controlled by Dakṣiṇā Rāy without stopping. Honey and beeswax are everywhere abundant, so they excitedly anchor and go ashore; Dukhe remains on board as Dhonāi has promised his mother. But Dakṣiṇā Rāy has detected their presence, and he observes to his brother Biṣam Rāy:

> Take a look, brother, Dhonā has come into our territories without offering me *pūjā* worship or the offering of rice balls. He is trying to evade me and steal the honey. But when he reaches Goḍakhāli, I will trick him instead. I will conceal the beeswax and honey so that he can find none of it. He will get his just desserts unless he performs a *pūjā* with a human sacrifice (*narabali*)." As he was saying this, Dakṣiṇā Rāy's anger began to build, and he headed off to Goḍakhāli, where he camouflaged all the beeswax and honey.[48]

When Dhonā arrives, he greedily surveys and sees honey everywhere, but when he draws near, it mysteriously disappears. After three days of searching in vain, he begins to suspect the trick of some deity, so he repairs to his boats and frets about his venture. That night . . .

> Dakṣiṇā Rāy came and spoke to him in a dream. "Why, Dhonā, are you lying here in my territory asleep, going without food? Tell me, what misery has befallen you?"
>
> He remonstrated with a certain petulance, "Just who are you appearing here? Make yourself known!"
>
> When he heard this, Dakṣiṇā Rāy explained the matter this way: "I am the one who creates the honey and the beeswax in these swamps and forests. A sage, *muni*, who was a strong-willed arbiter of justice was the chief in the low-lying regions. I am his son, Dakṣiṇā Rāy."
>
> Dhonā replied, "If you are indeed really the great lord of this low-lying land, then why can I not find any beeswax or honey?"
>
> Rāy responded, "O Dhonā, it has been many long days since anyone offered me human sacrifice in worship. Should you manage to perform a human sacrifice for me, I will fill your seven ships with beeswax."
>
> But when he heard this demand, Dhonā could only exclaim in distress, "Ah, fie!" It was as if the sky itself had shattered and fallen on his head. He quickly improvised, "The only people I have brought with me are lowly. Tell me, how can I supply some-

48. Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā*, 21.

> one suitable? I do not want your beeswax and honey. We will row our boats back to our own land."
>
> Rāy heard him out, then his anger rising, he retorted, "All of the sailors that fill your boats I will feed to the crocodiles, and then we will see just how you flee back to your homeland."[49]

Dhonāi is hapless and helpless, and Rāy presses him to hand over Duhke, no one else; but Dukhe overhears what is happening, and he closes his eyes and meditates, calling three times to Bonbibī. His call of distress shakes her throne, and she tells Śājaṅgali:

> "Whenever anyone in this forest calls me Mother, I must fly to their rescue. You do not understand the responsibility and implications of wielding the power of *barakat*. In the low-lying land of the eighteen tides I am the mother of each and every one."[50]

Bonbibī responds to Dukhe's call by assuming a magical created form (*māyārūp*). She instructs the astonished Dukhe that when Dhonāi starts to hand him over to Dakṣiṇā Rāy, he should call on her just as he has done.

So Dhonāi takes his ships to the appointed place of Kēdokhāli to collect the honey and beeswax, which Dakṣiṇā Rāy has loaded with the help of his demonic hordes (*deo dāno*), reminding Dhonāi of their bargain. Dukhe grows increasingly terrified as the time draws near, and so he laments:

> "Tomorrow the boats will cast off and my uncle will return to his home. He will surrender me to Dakṣiṇā Rāy to be mauled to death. Dakṣiṇā Rāy will shapeshift himself into a tiger, a man-eater, and eat me. By that act of handing me over, my uncle will have made himself a rich man, returning home triumphantly."[51]

As expected, at the first opportunity, Dhonāi offloads Dukhe, casts off his boats, and heads back to Bārij Hāṭi, leaving Dukhe to fend for himself. Dakṣiṇā Rāy, "that son of a *rākṣas* demon, assumed the form of a tiger and advanced in order to eat Dukhe."[52] Dukhe calls out for Bonbibī, but before she can arrive, he expires, dying of fright. Śājaṅgali has accompanied Bonbibī, so assessing the situation, he sprinkles Dukhe with magic water and blows on his face. He soon revives.

Śājaṅgali spots Dakṣiṇā Rāy and gives chase. As they cross the waterways, Dakṣiṇā Rāy calls out to his crocodiles and sharks to attack Śājaṅgali, but he dispatches them by the hundreds with seemingly little effort, flinging them by the tail to their deaths. Rāy flees to the shelter of his friend Baḍa Khān Gāji, who consoles him but points out that what he has unwittingly done was to pick a quarrel with Bonbibī, who is extending her personal protection to Dukhe. He also reminds

49. Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, 21.
50. Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, 22.
51. Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, 26.
52. Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, 27

Dakṣiṇā Rāy that his own mother Nārāyaṇī, acting as his proxy, has submitted to Bonbibī after her defeat, which makes him subservient to Bonbibī as well. Right then Śājaṅgali catches up with them, but Baḍa Khān Gājī himself steps forward to intervene, cooling him down. Śājaṅgali is nonplussed; he cannot understand how a god-fearing *gājī* warrior can be friends with a demon (*rākṣas*) like Dakṣiṇā Rāy, sufficient to mediate on his behalf. As they face off, Bonbibī's own summons rings insistently in their ears, so the three of them hurry to her with hands pressed together in supplication. Turning to Baḍa Khān Gāji, she demands to know who he is and how, if he is indeed a true saint (*oli*) of Āllā, can he shelter this demon *rākṣas*. Gājī explains that he is the son of a king, Śāhā Sekandār, and that in a previous battle, he, Baḍa Khān Gāji, defeated Dakṣiṇ Rāy. In the aftermath of that battle, he has graciously allowed Rāy to share power in the region. Pressing on, Baḍa Khān then reminds Bonbibī that Dakṣiṇ Rāy must be considered her *de facto* son because she has defeated his mother Nārāyaṇī in battle, after which Bonbibī has tendered Nārāyaṇī her protection and grace—and a share in managing the land. That act of compassion has made Nārāyaṇī's offspring her own. Bonbibī acknowledges the truth of it, and so a second rapprochement is achieved. Bonbibī then declares that Dukhe enjoyed her protection as if he were her own little brother, so she commands Baḍa Khān Gāji to be a brother to Dukhe and provide him with wealth should the need ever arise.

Dhonāi is unaware of what has transpired as he flees home. When he arrives, embarrassed but feigning grief with a long face, he informs Dukhe's mother that the poor boy has been eaten by a tiger. Such is her grief that she becomes blind and deaf. She cannot imagine how Dukhe could have died, for she explicitly instructed him to take refuge in Bonbibī, who would always protect her lowly devotees. His mother's heartache is so great that Bonbibī soon comes to hear of it, so she makes arrangement to send Dukhe home from the low-lying regions. She instructs him not to fear tigers, for he will travel under her protection. She also advises him not to chastise Dhonāi, for had Dhonāi not acted in the duplicitous manner that he did, Dukhe "would never have met her, would never have gotten her *darśan*."[53] So she dispatches him to his homeland, mounted on the back of a magical crocodile named Seko,[54] with the promise that he will soon marry Dhonāi's daughter.

The giant crocodile uses his supernatural powers to traverse the swamps and rivers to their destination in less than the twinkling of an eye. Finally on dry land, but still overwhelmed with the emotion of it all, Dukhe strikes out to look for his mother. When he finds her, blind and deaf, Dukhe calls on Bonbibī once

53. Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, 33.

54. *Seko* means arsenic. The presence of naturally occurring arsenic in the ground waters of the whole of the southern Bangla-speaking region on both sides of the border is a discovery of the very late twentieth century, its sudden appearance blamed on deep tube wells. So this reference, which is seemingly and appealingly prescient, has to be read as a coincidence, barring some other corroboration.

again. This time she materializes in the form of a white fly and instructs him to touch his mother's eyes and ears while reciting Bonbibī's name. It works. After his mother has recovered, she advises her son to don a mendicant's garb and visit seven villages to beg food and spread the story of Bonbibī's compassion. With the food he collects, his mother prepares a feast for the village, and Bonbibī's fame spreads far and wide. Afterwards, Dukhe decides to visit the local judge (*hākīm*) to lodge a legal complaint (*nāliś*) against Dhonā for his actions in the Sunderbans. His mother discourages him because it would be so costly, but he insists they can afford it because Baḍa Khān Gāji has promised to supply him with seven carts of riches in his time of need. So he summons Baḍa Khān, who keeps his promise and takes him to a place where the carts are buried, then disappears. But when Dukhe tries to dig, the ground will not yield, and he feels somehow deceived. Right then, seven miscreants come along, frightening Dukhe, so he flees, and they in turn greedily dig up the carts. When they open the lids of these treasure chests, nests of writhing serpents are stirred and rise up, hissing their danger. Their improvised plan aborted, the thieves convince themselves it has all been a trap, so they decide to take revenge. They deposit the chests at Dukhe's mother's house, fully expecting the poisonous snakes to kill her and her son, but when Dukhe opens the chests, there is nothing but piles of gleaming treasure.

Now, of course, Dukhe and his mother need a proper dwelling to store that wealth, so he calls out for Dakṣiṇā Rāy, who instantly sends him a consignment of three lakh pieces of cut timber. Being inexperienced in business matters, Dukhe does not know how to procure carpenters and handymen, so he calls on Bonbibī again and explains his deficiency. She shows herself in a dream to one resourceful man named Jadurāy and instructs him to locate Dukhe and assist. He does: he hires and manages all the necessary help to build a lavish compound: day laborers, carpenters, guards and the rest of the requisite constabulary, female servants, rent collectors, and so forth. Thus Dukhe, though low-born, has "become famous throughout the region as a wealthy land-owning *caudhurī*."[55] He has houses built for widows, clears roads, constructs ponds, and turns the region into a profitable *jamidār*'s estate with untold numbers of satisfied tenants, for by Dukhe's decree they pay no taxes.

Witnessing this transformation from a safe distance, Dhonāi grows increasingly worried.

Everyone by now has come to pay respects, curry favor, and attend on Dukhe—everyone except Dhonāi, so Dukhe has him summoned. Dhonāi is understandably terrified, but when he is put before Dukhe, the latter forgives him, for he notes that it was Dhonāi's perfidious act of abandonment that proved a felix culpa, leading to his meeting with Bonbibī and his becoming a *caudhurī.* Dhonāi goes away certain

55. Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā*, 39.

that Dukhe will eventually get even, so this time it is Dhonāi who calls on Bonbibī for help. Attentive to those who call on her—even scoundrels such as Dhonāi—she appears to him in a dream where she scolds him for his stupidity. "Listen, Dhonā, you imbecile. If you really want to avoid being chastised at the hands of Dukhe and escape with your life, then gift him your daughter in marriage."[56] Desperate, Dhonāi does as instructed, proffering his daughter Cāmpā to Dukhe, who happily accepts her. A magnificent wedding soon follows and thousands upon thousands of people from every social rank are in attendance. A number of *mollās* and *kājis* are summoned, and the latter consult the Korān for approval of the wedding before performing the nuptial rituals. Afterwards, Dhonāi and Dukhe are reconciled. In his euphoria, and remembering his own plight as a poor boy, Dukhe forgives all of his farmer tenants their taxes for the next three years. Dukhe then escorts his bride home to his mother, who gives her blessings. When summoned, Bonbibī appears once again as a white fly to offer her grace to Dukhe's bride, Cāmpā, so they may live a good life.

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4.3. THE SEMIOTIC CONTEXT OF BONBIBĪ'S TALE

Even a cursory run at the connections made in this abbreviated rendition of the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* proves formidable. The text is suspended in a web of intertextualities and exhibits presuppositions about the basic structure of the universe that will resonate with the texts to which it connects. We can be brief while making the point, so I will employ a shorthand to summarize the connections: logical presuppositions (LP), pragmatic presupposition (PP), explicit or overt intertextuality (E/OI), and implicit or covert intertextuality (I/CI). A number of these items may seem obvious, but because virtually no basic exegetical work has been performed on this text, this approach will at least remove some of the arbitrariness of this interpretive exercise, as it will when applied to any text or set of texts.

The title declares the genre as *jahurā nāmā*, which is a form of *kathā* (fictional story), that genre subset specifically celebrating the glories of the appearance or manifestation (*jahurā*) of a celestial figure (PP); in this case, it details how Bonbibī establishes her preeminence in the Sunderban and how Dukhe makes her even more famous and thereby the object of worship. The *jahurā nāmā* clearly patterns itself (through mimesis, therefore parody) on the *maṅgal kāvya*, one of the most ubiquitous forms of early modern Bangla literature (I/CI) which celebrate the auspicious appearance or activities (*maṅgal*) of the goddess, such as Caṇḍī, Manasā, Durgā, Śitalā, and others, including two male deities, Dharma and Dakṣiṇā

56. Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, 41.

Rāy.[57] The Bangla of the text is somewhat Persianized (PP), aimed obviously at a *musalmāni* or, more likely as will become apparent, a later Muslim audience as the communities grow apart.[58]

The text assumes a basic tripartite cosmography (LP) with a heaven (*behest*) that serves as residence for Āllā, Mohāmmad, Phātemā, and others (I/CI),[59] including the heroine Bonbibī and her twin brother Śājaṅgali. In his paramount role as the Prophet, the chief religious functionary, Mohāmmad is styled the *guru* of all *phakirs*, the moniker *guru* acknowledging the cultural context (I/CI). He also has preternatural abilities, such as invisibility, marking him as an extraordinary celestial figure; while not in evidence in the Nārāyaṇī story, in the Dukhe story Bonbibī has assumed similar celestial abilities. This of course mimics the powers of the gods and goddesses in the *maṅgal kāvyas*. Heaven is somewhere "up there" above or apart from earth, but includes communication gateways through the tombs of Mohāmmad and Phātemā at Madinā. The pristine original Korān sits on its throne in heaven, the tale seeming to take a position on that long-standing debate about its status (LP; E/OI); it is also explicitly used in divination, making it parallel to the brāhmaṇical use of astrological texts (I/CI). From his place in heaven God, that is Āllā/Khodā, observes and intervenes in the world, establishing what appears to be a fairly routine traffic between heaven and earth, a manner that imitates *purāṇik*-style descents (*avatār*) (LP, I/CI). Interestingly, and a good example of terminological imprecision—or perhaps a genuine misunderstanding of the nature of Mohāmmad—the author refers to Mohāmmad as Khodā, a name that one would expect to be exclusively reserved for Āllā; it suggests an understanding of divinity through the notion of *avatār*, which is used for Mohāmmad, but one cannot rule

57. For a survey of the corpus of *maṅgal kāvya*, see Āśutoṣ Bhaṭṭācāryya, *Bāṅglā maṅgalkāvyer itihās*.

58. Jawhar Sircar argues that the *maṅgal kāvya* texts were a brāhmaṇical effort to claim the allegiance of lower-caste groups and so-called *ādibāsis* or aboriginal tribes by formally appropriating low-caste goddesses and gods in direct response to Muslim proselytization; see Sircar, *The Construction of the Hindu Identity in Medieval Western Bengal? The Role of Popular Cults* (Kolkata: Institute of Development Studies, 2005), 81–95. While Sircar's argument suffers from reading back the contemporary categories of Hindu and Muslim, his contention may well be supported for, at the same time the *maṅgal kāvyas* were being created, new texts on *dharma* obligations were aimed explicitly at the lower-caste groups; see Theodore Benke, "The *Śūdraśiromaṇi* of Kṛṣṇa Śeṣa: A 16th Century Manual of *Dharma* for *Śūdras*" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2010). I am indebted to Donald R. Davis, Jr., whose unpublished paper titled "The Evolution of the Legal Subject in Classical Hindu Law" (typescript) draws attention to this development that saw a proliferation of such texts between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. Kumkum Chatterjee's take on the function of the late *maṅgal kāvya* genre suggests a slightly different audience, a much more elite consumer in a Mughal-inflected court setting; see Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), chap. 3, "Performance Narratives and the Mughal Factor," 90–122.

59. There is no need to elaborate the intertextual connections invoked by such well-known figures.

out the possibility of a Christian perspective being appropriated, considering the nineteenth-century date of the text.

In this cosmography there is a special place called Yam's abode, where non-*musalmāni* dead go, and from its depths (and notably its locational marker is "down") *bhūts*, *prets*, *ḍākinis*, *joginīs*, *rākṣasas*, and all manner of unseemly demonic figures can be conjured from the earth via the cremation grounds and graves (LP). This particular universe admits of no explicit Indic goddesses or gods—though *pūjā* as a preferred form of worship is noted (I/CI)—but the populations do include the full range of lesser celestial figures just noted and the generic *deo*, which suggests generic godlings or antigods with special powers (LP). The chief antagonist of the first episode is Nārāyaṇī, mother of Dakṣiṇā Rāy, who commands those ghoulish minions and who herself has special powers (LP). The secondary antagonist of the Dukhe story cycle is Dakṣiṇā Rāy, in this text not quite a god (as we will see, he is in the *maṅgal kāvya* bearing his name) but the son of a *muni* or seer, though still possessing extraordinary powers. He is adept at shape-shifting, whereby he assumes the form of a man-eating tiger, and has the ability to control sentient beasts, including tigers, crocodiles, and sharks (LP). His man-eating is couched as human sacrifice or *narabali*, hinting at popular stories about worshipers of various forms of the goddess who is commonly reputed to need human sacrifice, representing the most fearful manifestations of Indic deities (LP, I/CI).

Bonbibī receives special care authorized by Khodā in order to survive in the forest and complete her mission, another example of God's intervention in the affairs of the world (LP). She and her twin brother are learners (*murids*) who must go to Madinā and Makkā to gain initiation and become themselves capable teachers (*murśids*), invoking prevailing *sūphī* institutional structures (I/CI). With this knowledge, they are able to understand the disembodied voices or oracles from the inhabitants of heaven (Mohāmmad, Phātemā); to draw on the power of Khodā himself through meditation, especially on his name, a special *sūphī* power associated with recitation or *jikir*; and, in the case of Bonbibī, to be a worthy recipient of the power of *barakat* (LP, I/CI). As the recipient of *barakat*, Bonbibī has additional powers and responsibilities, including being able to hear anyone who calls on her as mother and to assume other forms, such as the white fly, in order to minister to her devotees; she uses this *barakat* to generate the tactical power of *kerāmat* necessary for her to perform miracles. Her use of the *kālemā* as a *mantra* (perhaps conflating its recitation with *jikir*) to invoke celestial power likewise acknowledges the local cultural context (LP, I/CI).

Cultural background is evident through the invocation of a number of administrative, legal, and socioeconomic systems that were operational in the Bengal of the times. Dukhe, for instance, decides to file a legal case against Dhonāi and goes to the *hākim*, but at great expense (I/CI). When Dukhe becomes rich enough he becomes a *caudhurī*, head of a community and landlord, with all of the various

functionaries he is required to hire to run his estates, which paints a fairly detailed picture of prevailing policing, land revenue, and taxing systems (I/CI). Dhonāi takes his boats into the Sunderban for trade, specifically after honey and beeswax, and Dakṣiṇā Rāy dispatches three hundred thousand pieces of cut timber, all three commodities obviously part of established trade networks to plunder the Sunderban during this same period (I/CI). All of these implied intertextualities reference complex administrative systems associated with the Mughal settlement of Bengal, so they strongly suggest a temporality that is never stated explicitly, but remains consistent and assumed to be familiar, and at the time of writing seem very much still to be in place with only a different government in power. Social rank is paramount, but expressed in terms of lineal relations, not caste (LP, I/CI). Conflict is generated over insults that do not acknowledge relative rank and spheres of influence and power, and are smoothed over by the establishment of proper kinship and marriage relations, features of Bengali culture that imbricate religion but do not depend exclusively on it; relative prestige cuts across communities (I/CI). This feature is perhaps the most commonly shared perspective when all the stories of fictive *pīrs* and *bibīs* are compared, and it is significant that, here and in a number of other stories, one finds the *sūphī* tendency to emphasize the familial relationship within the lineage, and perhaps the more general Islamic insistence on the rhetoric of brotherhood.

Finally, there are several significant explicit intertextual references that signal to the audience certain expectations. Apart from the Korān already mentioned—deemed the source of all knowledge, now and in the future—the story of the *Rāmāyaṇ* frames the opening sections, without being made explicit (I/CI), but with sufficiently precise analogies that there can be no mistaking it (E/OI). Berāhim promises the barren Phulbibī that he will honor any request she might make as appeasement for taking a second wife, a promise she holds in reserve, just as Daśarath promises the same to one of his wives, Kaikeyī, for her aid in his time of need. The latter uses her promise to exile Rām and Sītā in the forest, and Phulbibī uses her pledge to have Golālbibī abandoned in the jungle. Golālbibī is pregnant with the twins, just as Sītā is pregnant with Lav and Kuś when banished by Rām toward the end of the *Rāmāyaṇ*. In both instances, the twins are saved, but in the case of Bonbibī, she is abandoned a second time because her mother, Golālbibī, cannot see how to raise both, so she opts for the boy—a commonly held Bengali cultural preference regardless of religious orientation (LP). The tigers and deer and all the other animals of the Sunderban raise Bonbibī and become her real family, which she subsequently nurtures in her role as mother of all the inhabitants of the low-lying lands of Āṭhārobhāṭī.[60]

60. Jalais explores this series of relationships based on Bonbibī as mother, Dakṣiṇ Rāy, Baḍa Khān Gāji, and Dukhe as brothers, and everyone in the Sunderban under Bonbibī's protection through kinship; see Annu Jalais, *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sunderbans* (London: Routledge, 2009), chap. 4, "Is Salt Water Thicker than Blood?," 65–108.

Dakṣiṇā Rāy is an analeptic figure in this story whose own tale was told several centuries earlier (E/OI). His battle with Baḍa Khān Gāji, who also appears as another analeptic figure, is the subject of explicit inquiry by both Śājaṅgali and Bonbibī separately (E/OI). Baḍa Khān is acknowledged by Bonbibī to be a recognized saint (*oli*) with a formidable set of powers, including the ability to conjure wealth on demand (LP, I/CI). Śāh Sekandar, who is introduced when Baḍa Khān answers Bonbibī's question about his origins, makes a third analeptic figure. We have already noted how his name invokes the Ilyas Śāhi dynasty of the thirteenth century. But because the conflict between Dakṣiṇā Rāy and Baḍa Khān Gāji is central to Bonbibī's assertion of power in the region, let us take a look at the two tales that speak to that conflict, the reasons for it, and how the conflict is ultimately resolved. The web of connections that suspends the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* is about to become even more complicated.[61]

4.4. THE *RĀY MAṄGAL* OF KṚṢṆARĀM, PRECURSOR TO THE TALE OF BONBIBĪ

The earliest adventures of Dakṣiṇ Rāy[62] and Baḍa Khān Gājī predate the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* by several centuries. Not only does their prior interaction provide a backdrop to her story, but the resolution of her own conflict with Nārāyaṇī, Dakṣiṇ Rāy's mother, is conditioned by the issues of symbolic kinship established in the first tale, as the narrator openly declares. We see the effect of the precursor narrative again in the second Bonbibī tale, Dukhe's adventure, when the eminent Baḍa Khān stops the execution of Dakṣiṇ Rāy by reaffirming kinship relations that would forbid a violent outcome. That precursor narrative was not singular, however, for the tales of Baḍa Khān Gāji and Dakṣiṇ Rāy circulated in four roughly parallel trajectories, three of which connect to different features of Bonbibī's story.[63] The earliest extant version of the conflict between Dakṣiṇ Rāy and Baḍa Khān Gājī can be found in the opening tale of the *Rāy maṅgal* of Kṛṣṇarām, which dates to the late decades of the seventeenth century (ca. 1684).[64] This text is the most likely candidate for the explicit intertextual reference in the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* to the outcome of the conflict because in the next oldest extant *Rāy maṅgal*, that

61. For the culture of the indigenous communities (*ādibāsī*) and the literatures, tales, and performances that circulate in the Sunderbans, including analyses of the language; see Raṇajit Kumār Bāuliyā, *Sundarban añcaler ādibāsī saṃskṛti o sāhitya* (PhD diss., Calcutta University, 2010).

62. Note the spelling of Dakṣiṇ Rāy in this text.

63. For a survey of these texts, including a comparative analysis of features, see Āśutoṣ Bhaṭṭācāryya, *Bāṅglā maṅgalkāvyer itihās*, 922–38. For the most concentrated study of all the texts of Dakṣiṇ Rāy, including the *Gāji kālu o cāmpāvatī kanyār puthi* covered in the next chapter, as well as the ritual processes practiced today and the emergence of ancillary figures, see Amarkṛṣṇa Cakravartī, *Dakṣiṇeśvar dakṣiṇrāy: Ek laukik debkalper anupam rupkathā*, ed. Debabrata Bhaṭṭācārya (Kalakātā: by the editor at De Buk Sṭor, 1412 BS [2005]).

64. Kṛṣṇarāmdās, *Rāy maṅgal*, 165–248.

of Haridev, there is no overt hostility.[65] Haridev's text was composed in the early decades of the eighteenth century, and in it he tells a story that seems to have already accepted the brokered peace between the two antagonists, choosing to eschew reports of conflict in favor of a more benign, prearranged alliance: not only does Dakṣiṇ Rāy acknowledge Baḍa Khān Gājī as his brother—another kinship connection that determines status—the latter also enjoys equal favor from Īśvar to rule the Sunderban mangrove swamps, even though Dakṣiṇ Rāy was a demigod in the lineage of Śiv. As a brilliant example of Fuch's notion of Romance as a segmented narrative, the plot of Haridev's tale constitutes a meandering mythic replay of the exploits of Dakṣiṇ Rāy's genealogy involving a seeming myriad of gods and goddesses and other heroic and celestial figures in a concatenation of vignettes that eventually leads to the birth of Dakṣiṇ Rāy on earth, and then quickly moves on—Dakṣiṇ Rāy's connection to Baḍa Khān Gāji occupies only a fraction of that text.

A later text by Rudradev, which exists only in a lengthy fragment, tells a slightly different version of the all-out war between Baḍa Khān Gāji's band of *phakīrs* and Dakṣiṇ Rāy's eighty-four tigers.[66] While the etiology of the conflict is missing from the fragment, the contours of the exchange between the principals is parallel to that of Kṛṣṇarām's *Rāy maṅgal*, but many more *phakirs*—some of whom are already familiar to us—are explicitly named, including Mānik Pīr, Gorācā̃dā Pīr, Dapharkhā̃, Badar Pīr, Śalemānā, and Dāyānā Gāji.[67] After a seesaw slaughter of both tigers and *phakīrs* through the deployment of a multitude of magical weapons by both sides, and by the predations of crocodiles and swarms of wasps, the war is a standoff after seven days. Famously riding his husking pedal, Nāradā is dispatched from the heavens by Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiv to broker a peace, which he does; Baḍa Khān acknowledges Dakṣiṇ Rāy as his older brother and shares power over the land.[68] Then the manuscripts breaks off and picks up with a later episode of the *bāuliya* named Ratā and his encounter with Dakṣiṇ Rāy.

Fortunately, the oldest extant text of Kṛṣṇarām is complete and provides a sustained and unified narrative of the incredibly destructive conflict of Baḍa Khān and Dakṣiṇ Rāy, which occupies more than a third of the overall text. Kṛṣṇarām's *Rāy maṅgal* is easily the most literarily sophisticated of all the stories about Rāy and Gājī, so it is worth pausing for a moment to comment on its linguistic challenges. Written in a colorful earthy language that captures the rough obscenities one might well imagine to be common among warriors and others involved in

65. Haridev, *Rāy maṅgal*, 1–172.

66. Rudradev, "Rāy maṅgal: Rāy gāji yuddha, ratā bāuliyā puṣpadatta baṇik pālā," in *Dvādaś maṅgal*, ed. Pañcānan Maṇḍal, Sāhityaprakāśikā, vol. 5 (Śāntiniketan: Viśvabhāratī, 1373 BS [1966]), 121–48.

67. Rudradev, 134–35.

68. Rudradev, 136–39.

grueling manual labor far from the culturally sophisticated urban centers favored by most aspiring rulers, the author sensitively depicts dialectal differences to signal status, rank, and ethnic background. Perhaps most notably, Dakṣiṇ Rāy's diction is in a high register worthy of a deputy of the king's court, his pronouncements delivered in a formal, cultivated style, while Baḍa Khān Gājī speaks in what we might term a cruder (to the Bengali ear) pidgin Hindustani, which points to his non-Bengali origins. His speech is a free mixture of Persian and Hindustani words, and neologisms formed from their roots or from Hindavī and Avadhī (but notably there seems to be no early Oḍiyā or identifiably Maithili lexicon I could discern), and it is laced with the most obscene invectives imaginable, signaling a considerably less cultured discourse than that of Dakṣiṇ Rāy. The communication between the Gājī and his tigers produces yet another unique dialectical register, a kind of "tiger-speak," for lack of a better term, rippling with rude, sexual, and scatological humor. In this remarkably supple handling of a Bangla that has not yet managed the stability of diction it achieves in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Kṛṣṇarām pushes the virtuosity of the elite composers of the *maṅgal kāvya* genre of his generation and subsequent periods.

The frame narrative of Kṛṣṇarām's story begins when Dakṣiṇ Rāy visits the poet in a dream and importunes him to compose the story of his devotees, the merchant Devdatta, who was jailed and nearly killed on his trading voyage, and the adventures of his son of twelve years who sets off at Dakṣiṇ Rāy's urging to find the father he has never seen. Kṛṣṇarām conveniently reports that in that dream, Dakṣiṇ Rāy criticized a prior poet, Mādhav Ācārya, for failing to tell his tale with the dignity and respect it deserved, making Dakṣiṇ Rāy the butt of jokes by many a country bumpkin.[69] When Kṛṣṇarām pleads ignorance of the proper narrative, Dakṣiṇ Rāy assures him of how it will progress and renders an impromptu précis of the entire narrative to get him started. Kṛṣṇarām begins in the first person:

. . .

> 12 Listen, everyone, how this strange and wonderful tale came to be composed and made famous in wide circulation. 13 From the name alone the region of Khāspur Pargaṇā proves a delight, and therein Viśvambhar Baḍiṣyā constitutes the eastern portion. 14 I was passing through there on a Monday in the month of Bhādra [August-September] and at night lay down to sleep in the barn of some cowherder. 15 Toward the end of the night I saw in my dream a great man mounted on the back of a tiger.[70] 16 Massive of girth, he gripped a stunningly heavy draw-weight bow. He introduced himself as Dakṣiṇ Rāy, the Lord of the South: 17 "Do write my auspicious

69. This is the only known reference to Mādhav Ācārya's text, which is not to be found in any catalogued manuscript collection. There is a report of another text which is unattributed and could not be located; see Satyanārāyaṇ Bhaṭṭācāryya, ed., *Rāimaṅgal* (Bardhamān: Sāhitya Sabhā 1363 BS [ca. 1956]).

70. At times Dakṣiṇ Rāy rides a horse; at other times, he rides a tiger.

tale using the theatrical style of *pāñcālī* so that it will be broadcast far and wide through the Āṭhārobhāṭī, the Land of the Eighteen Tides. 18 Previously one Mādhav Ācārya composed such a song, but it did not suit me and failed to do its proper job as a work of art. 19 Merchants never gamed with dice on any cremation ground as he claimed—he bamboozled rustic farmers, misled them, and now his song is popularly recited. 20 Nearly all singers are ignorant of my story and so repeat the familiar; they perform songs that extol others in their all-night vigils. 21 The salt workers and mat weavers are reduced to hysterics when they hear his farcical comedy, with all its jokes and banter. 22 But no longer. Should any person fail to appreciate your poem in the proper manner, my tigers will slay every member of his lineage."

23 When I heard this grave pronouncement, I grew apprehensive in the extreme, and quickly placed my hands together in the sign of humility and spoke, bringing to his attention that 24 "I know virtually nothing of your feats, your character. How can I, ignorant as a child, compose properly your tale in song?"

25 Rāy smiled and spoke in gentle reassuring words. "By my grace will the song be unsurpassed and complete. 26 If you are diligent and mindful, you will discern it all. Listen carefully. I will tell you everything you need to compose my tale. 27 One day some time ago, following carefully the words of a sage, the brilliant sun king Prabhākar performed the ritual service of Lord Sadāśiv, who granted him the boon that he would become his son. 28 It was I [Sadāśiv] who became his son, and it was I who cleared the forests and established a viable kingdom. 29 I married the daughter of Dharmaketu;[71] then, and by the power of *yoga*, [my mother and father] left behind their bodies and the couple took themselves to Kailās.

30 "So by virtue of that boon, Hara, Śiva himself, became the Lord of the Southern Regions, but first and only in disguise did he accept the food offerings of *pūjā* in the settled areas. 31 Then he dispatched Kālu Rāy to the city of Hijali, for there the king, that man-lion among men, failed to recognize and honor me. 32 I slew his son and then restored him to life, whereupon the king dutifully lavished me with honor and respect by making the requisite sacrifices of offering.

33 "There was a merchant, Devdatta by name, who hailed from Baḍadaha, but for many long days he had been held prisoner in Turaṅga, the City of Horses. 34 Paying heed to my words of guidance, his son Puṣpadatta made ready seven hardy boats and pushed off in search of him. 35 Along the way he accosted the king not realizing who he was; the king did not recognize him either and started to hack him to pieces. 36 As he was about to die, that merchant's son focused his thoughts on me; at the moment of his crisis I went to protect him. 37 With tiger in tow, I attacked, raining down mighty blows. I slew King Surath and all of his many soldiers. 38 The Queen appeared and importuned me with solemn hymns of praise, and suffused with feel-

71. There is an allusion, if not a deliberate connection to Kālketu, the first of the heroes of the *Caṇḍī maṅgal*, because Kālketu's father is Dharmaketu, which would make Dakṣiṇ Rāy his brother-in-law. The text and the story are not explicitly named. See Kavikaṅkan Mukundarām Cakravartī, *Caṇḍīmaṅgal*, ed. Sukumār Sen, rev. ed. (Naẏ Dillī: Sāhitya Akādemī, 2007), esp. bk. 2; for translations of this and all *Caṇḍī maṅgal* passages, see Kavikankan, *Chandimangal of Kavikankan*, trans. Edward Yazijian (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2015), which follows the Sen edition.

> ings of compassion, I gave her back his life. 39 Then they married their daughter Ratnāvatī to the young merchant [Puṣpadatta], and so the father and son returned to their own land. 40 Puṣpadatta was one valiant hero: he constructed a citadel for me and, within it, a palatial abode. He then routinely performed my worship with due diligence. 41 So make known in my auspicious *maṅgal* escapades such as these."
>
> 42 *And so Kṛṣṇarām has composed the* maṅgal *of Rāy in the* śaka *year 1608.*[72]

With that frame narrative set, Kṛṣṇarām launches the saga of Dakṣiṇ Rāy and his followers. A Bengali merchant named Devdatta undertakes a trading voyage at the behest of his local king to supply the accoutrements of kingship the courts demand. His wife is four months pregnant, and though she begs him to delay his departure, the king is impatient. Prior to departure, his wife's pregnancy is attested before *brāhmaṇs* at the insistence of his mother, a document that will prove valuable for all concerned. Devdatta, however, is not a terribly fortunate merchant, and when he reaches his southern destination, his ships laden with goods for trade are confiscated and he is summarily jailed for trespass, among other charges. Some twelve years later his son sets out to find him.

The young boy-merchant is named Puṣpadatta, and he badgers the king until the latter grants permission for the trip, but Puṣpadatta needs ships built. Seven brothers, traditional woodcutters of the Sunderban region, chop and rick wood in an abundance never before witnessed, certainly enough for the seven ships Puṣpadatta requires. In their euphoria over the extraordinary stand of trees they are felling, they mindlessly destroy one particular tree that is the favored of Dakṣiṇ Rāy, Lord of the Āṭhārobhāṭī, made up of the low-lying lands of the eighteen tides. He sets his tigers on them with instructions to slay six of the brothers, but not devour their bodies, and to spare the eldest; so they break their necks and drink their blood before abandoning the six corpses. The surviving brother nearly commits suicide, but Dakṣiṇ Rāy appears before him and explains why his brothers have been killed. Dakṣiṇ Rāy proposes that if this unfortunate man will make a sacrifice of his only son, he will revive his brothers. Following the old Bengali saw that sons can always be replaced, while brothers cannot, he reluctantly agrees to the bargain. After the sacrifice, where he slices through his son's torso at the waist and offers his flesh, Dakṣiṇ Rāy is appeased and restores the brothers and the son to life with the express instruction to sing of his magnificent glory, which they dutifully do. And so the story of Dakṣiṇ Rāy's greatness spreads.[73]

72. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, *Rāy maṅgal*, sec. 2, pp. 166–68. *Śaka* 1608 is approximately 1686 CE. The *śaka* date is embedded in a riddle called *hēyālīmūlaka śloka*, frequently based on astrological signs, but sometimes on other known "sets" of things (e.g., *kar* = hand = 2); so here the code is *vasu* = demigods (8), *śūnya* = nul or void (0), *ṛtu* = seasons (6), and *candra* = moon (1).

73. There is a similar story in Rudradev's *Rāy maṅgal* wherein the *bāuliyā* Ratā is forced to sacrifice his son to Dakṣiṇ Rāy for not properly worshiping him prior to entering the forest to cut wood. His son is unfazed and volunteers, and so: "With the right intention forming in his heart, he grasped his son's hair in his left hand, and slew him with the three-pointed sword. Recognizing Ratā's devotion . . . "

When the time comes for Puṣpadatta to have his ships constructed, he has the timber he needs, so he advertises widely for skilled shipwrights. From his celestial chariot Dakṣiṇ Rāy summons Viśvakarmmā and Hānumān, who, in disguise, apply for and receive the commission. They construct the vessels in the blink of an eye. The ships are loaded with goods for trade, all described in lavish detail, and Puṣpadatta sets off after receiving the blessings of his mother, who as the ideal wife, *satī*, is an ardent devotee of Dakṣiṇ Rāy, whom she petitions to watch over her son. Off the young merchant goes in quest of the fabled land of Turaṅga to find his father.

As Puṣpadatta moves slowly through the meandering distributaries of the Bhāgirathī River in lower Bengal, deeper and deeper into the swampy byways of the Sunderban's mangrove forests, he witnesses what is for him a strange form of worship, a *pūjā* in which the locals pay their respects to mounds of earth, usually crowned by clay pots. Puzzled, he asks his much older and experienced captain why they are worshiping in this way.

> 168 The helmsman began, "Brother, there is definitely a reason. Since you are not aware of it, I will tell you, but you must listen carefully. 169 You must have already heard of Baḍa Khān Gājī, a *pīr* who appears in the flesh, and Dakṣiṇ Rāy, Lord of the Āṭhārobhāṭī, the Land of the Eighteen Tides. 170 Previously those two had been fast friends, then a conflict between them escalated into an all-out war. 171 Each of the two lords wanted complete suzerainty over the same vast domain, so the two brothers pursued their dispute on all fronts. 172 The Gājī struck Dakṣiṇ Rāy's expansive chest, and he was felled, but just as promptly sprang back up, his body a trick of the illusory nature of creation, *māyā*. 173 Then Baḍa Khān hacked through Rāy's now-raised neck and that phantom head bounced to the ground. And so it went. 174 Finally God, Īśvara himself, broke up the stalemate and these two giant figures afterwards became fast friends. 175 Since that event, worship has been directed toward the waterpot, the severed head [of Dakṣiṇ Rāy]; but in some places, his arresting image sits astride a tiger. 176 Wherever a settlement is associated with the name of Baḍa Khān, the established practice is to erect a mound of earth. 177 No image is fabricated; only contemplation will impel him to fulfill the supplications of his devotees. 178 The jurisdiction of the entirety of Āṭhārobhāṭī lies with Dakṣiṇ Rāy; and Gājī's jurisdiction lies therein by virtue of being the Lord's close friend. 179 With a single combined worship are the two figures truly satisfied. One can see them appear together in the same place as brothers."[74]

Intrigued, the young boy wants to hear the cause of the conflict between Baḍa Khān Gājī and Dakṣiṇ Rāy, which constitutes the third nested frame of Kṛṣṇarām's narration. The conflict turns out to be the result of an insult, born of ignorance, by

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Unfortunately, we can only speculate if his life was restored because the manuscript once again breaks and does not pick up the rest of the story, but moves on to Puṣpadatta's adventures; see Rudradev, *Rāy maṅgal*, 140–42.

74. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, *Rāy maṅgal*, sec. 10, p. 180.

a merchant named Dhanapati. Rāy rules by virtue of being one of the demi-gods, born of the legendary King Prabhākar and wife Līlāvatī, daughter of Dharmaketu, and now controller of much of the land and resources of the region.[75] On a trading voyage that had to traverse Dakṣiṇ Rāy's region, just as Puṣpadatta is now doing, Dhanapati stopped to perform *pūjā* worship to an earthen mound at one of Rāy's shrines along the route. The innocent but ignorant trader failed to pay any, much less commensurate, respect to Baḍa Khān Gājī, the prominent warrior saint who lived as Dakṣiṇ Rāy's brother in the forest with his band of tigers. When the tigers reported back that they had lost face, the prestige of Baḍa Khān Gājī was completely undone in the region as a result of the favoritism shown by the merchant. The Gājī was inconsolably angry and sought revenge on both the merchant and Dakṣiṇ Rāy, who had allowed this to transpire without intervention.

> 183 While Dhanapati the merchant was pursuing his seafaring trade, by the intervention of Fate, he laid up at one particular landing. 184 He had spotted the special waterpot of Dakṣiṇ Rāy on the shore, and, knowing he was the special boon-born son of Hara, Śiv, he made a generous offering of fragrant flowers 185 and varieties of ornaments studded with gems. Who else could lavish so much? Finishing his service of worship, he begged leave with his hands pressed together in respect. 186 But he unwittingly failed to pay his respects to Baḍa Khān Gājī, and soon he was surrounded by great hosts of *phakirs*. 187 The naïve merchant felt he was being threatened and grew angry, driving them away from the premises. 188 He boarded his ship and set sail for Siṃhala, while the *phakirs* went together to complain to Gājī Pīr.
>
> 189 Situated in that particular village was a sanctum for Gājī, and the city and its markets were appropriately resplendent. 190 "Respected sir, you no longer seem to give proper attention to the administration of the region. 191 Some merchant fellow paid his respects in worship of Dakṣiṇ Rāy and departed, but he ignored you altogether. We consider this an egregious offense. 192 The bumpkin Bāṅgālī does not know to fear. He attacked us and drove us from our rightful place. 193 We cannot show our faces to the people out of our shame. We will no longer consider ourselves *phakirs*; we spit on that title."
>
> 194 Right then a tiger by the name of Kālānal spoke up. "When I went out to hunt, I received none of the usual deference, or the run of the territory. 195 The tigers of Dakṣiṇ Rāy always deferred and allowed us to snatch the prized head, but now when they hear your name [Gājī], everyone simply casts knowing looks. 196 The mat weavers, the salt manufacturers, and the woodcutters now recognize no one else save Dakṣiṇ Rāy. 197 I had just eaten one nobody salt miner, when in a rage three swifts of twenty tigers each came roaring after me. 198 Seeing the situation, I began to calculate how the importance and stature of this lordly Baḍa Khān had declined, for the *pīr* is no longer recognized or revered in Āṭhārobhāṭī, the Land of the Eighteen Tides. 199 This anger festers because everyone accepted your authority."
>
> . . .

75. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, sec. 2, pp. 166–67.

202 In the presence of all gathered there, Gājī cursed the merchant. 203 "This daughter-fucker has fled! Now what are you going to do? The bastard will be totally lost. 204 Can you not just hear Dakṣiṇ Rāy wail when he is bound and hauled back here? Only then shall I again be considered a true warrior-saint, a *gājī*." 205 Thus Khān instructed them to crush the ears of [Rāy's] servants. "I have to see for myself quickly what kind of Śaytān he is. 206 Every day his bare fists pummel people into bloody submission. He seizes their land and produces with a flourish a document that testifies to his ownership, that claims it as his property."

207 Then he ordered them, "Be quick, go to [Dakṣiṇ Rāy's] house, search him out. It will take all of you together to corral him and pound his enormous body to a pulp!" 208 With these words he exhorted and aroused the *phakīrs* gathered there. In a breathless, unruly mob they sped off to initiate the quarrel. 209 They destroyed everything in [Rāy's] dwelling, then hurled what was left into the brackish waters. With the help of the tigers, they destroyed the carefully crafted icons. 210 Someone laid hold the *brāhmaṇ* priest, ripping off his sacred thread. They jostled him to the ground and with a swarm of fists battered him senseless. 211 This army of *phakīrs* deliberately polluted his food: "Your *jāti*,[76] like your body, is stripped, and now all you can wear is a beard, you daughter-fucker!"[77]

A tiger among Dakṣiṇ Rāy's entourage has been witness to the melee and reports back to his master, who is puzzled and outraged at the same time. Cautioning against immediate punitive retaliation, an elder statesman among his tigers is sent to sound out the Gājī and ascertain the real root of the trouble. The emissary counsels Gājī, "As yet no one has openly broken from the other. What is the point of this treachery, this rivalry? Should conciliatory words be uttered, all will be well."[78] But the Gājī cannot be mollified and rejoins with a volley of imprecations laced with the most vulgar of obscenities. The conflict, now inevitable, escalates quickly. Rāy gathers all his tigers and sets out to destroy Baḍa Khān. First routing a group of *phakīrs*, Rāy scatters all the tigers, who suddenly decide that this fracas is none of their affair. Then he finds the Gājī.

365 When suddenly the two sovereigns appeared, they began to heap abuse on one another. Rāy was first to scream insults at Gājī. 366 "Previously you fell at my feet—do you not remember that? But when you started to eat meat, you became high and mighty, so who is that chum to you now? 367 You snatched away the mercenary *brāhmaṇ*'s whore-daughter,[79] and that act makes you little more than a common

76. *Jāti* is "birth" or station, often wrongly translated as caste, the latter an imported construction. The language implies that only the beard—that is, to join the ranks of *musalmāns*—can cover his shame, now that he is symbolically and literally stripped. But importantly, the motivating factor for this forced change of status is not ideological, therefore not a religious "conversion" as the term is understood today, but about honor and social standing and pollution.

77. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, *Rāy maṅgal*, sec. 11, pp. 181–83.

78. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, sec. 12, v. 226, p. 184.

79. This reference suggests the marriage of Gāji with Cāmpāvatī, the daughter of *brāhmaṇ* king Mukuṭ Rājā, which is detailed in the various versions of the *Gāji kālu o cāmpāvatī kanyār puthi*, the

highwayman. 368 Were there a real *pīr* standing here, he would receive an offering of *śirni* from me; I would have brought proper food for him to eat—but instead this one runs after tits and cunt. 369 If you had managed to take possession of my army of tigers just now, then you would be the master-in-control and I would be like the thief. 370 Just as ants sprout wings in order to [swarm in reproductive frenzy and] die, you go and destroy the sacred room that houses my worshipful image. 371 If you will relent in these despicable actions, I will make nothing more of it. You are not normally considered to be a nasty or particularly evil man, so return to your good standing now. 372 If you take refuge in me, then I will be mollified and suffer you protection."

Kṛṣṇarām now relates how the Gāji replied in the rising flush of his anger.

373 "What kind of infidel are you, you lowlife bastard? Listen carefully to my pronouncements, you dunce, you filthy vulture. 374 What do you do here in the jungly wild besides smoke your hookah and get intoxicated? Are you really such an ignoramus that you can only spew deprecations from your pumpkin-chariot?[80] 375 You really do not have a clue about the *pīr* Baḍa Khān Gāji. [Just as] Khodā, God Himself has given the coral tree[81] to this world as proof of the good things in life, 376 who has blessed you with such a kingdom with its abundant flowing rivers? Tell me, have you paid no heed to that great opportunity and benefit? 377 If there is no sense of honor or propriety in the gush of big-talk you aim in my direction, then you will be made to show respect after I have chastised you. 378 All of the prosperity you previously enjoyed as a result of your various offices will disappear like so much wet smoke belching from your water pipe. 379 Are you listening, whoremonger, to this rehearsal of your death? The Lord Gosāñi is the essential reality of the totality of creation, you daughter-fucker. 380 Everyone will ignore your cry for help, Dakṣiṇ Rāy, they will not offer even the tiniest dried up tit to suck. 381 If you desire your own well-being, make yourself scarce, scamper away like a scared cat. 382 With a power like a raging river, we swept away your icon, utterly collapsing your thatched hut. 383 The tiger Kālānal tried to stop me, but this outrageous and treacherous action has serious consequences. I will shackle this jacket-wearing Bāṅgālī dog and humiliate him. 384 According to the custom in the Bhāṭi, he must make some token offering. 385 Whenever and whatever thing gets produced here, half is yours, half is mine—it is a simple agreement. 386 It is written that the act of hoarding and loaning money is an abominable practice, while the calculation of the debts of the poor will be forgiven."[82]

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earliest extant version somewhat later than this text. That story will occupy our attention in the next chapter.

80. The pumpkin-chariot (*kaduratha*) refers to the bowl of the hookah.

81. In the Bangla-speaking world, the coral tree (*mādāra*) is *Erythrina variegata*, sometimes called the flame tree or the tiger-claw, with its distinctive red claw-like flowers. It is a special favorite for gardens and attracts a variety of nectar-seeking birds. The intertextual reference is likely Qur'ān 55, *Sūra al Raḥmān*. (Note: the English name for the coral tree is a coincidence with the reference to coral in the *sūra*.)

82. The implication being that Dakṣiṇ Rāy engages in such activities as a *zamandar*. This prohibition against usury and related practices is one of the few intimations of Islamic law, and a direct intertextual reference to Qur'ān 2.275–81, *Sūra al Baqara;* see also 3.130–31, *Sūra al 'Imrān;* 4.160–61; and 30.39–40, *Sūra al Nisā*.

> 387 Unable to tolerate further the Gāji's outrageous behavior, Dakṣiṇ Rāy interrupted and began to speak. 388 "Who are you, where are you from, and just what are these customary rules? You act as if you own the world, but in the village you have no respect. 389 The more I forgave you out of our previous affection, the greater your arrogant swagger has grown, it swells bigger and bigger. 390 Just as the sinner's heart and mind are submerged in sin, that haughtiness in the end must reckon with Yam, the lord of death. 391 When a lowly person grows too big and waves his fist at the sky in defiance,[83] every imaginable form of misery and anguish accrues, for Lachmi[84] will have fled. 392 You should prepare yourself to meet a similar destruction: die or take flight and escape with your life to someplace far far away. 393 However many tigers have accompanied you, I will rip them to shreds, and devour them morsel by tiny morsel. 394 [Your tiger] Khān Dāuḍā suffers you to mount his back. Hold that pose as this arrow is loosed. 395 As he soothingly addresses him as *beg*, the honorable one, the arrow called *siṁhaduḥkh*, the "scourge of lions," streaked forward.[85] The new razor-sharp arrow escaped with a zipping hiss. 396 It split the blaze on the tiger's forehead like a crack of lightning. The *pīr's* tiger tumbled to the ground and writhed in the dirt. 397 Baḍakhā̃ staggered up, his most noble mount gone. He called to his tigers, "Hey, gather around me!" 398 But they vanished, scattered here and there; who would stay and get mixed up in this kind of exchange? They blended in and disappeared into the throng of Rāy's congeries.[86]

The two mighty figures exchange as many imprecations as they do blows, the insults flying as fast as the missiles from their celestial weapons and bows. As he fervently meditates on the Prophet, *paygambar*, doom seems to fall upon the Gājī, for his chest is split open. His body slumps to the ground, lifeless, but his prayer to *paygambar* has been rewarded and he heals himself with a new body, the old one still lying on the ground.[87] Śiv's trident has proved ineffective for Rāy. The *pīr* taunts him: "You son of a stinking Bāṅgāli jackal, you hide behind your women's skirts, but now you are found out, there is no going back. You will find no protection

83. Literally "tries to beat the sky."

84. Lachmi is Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth and good fortune.

85. In this construction—*balite balite bege siṃhaduḥkh bāṇ*—the author has skillfully captured the seamless action of Dakṣiṇ Rāy notching his arrow and letting it fly as he addresses Baḍa Khān ironically as *beg*, or "revered one" or "your highness." The term /*bege*/ is a noun in the first foot, while it serves as the verb for the second foot.

86. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, *Rāy maṅgal*, sec. 18–19, pp. 197–99.

87. This is the only example among the many tales of the fictive *pīrs* where the warrior saint is slain—but significantly, he is not really slain in the traditional sense, because he is instantly revived (this is not, however, a point of theological contention or a position that requires explanation apart from what the text tells us). This avoidance of death is a feature that sets apart Baḍa Khān Gāji and the other fictional *pīrs*, *phakirs*, and *bibīs* from the more historically famous, whose fame as *gāji* was partially predicated on their martyrdom, and whose tombs become the focal site for the development of a religious community. See, for instance, Shahid Amin, *Conquest and Community: The Afterlife of Warrior Saint Ghazi Miyan* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2015).

there."[88] Unknown to Rāy, the *paygambar* has bestowed on Gājī the power to strike a blow that never fails, for Yam, the Lord of Death himself, dwells in his sword's diamond-sharp edge. After using magical incantations to round up and slay all of Rāy's tigers, he advances toward his foe and, with a calculated deliberation, raises his sword for all to witness as he severs Rāy's head from his body. That head falls to the ground with a deafening thud and rolls still in the dirt. The earth herself staggers and tilts under the weight, and the gods are startled. Suddenly the Supreme Lord, Īśvar, personally appears to mediate and end the dispute.

416 Half of his head was black,
a tuft of hair pulled to one side,
wildflower garland and rosary looping his forearms.
Half of his body was a dazzling white,
the other half the deep indigo of rainclouds,
Korān in one hand and *Purāṇa* in the other.[89]

417 The exact same vision
was beheld by both men
and both fell and grasped his feet.
That lord of the universe lifted them up,
placed one's hand in the other, and made them to understand
they must establish a formal pact of friendship.

418 "Suzerainty over this Bhāṭi land
lies entirely with Dakṣiṇ Rāy,
so why have you kicked up a fuss, Pīr?
Who does not show you honor and respect?
Is there anywhere you are not loved and honored?
Your name and standing are famous across the world.

419 "You and Rāy are one and the same.
In this matter only knuckleheaded barbarians
see you as different and suffer all manner of misery for it.
There is one essential truth in all this:
whatever else you may see,
it is only the play of apparent forms.

420 "Baḍakhā̃'s magically created body[90] will
from its grave emanate a charismatic power, *kerāmat*,
that will allow people to gain their desires.

88. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, *Rāy maṅgal*, section 20, v. 409, p. 200.

89. The image is consistent with that of the combined form of Satya Pīr and Satya Nārāyaṇ, which had already been made popular in Bengal more than a century prior to this text.

90. Magically created (*māyā*) body or form (*ākār*); except in explicit vedāntic passages, *māyā* in Bangla nearly always refers to the magic or wizardry of creation, and only in that sense is it illusory. When Baḍa Khān Gāji is killed and when Dakṣiṇ Rāy's head is lopped off, the poet makes clear that the ontological reality of these two is in no way affected, i.e., it is simply the play of the created world.

Wherever the name of the *pīr* is invoked,
that locale is designated an official court where
any decree or settlement can be registered in his name.
421 "May everyone worship in *pūjā*,
the King of the Southern Regions
in the form of a pot, a sign of his shaved head.[91]
Then his story and fame will proliferate
to every imaginable spot on earth, and
images (*mūrti*) will reside in all those places."[92]
. . . .
426 "Now Dakṣiṇ Rāy
is the overlord of all the Sunderban *bhāṭi*.
Kālu Rāy has Hijuli as his special domain.
Sāheb Pīr has free reign in all areas.
Everyone must bow their heads to him.
No one should show him any disrespect."
427 The god, Dev Bhagavān,
disappeared after delivering these words.
Who has the power to fathom the magic of his *māyā*?
His words are not to be foresworn,
as every human in every home recognizes—
and acknowledging that, they show proper honor and respect.
428 *When the good and virtuous merchant heard this,*
he made his obeisance in an attitude of loving devotion
and took a flower as the leftover offering, prasād.
Kavi Kṛṣṇarām notes that
finding the winds favorable,
he boarded his boat and shoved off.[93]

The remainder of the tale traces Puṣpadatta's adventures further south in finding his father. At each place they stop, the helmsman recites the local lore, such as the wonders of Puri and Orissa[94]—in the midst of which the poet pointedly opines that, based on what the protagonist observed in Puri, all distinctions of social ranks will eventually be leveled in the Kali Age: *jabans* and *brāhmaṇs* and the rest of the *varṇas* will be merged into a single society.[95] When they encounter the Setubandha, the helmsman narrates the tale of Rām, Sītā, and Rāvaṇ.[96] As

91. A sign (*māyā*, not the head itself) referencing his shaved head (*muṇḍa*) which takes the form of a waterpot; see above, vv. 166, 175.

92. There seems to be a conflation of the traditional Sanskrit concepts of *pratimā* (copy, sign) and *mūrti* (manifestation).

93. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, *Rāy maṅgal*, sec. 21, vv. 416–28, pp. 201–3.

94. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, sec. 23, vv. 449–63, pp. 204–6.

95. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, sec. 23, vv. 455–56, p. 205.

96. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, secs. 24–25, vv. 464–85, pp. 206–8.

they continue south, the merchant's fleet soon encounters a menagerie of strange creatures—monstrous crabs with snapping claws threatening the boats, tides of blood-sucking leeches, gargantuan raptors that menace the ships until scattered with cannon shot, and leviathans sufficiently large to swallow the ships but thwarted only by invoking Garuḍa, Viṣṇu's avian mount, to come and save them. Fatefully they arrive at the treacherous Kālidaha where Dakṣiṇ Rāy generates a vision seen only by the merchant and no one else and which will prove fateful:[97] On a sandbank in the middle of the ocean there is a magnificent palace of gold wherein sit Nārāyaṇ and his wife Nīlāvatī. They are attended by hundreds of different types of birds, a multifarious profusion of arresting and fragrant flowers, and around them deer, buffalo, tigers, and humans share the idyllic space, where peacocks play with serpents and elephants mix with lions. All around an ethereal music wafts to which celestial figures dance. The merchant is stunned and in his euphoria vows to share this incredible vision with anyone who will listen, while the taciturn helmsman, who sees nothing at all, remains mute, figuring it to be a phantasm.

When they reach their trading destination, the young merchant explains his mission to the local king—to find his lost father and then to trade—and then foolishly trumpets his encounter with the apparition in the middle of the sea. Intrigued, but detecting a scam, the king promises him half his kingdom and the hand of his daughter, Ratnāvatī, should he be able to verify the claim, but incarceration should he not—an agreement they formally certify in writing.[98] Needless to say, the naïve Puṣpadatta lands in prison with a death sentence, his boats brimming with trading goods confiscated. As he languishes in prison, a large stone on his chest, the young Puṣpadatta meditates on Dakṣiṇ Rāy, who eventually feels his prayers. He dispatches his tigers, led by Lohājaṅga Rūp Rāy and Balāki, to terrorize the king and aid the merchant. Swarms of hornets, wasps, and bees likewise wreak havoc and a major war ensues with much bloodshed. Finally Dakṣiṇ Rāy himself arrives and confronts the king, whom he slays.[99] His grieving queen bargains with Dakṣiṇ Rāy to offer worship to him and to give her daughter's hand in marriage to the merchant in exchange for her husband's resurrection. Dakṣiṇ Rāy's conditions are met and he brings the king back to life,[100] along with all his slain soldiers and courtiers. The young merchant finally recovers his father from deep within the prison, barely alive. A joyous reunion ensues. Puṣpadatta convinces his father that

97. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, sec. 28, vv. 508–24, pp. 210–11.

98. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, sec. 32, vv. 581–85, p. 215. It should be noted that in Rudradev's tale, Puṣpadatta demonstrates a different kind of naïveté upon reaching the strange shores of the southern king. He ignores the advice of his helmsman and is enticed ashore by a bevy of incredibly beautiful women who seduce him with promises of supersensual sex and other delights . . . but alas, once again the manuscript breaks off, this time completely. See Rudradev, *Rāy maṅgal*, 143–46.

99. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, *Rāy maṅgal*, secs. 38–39, vv. 725–45, pp. 227–28.

100. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, sec. 40, vv. 749–52, p. 229.

he is indeed his son when he produces the letter of surety attesting paternity as sworn before *brāhmaṇs*, who have recorded his testimony that his wife was indeed pregnant at the time of his leaving.[101]

Subsequent to that reunion, the young merchant is married to the princess. After basking in the joys of married life and the riches of kingly favor, he eventually realizes he needs to return to Bengal. In riddles he tells his bride that he must return to his ancestral home and asks if she can possibly leave her loving family. She replies that Sītā went with Rām into exile, Damayantī did not resist when Nala had to escape, and Draupadī left without sorrow.[102] After a long and emotional preparation for farewell, they take their leave, laden with riches. Working their way back up the coast, they stop at Setubandha, then at Puri—where the narrator again inserts his own voice into the narrative and comments that rice *prasād* from Jagannāth is routinely distributed to all without discriminating among social groups (*varṇa*).[103] They reach the mouth of the Gaṅgā and move upstream until they are close enough to home for Puṣpadatta to send a messenger by land to his mother. Upon docking, Puṣpadatta pays his sailors handsomely and distributes alms to the needy. His father is reunited with his mother. Ratnāvatī is received as the proper daughter-in-law, who through a ritual dice match extracts from Puṣpadatta a vow never to marry another, ensuring his fidelity.[104] Puṣpadatta then meets the king, providing him with extraordinary riches as appropriate, while narrating the tale of his adventures which were successful because of the intervention of Dakṣiṇ Rāy, whom they all subsequently worship.[105] Afterwards, with the help of Viśvakarmmā, he builds a palace for Ratnāvatī and himself, and they install an image of Dakṣiṇ Rāy seated on a tiger, whom they worship with *pūjā* and animal sacrifices.[106]

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4.5. THE NEW WORLD ORDER OF THE SUNDERBANS

One does not have to look far to see how the author Muhāmmad Khater drew on the *Rāy maṅgal* to craft the tale of the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā.* The raison d'être of both the *maṅgal kāvya* and *jahurā nāmā* genres is to make known the advent of the heroic figure, to inculcate appropriate behavior as directed by that hero or heroine, and to instigate a sanctioned form of worship. In this, the *jahurā nāmā* positively parodies the genre of *maṅgal kāvya*, the shared goals of the genre binding them

101. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, sec. 41, vv. 765–807, pp. 231–34.
102. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, sec. 46, vv. 860–67, p. 238.
103. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, sec. 50, v. 920, pp. 242–43.
104. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, sec. 52, vv. 948–50, p. 246.
105. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, sec. 53, vv. 956–62, p. 247.
106. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, secs. 53–54, vv. 868–73, pp. 247–48.

in many of their pragmatic presuppositions. Both portray conflict that pits divine will against human foibles, and resolutions that bring human conduct into alignment with divine plans. In both narratives, the mechanisms that trigger conflict hinge on the unwitting failure to pay proper respect to the presiding powers that govern the Sunderbans. Dakṣiṇ Rāy's failure to intercede with the merchant who has failed to show respect to Baḍa Khān Gāji results in the latter desecrating Rāy's images and polluting his *brāhmaṇ* priests. The result is armed combat. Similarly, the hapless woodcutters who inadvertently violate the sanctity of Dakṣiṇ Rāy's favored tree precipitate severe retribution that is eventually redressed. When Bonbibī and Śājaṅgali enter the Sunderban, they too violate the boundaries without permission as they establish their small foothold in the name of God after their departure from Medinā. That transgression culminates in Bonbibī's battle with Nārāyaṇī, mother of Dakṣiṇ Rāy. In the second tale of the Bonbibī cycle, the near disaster sparked by the greedy merchant Dhonāi, who tries to slip past Dakṣiṇ Rāy's home territories without paying his due, prompts the battle between Śājaṅgalī and Dakṣiṇ Rāy over the anticipated, but never executed, sacrifice of Dukhe. Disrespect cannot be allowed to go unpunished; honor becomes a means of establishing relative standing and rank, which is translated into socially recognizable hierarchical kinship terms.

The *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* does not automatically follow all the contours of the *Rāy maṅgal* or *maṅgal kāvya* formulas. Though the role of merchant centers much of the narrative, the resolution of his fortunes is inverted, but it is worth remembering that following structuralist principles, an inversion is still mimetic. Following the well-attested formula for the *maṅgal kāvya* romance, prosperity eventually accrues to the merchants in the *Rāy maṅgal.* Puṣpadatta and his father Devdatta, whom he rescues, both benefit by virtue of their devotion, and both benefit from the dual devotion of their wives to their husbands and to Dakṣiṇ Rāy. In the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* the tables are turned; while the avaricious merchant Dhonāi is denied his profits, he is eventually spared by the grace of both Dukhe and Bonbibī, and at least some of his wealth is not taken away. But it is Dhonāi's nephew, Dukhe, the youngest, poorest, and socially lowest individual on the voyage, who ultimately reaps the greatest benefit from the commercial voyage to the Sunderbans, benefits Dhonāi never intended for him to receive, including the hand of his own daughter rashly promised when he was desperate to recruit one more crew member. The mechanism for effecting the aid of Rāy or Bonbibī is perfectly parallel: meditate on them with earnest devotion, which will draw their attention and give them the opportunity to intervene. One of the recurring points of these texts is that worship of the *pīrs* and *bibīs* is an effective way to satisfy worldly needs, often in the form of wealth, which they are reported frequently to supply when someone calls on them with even the simplest devotion. The message is not without its ambiguity, though, for even the double-crossing Dhonāi in the end gains Bonbibī's help, but only when he is cornered, with all his other options exhausted. In that vexed

predicament, perhaps because all of his other possible courses of action are eliminated, his prayers of desperation produce the positive aid he seeks. One cannot but be reminded of the grudging way that Cāṇḍo, devotee of Śiva, grudgingly proffers worship to Manasā, goddess of snakes, in the *Manasā maṅgal*, perhaps the most widely circulated of all the *maṅgal kāvyas*. Up to that point in the Dukhe story the receiver of the text is led to believe that the protector's mercy can only descend if the intentions of the protagonists are honorable and pure with respect to Bonbibī and what she represents, but just as in the defeat of Nārāyaṇī earlier, supplication alone, regardless of how it is brought about, suffices to wrap oneself in Bonbibī's protection, which is itself an extension of Āllā's bestowal of power.

The key sequence in the *Rāy maṅgal* for the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* is undoubtedly the death match. In that protracted battle, Baḍa Khān, a saint (*oli*) and warrior *pīr* (*gāji*), demonstrates a power throughout that is equal to, but eventually proves to be greater than, that of Dakṣiṇ Rāy, who is himself a demigod, in the lineage of Śiv through the *muni* Prabhākar. In the end, each slays the other, but it is Baḍa Khān Gāji who ultimately prevails, rising from his dead body to lop off the head of Dakṣiṇ Rāy. His prayer to *paygambar*, the Prophet, has granted him invincibility, which ultimately gives him the advantage. Only when God, designated in the text as Īśvar, descends does the fight stop and the two enemies are forced into a truce of friendship. Dakṣiṇ Rāy is left to be the de facto administrative ruler of the Āṭhārobhāṭī region, the low-lying lands of the eighteen tides, while Baḍa Khān Gāji freely roams the entire area with an even greater power, for not only is he not confined geographically, but everywhere he goes, his presence constitutes an official, albeit mobile and temporary, court for any legal hearing or registry; so too do his various tombs or *dargās* come to function more permanently. Previously the two had been reckoned brothers, and Īśvar has reimposed that relationship. All those resident in the Sunderban are instructed to honor them both equally, though the text does not stipulate which one is elder and which junior. In terms of privilege, Baḍa Khān Gājī emerges as the senior of the two. But the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* alters decidedly the balance of power away from the two "brothers" in favor of Bonbibī.

Recall in the Bonbibī story, Dakṣiṇ Rāy's mother Nārāyaṇī serves as his proxy but is bested in battle with Bonbibī. After her defeat, Bonbibī shows mercy when Nārāyaṇī begs for her life, but the condition of course is that all people in the Sunderban have to switch their allegiance and become vassals of Bonbibī. By virtue of his mother's defeat, Dakṣiṇ Rāy is made into a vassal of Bonbibī, so everyone who counts as his subject likewise comes under her power. Similarly, that battle establishes Bonbibī's superiority over an entire army composed of hungry ghosts, witches, goblins, and the like, sending an unmistakable message about the hierarchy of the cosmos. Bonbibī's God-given power leaves no mistake—remember, she requests the help directly of Āllā, as opposed to Baḍa Khān Gāji's power, which derives from the Prophet. Bonbibī's power and prestige are predicated on a new

cosmic order, changing the basis of a key logical presupposition found in the *Rāy maṅgal*; the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* asserts that Āllā alone is in charge.

In the second tale of the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā*, wherein Dakṣiṇ Rāy is being beaten directly by Śājaṅgali but is saved by the intervention of Baḍa Khān Gājī, the new social order is again asserted, instantiating the rehierarchizing of the cosmos. Not quite as accomplished as his twin sister, Śājaṅgali seems a bit nonplussed when Baḍa Khān Gāji stands up for Dakṣiṇ Rāy; he cannot imagine how a revered and powerful *musalmāni pīr* could intercede on behalf of a bloodthirsty demon, a *rākṣas.* But as his temper flares and he is castigating Baḍa Khān for being sympathetic to this infidel, Dakṣiṇ Rāy attempts to explain Śājaṅgali's relationship to them both, but with little success. Before the issue is settled, Bonbibī summons all three of them for an audience and, not insignificantly, they respond immediately and appear before her, an act of submission that already acknowledges her privilege. Then the same query is rehearsed regarding Baḍa Khān Gāji standing up for Dakṣiṇ Rāy. The critical moment occurs when Baḍa Khān Gāji explains to Bonbibī that after Dakṣiṇ Rāy's defeat the two of them are sharing power as brothers, that Rāy is a *brāhmaṇ*, not a *rākṣas*, and that Nārāyaṇī's defeat at her hands makes them all her children. At that point in the text, the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* unmistakably invokes the intertextual connection with the *Rāy maṅgal*, for the outcome of the conflict found in the alternate tale of Gāji, Kālu, and Cāmpāvatī is not about brothers as equals, as we shall soon see.

The cosmos operational in the *Rāy maṅgal* is clearly *purāṇik* and invokes such figures as Viśvakarmmā and Hānumān, Rām and Sītā and Rāvaṇ, and Nārāyaṇ and consort Nīlavatī. But the *Rāy maṅgal* cosmology only partially maps onto that of the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā.* In both texts, fate is tied together with notions of *karma*, as it is in virtually every early modern Bangla text regardless of religious or other orientation. But the gods and goddesses—the *devs* and *devīs*—are absent in the Bonbibī text. In Bonbibī's world only the sinister dimensions of the traditional Indic cosmos seem to operate, the demonic extra-human characters figuring into the narrative: ghosts, demons, goblins, witches, and so forth, and the one apparent godling, Dakṣiṇ Rāy, requires a human sacrifice—the accusation a convenient misreading of Kṛṣṇarām's report of the many men slain by Dakṣiṇ Rāy, though in every case he revives them as a result of the interventions of the women who then institute his worship (a common *maṅgal kāvya* trope).

Explicit references to Rām and Sītā are missing in the Bonbibī text, but it is clear that the author played on the audience's knowledge of the story, which we might not unreasonably speculate suggests that to name them explicitly (an overt intertextual reference) would somehow validate them, and the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* seems deliberately to avoid all such explicit recognition. Both texts propose separate realms of heaven and earth, though in the *Rāy maṅgal* traffic and communication seem to be one-way (heaven to earth), while the Bonbibī text allows for two-way traffic, with portals to heaven active, especially in Medinā and through

tombs more generally. Both share in the assumption that God, however conceived, actively intervenes on earth to set the good of the world back on course. But the nature of highest divinity in the *Rāy maṅgal*—as revealed when Īśvar descends to arbitrate the conflict between Dakṣiṇ Rāy and Baḍa Khān Gāji—is radically apart from that articulated in the Bonbibī text. In the *Rāy maṅgal*, Īśvar as Dev Bhagavān is a combined form of a *musalmāni* and *vaiṣṇav* divinity, half white, half black, carrying the Korān and *Bhāgavata purāṇa*. Semiotically the two parts are equal, just as Dakṣiṇ Rāy and Baḍa Khān Gāji are equals as brothers. This image of Īśvar is one to which the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* does not subscribe: the sole divinity is Khodā, Āllā. Here the similarities of cosmic order diverge dramatically, and all forms of Indic divinity—and, by the time the Bonbibī tales were circulated, more accurately Hindu divinity—are rehierarchized under a single and singular God, Āllā. This shift in cosmology will turn out to be highly significant and consistent with the tenor of the other tale of Baḍa Khān Gāji and Dakṣiṇ Rāy, the *Gāji kālu o cāmpāvatī kanyār puthi*, to which we now turn.

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