

EPILOGUE

We began this inquiry with the simple question: what kind of cultural or religious work do the tales of the fictional *pīrs* do or try to do? Of the many things we can observe, perhaps most telling are the ways these seemingly simple tales explore how the same world can be configured and reconfigured, a feature that is intrinsic to fictions everywhere. The stakes, however, are very real, for these tales subjunctively reflect and refract issues of real life in the lives of their Bengali audiences and, I would argue, that relentless but usually indirect and gently suggestive critique ultimately confirms their pragmatic utility. The tales turn out to be anything but naïve, for their persuasive power is significant and continues to have a strong purchase on their audiences. For those of us who try to understand in religious terms how and why people believe the things they do, act the way they do, these tales suggest a very different process for our all-too-abrupt notions of conversion. Stories, we might argue, are powerful, even more compelling than scriptural authority, unless, of course, that scriptural authority itself relies on stories, parables, or myths to make its case. Narratives exert an exploratory power that stands in opposition to—and constantly assesses—the prescriptive world of doctrines and their derivative, sanctioned histories. It is not surprising that in the world of Islam, narratives that tell of the fabulous exploits of heroes and heroines, constantly reshaped for each generation, face the enmity of doctrine-driven reformists.

I have focused this inquiry on the early modern period that leads up to the contemporary world, at least in a few cases into the nineteenth century; by the early decades of the twentieth century, with the political strife that accompanied the instantiation of the categories of Muslim and Hindu into exclusive political identities, I thought the *kathā* traditions might have come to an end. Hidden away in the

holdings of the India Office Library, where I was working in 1992, I ran across an unusual piece that initially puzzled me, for it was like no other. In the late 1920s, Sañjiv Kumār Bāgchi composed a drama titled *Satyanārāyaṇ nāṭya kāvya*.¹ The title page advertises the author as a singer, poet, accomplished wit, and connoisseur of humor, and the creator of instrumental “card music” (there is no explanation of what constituted “card music,” but there are hints that playing cards were involved, or possibly a cotton carder). The photograph on the frontispiece is a self-advertised joke: handlebar moustache, military tunic over a dhoti, and the modest comment implying that he represents the new height of fashion—native costume below combined with the dress of the enforcers of the colonial masters above. The text, likely self-published by members of the author’s family, covers ninety-six pages and is divided into twenty sections. The dialogue is all in song, the music of his own composition. The last four pages are given over to various lengthy encomia (all but one in English) from prominent appreciative fans, all servants of the Raj, such as Bhupendra Nath Mukherjee, Shaheb Bahadur Sub-Divisional Officer, Kushtia; Gokul Chandra Mozumdar, Sub-Divisional Magistrate, Kandi, Murshidabad; and Surendra Kumar Sen, Pleader Judge’s Court, Secretary of Arya Pustakagar, Dinajpur; these and others cited comment on the extraordinary novelty of Bāgchi’s “card music” and the biting comedy and social commentary that punctuates his more serious pious sentiments. While one need only begin the libretto to confirm the light-hearted manner of delivery of the Satya Nārāyaṇ and Satya Pīr narrative (taken from the *revā khaṇḍa* of the *Skanda purāṇa*), this text does what no other we have examined even hinted: in the preface titled “Why Do I Write?” the author proclaims that it is to lament the contemporary traffic in gods and goddesses and to mock the “religion of the bazaar.” In prior centuries, the Satya Nārāyaṇ and Satya Pīr stories parodied different textual traditions, but this would appear to be the first self-declared parody of parodies.

Some years later as I puzzled over this unique piece, I would surmise that Mr. Bāgchi’s *nāṭya kāvya* could well be counted as a marker of the end to the creative period of these narratives, perhaps of all of the *pīr kathās*, for as Northrop Frye observed in his *Anatomy of a Criticism*, the urge to parody begins to intensify when a particular genre and its conventions are exhausted.² As we have already noted, parody is always context-specific, a product of its distinctive historical moment in interaction with prevailing authoritative discourses.³ If these observations hold, it would appear that I had stumbled onto an harbinger of Satya Pīr’s demise after five centuries of vibrant presence in the lives of those in the Bangla-speaking region. My sense of foreboding, however, was premature, for it seems that Satya Nārāyaṇ

1. Sañjivkumār Bāgchi, *Satyanārāyaṇ nāṭya kāvya*, 1st ed. (Dinajpur: Kālīpad Bāgchi and Raṇajir Kumār Bāgchi, 1334 BS [ca. 1927]).

2. Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, 36, quoting Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of a Criticism*, 103.

3. Dentith, *Parody*, 163–64; Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, xi, xiv.

as Satya Pīr, exercising that subjunctive quality, was simply shifting from the older print form to a new kind of performance suitable for a modern, clearly metropolitan, local colonial audience.

In June 1920, a scant few years before Bāgchi's production, M. L. Sāhā published a short piece titled *Satyanārāyaṇ*, which was composed as a script for a gramophone recording.⁴ This experiment rendered in brief but dramatic dialogue the traditional trilogy of the poor *brāhmaṇ*, the woodcutters, and the merchant. After the title page, which included impressive personal information,⁵ a cast of nine male and four female characters was listed, while the story itself covered only twenty pages of this foolscap printing (F 8vo, 6–1/2 × 4–1/2 inches), a short but standard size one expects from the popular and inexpensive *baṭ-tola* editions of texts, though this was a private printing by the author. Given the tenor of the text, we might speculate that it was a bit of a spoof, but there is no direct evidence of that. Because we do not have the actual gramophone recording, we cannot gauge the tone of the delivery, which might more clearly indicate how the drama was to be understood. But regardless of how the text is read, it is clearly an innovative attempt to deploy the new technology of the gramophone to convey the story of Satya Nārāyaṇ, who assumed the form of a *pīr* to make known the way to wealth and weal. Whether we choose to see the text as a parody or a religious production is of no consequence, for it is the entrance of Satya Pīr into the new world of technology that again underscores the ever-exploratory nature of the tradition. Satya Pīr seems always to have found new avenues of expression, leading his promoters to explore these older ideas in a new form.

When she was a visiting scholar in North Carolina some years ago, my mourned colleague Papiya Ghosh gently suggested to me that the critique of syncretism that Carl Ernst and I had initiated several years earlier may have overemphasized the negative entailments of the concept,⁶ for syncretism, she noted, was actively being used by intellectuals and activists in India to offer an alternative, an antidote to the Islamist and Hindutva drive for purity in their respective religious traditions. Satya Pīr and Satya Nārāyaṇ were routinely placed on the front lines of this attempt to argue for an inclusive perspective in the modern state. Similarly, she named Bonbibī as another example. At the time I quibbled at the suggestion because of the imprecision of the language (as I then saw it), but in a demonstration of the malleability of abstractions, the definitional edges of both syncretism and

4. M. L. Sāhā, *Satyanārāyaṇ: Grāmāphōn rekardē samagra abhinay* (Kalikātā: by the author, 1920). Unfortunately, I was unable to locate any gramophone recording in the British Sound Archive, only this script from the British Library.

5. The title page included the address of the author at “5/1 Dharmmtolā Śṛīṭī, Kalikātā,” his “Poṣṭ Baks naṃ. 906,” his four digit “Teliphon naṃ. 2290,” and his wire address as “Teligrān Ṭhikānā ‘Bāgjantra.’” We can only speculate regarding the reasons for such detailed personal information, though it does signal a complete embrace of new technologies.

6. Stewart and Ernst, “Syncretism.”

secularism to which she alerted me have indeed become blurred for at least some of those who argue for and attempt to promote in public life some form of religious neutrality (syncretism is often paired with secularism, the latter signifying in the Indic context a promotion of pluralism). Many figures that hint of allegiances that cross the hard modern categories of Hindu and Muslim are marshalled in this effort to counter the communalism that has become so widespread.⁷ In a sense, I realized, this was what the narratives of Satya Pīr and the other stories of *pīrs* and *bibīs* had always done, to bring together people of different ethnicities, of different social classes, and of course different religious orientations, in provocatively new configurations, disrupting the status quo, their activity redirected to new (reformulations of the old) regimes.

The *pīrs* and *bibīs* are not just being used to address intercommunal strife, but intracommunal conflict as well. Confirmation of this revitalized life of the stories of the *pīrs* and the audiences they target can perhaps best be seen in the public dramas performed in Bangladesh today. As my friend and colleague Syed Jamil Ahmed has so well documented in Bangladesh,⁸ the figures of the fictional *pīrs* continue to challenge and critique the religious and political normativity of the Bangla-speaking world.

These public performances reminded me of the ways in which stories used to be told, using the scroll paintings as visual cues to the storyteller's performance. The traditions of scroll (*paṭ*) painting are still thriving, even as evidenced by my personal collection of scrolls purchased over the last four decades—illustrations of the *pīrs*, of the gods and goddesses of the *maṅgal kāvyas*, of Caitanya, and so forth. I was reminded of this when in 2010 I visited a small exhibition at Asia House in London titled "The Tiger in Asian Art." That exhibit included a partial scroll from the Victoria and Albert Museum (which I identified as the opening to the story of Bonbibī, though it bore no label) and a number of other scrolls and single-register depictions of Baḍa Khān Gāji, Dakṣiṇ Ray, and others by Maithili, Bengali, and Santali artists. Contemporary Bangladeshi artist Shambhu Acharya's paintings in the modified *caukapaṭ* style speak to a constantly rejuvenating world of the imaginary; working with a local singer of tales, he has helped to create a new cycle of

7. Once alerted, I discovered that there are a host of articles and even a couple of short monographs that argue this alliance; see for example Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, *The Sunderbans: Folk Deities, Monsters and Mortals* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, Social Science Press, 2010), esp. the introduction and chap. 3; and Shams Shahriar Kabi, "Traditional Bengali Folklore *Gajir Gaan*: Non-Communal Artistic Contemplation," *Grassroots Voices* 7, no. 1 (July 2010): 16–30. The earliest article I have located that ever-so-briefly anticipates this move is Aparna Bhattacharya, "Worship of Satyapir, an Example of Hindu Muslim Rapprochement in Bengal," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 32, no. 2 (1970): 204–7.

8. Syed Jamil Ahmed, "Performing and Supplicating Mānik Pīr: Infrapolitics in the Domain of Popular Islam," *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 53, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 51–76. See also of course his full-length studies of performance previously cited.

Baḍa Khān Gāji stories that are now little more than a decade old as he described to me in 2010.

As the tales of the fictional *pīrs* and *bibīs* seek new creative outlets, we find their stories moving into new discursive realms that connect with unexpected literatures. Novelist Indra Das has linked the tales of Bonbibī and Dakṣiṇ Ray to the worldwide confreres of shapeshifters. His story, titled *The Devourers*,⁹ begins with a professor of history attending a Calcutta performance of *bāul* musicians—depicted as ganja-smoking antinomians who occupy the liminal space between ordinary society and its hallucinatory and seamy sensual underbelly. As the story unfolds, the action segues to a stranger past world. A mysterious figure entices the professor to listen to a very different history that will be like nothing any historian has ever recorded. Going back four centuries, we meet Fenrir, a therianthrope whose name invokes the ancient Norse shapeshifter Fenrisúlfr. As he traverses Persian lands en route to India, he lives on the edges of society with other shapeshifters of legend: werewolves, vampires, *jinns*, *rākāsas*, and the like. Driven by an uncharacteristic urge, he rapes Cyra, a mortal and a prostitute, producing an offspring that shares the humanity of the one and the soul-eating qualities of the other and, like other shapeshifters, the ability to absorb the experiences, linguistic skills, and other knowledge of those they consume. While it would be easy, perhaps far too easy, to read this tale allegorically, as the successive expansions of Middle Eastern, Persian, Mongol, and European power as they intruded into the South Asian subcontinent, in its final chapters it invokes explicitly the misty hybrid origins of Bonbibī, who migrates to and eventually controls the Sunderbans—a subtle reinterpretation of the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā*'s narrative of Bonbibī ontogenesis, raised by tigers, who, as we have repeatedly seen, are often themselves shapeshifters. Suddenly the frequent bodily transformations by Satya Pīr, Baḍa Khān Gāji, and others we have encountered become indexical of and participate in a larger transcultural imagination, the stuff of mythologies over the world and, closer to our times, the comic book superheroes and their antagonists.

It is fitting, then, that in their production of the previously cited *Folktales from India: The Sunderbans*, Vivalok Comics deploys modern color print technology to fuse the visual form of the old hand-painted scroll or *pāṭ* with the text embodied in comic book form. That particular storybook illustrates the tales of Mānik Pīr, Bonbibī, Baḍa Khān Gāji, and others. The effort to utilize the comic book medium as a vehicle for exploration is self-conscious on the part of the creators, who remark, “In the Indian context, comics are but a logical continuation of the strong pictorial and narrative tradition that it already has. The ‘*pata chitras*’ or scroll paintings of Bengal and the ‘*phad*’ of Rajasthan exemplify this. Both these techniques combine the excitement of both the oral and the visual form of story

9. Indra Das, *The Devourers* (New York: Del Ray Books, 2017). I am indebted to Ahmed Tanvir, graduate student at Brown University, for alerting me to this work.

telling.” Quoting Scott McCloud in the epigraph to the piece, “Comics are often thought of as the joining of two art forms: writing and drawing. But what happens between the panels isn’t about either, it’s the author’s imagination.” And I would add, the reader’s. Consistent with the impulse behind the original creation of the stories of the *pīr kathā*, the Vivalok creators go on to observe their own experience of growing up with the superheroes and other characters of comic books: “We have all mentally mimicked the world of these characters, which though unreal, provided an insight into the real world. Comics are viewed as the *unfolding of alternative spaces*.”¹⁰ The stories—here the *pīr kathās*—explore places and events not possible otherwise, stimulating the imagination in ways that constantly challenge expected boundaries. What better confirmation of the timelessness of these tales than to hear the delightful screams of my godson Samar and his older brother Anhad, as they play out the stories of Bonbibī, Baḍa Khān Gāji, and Dakṣiṇ Rāy on the bed with their grandmother Nilu, tirelessly reenacting their adventures, each time a new triumph as they relive tales that never seem to get old.

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10. Ghosh, comp., *Folktales from India: The Sunderbans*, 3; emphasis added.