PART III

Experiencing Religion in and through Literature

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Popular Sufi Narratives and the Parameters of the Bengali *Imaginaire*

Abstract A number of Bangla tales dedicated to the fictional or mythic holy men (*pīrs*) and women (*bibīs*) in the Muslim community have circulated widely over the last five centuries alongside the tales of their historical counterparts. They are still printed and told today, and performed regularly in public, especially in the Sunderbans, the mangrove swamps in the southern reaches of Bangladesh and West Bengal. Among them are figures such as the itinerant veterinarian Mānik Pīr, the tamer of tigers Baḍakhān Gājī and his female counterpart Bonbibī, and the matron of cholera Olābibī. Because of the way they defy the strictly demarcated categories that have come to define Hindu and Muslim in the last two centuries, Orientalist scholars, conservative Muslim factions, linguists, and literary historians have until recently rejected or ignored altogether this group of stories as purely entertaining with no religious, linguistic, or literary merit. I argue that not only are these fictions religious, they also create an important space within the limiting strictures of Islamic theology, history, and law that allows people to exercise their imagination to investigate alternative worlds. These texts simultaneously offer a critique of religion and society through their parodies, rather than articulating doctrine or theology. Because they are fictions, any approach to their religiosity must use hermeneutic strategies suited to the literary world in which they operate. But the imagination exercised in these tales is not unlimited, rather the parameters of the discursive arena in which they operate—the *imaginaire*—can be defined by two types of presuppositions and two types of intertextuality, which in turn allows us more clearly to understand the work of these important texts. The example of the tale of Bonbibī will be used to illustrate this.

In manuscripts that were composed at least as far back as the late fifteenth century CE, there exists a substantial body of literature in the Bangla language that tells the adventures of Sufi *pīrs* and *bibīs*, accomplished holy men and women respectively. This in itself is not surprising, for anywhere there is a substantial Muslim population stories of these saintly figures will circulate; but in this cycle of tales the heroes and heroines are entirely fictional.[1] They have no demonstrable association with anyone connected to what passes as the historical record, though there are on occasion allusions to the past that are suggested by the names, forming a rhetoric of association. As fictions, these stories read very much like the fabulous tales of the Arabian Nights; indeed, we can identify a number of narrative motifs they have in common. The primary heroes of these tales include figures such as the itinerant veterinarian Mānik Pīr; the commander of the tiger army of the Sunderbans, Baḍakhān Gājī; and his female analogue, the matron of the forest, Bonbibī. Other figures include Kwaja Khijir, patron saint of boatmen; Olābibī, who controls cholera and water-borne diseases; and Satya Pīr, who overtly signals allegiance to both *hinduyāni* and *musalmāni* perspectives on divinity.[2] As fictions, what kind of religiosity do these texts project, and how might we interpret this religiosity since they do not participate in the discourses of theology or law?

In their basic plots and structures, these tales bear some resemblance to the allegorical romances called *premākhyāns*, but that resemblance is a superficial one. Those *premākhyāns* or 'narrations of love' serve as an explicit platform for Sufi religious teachings, and that instruction is modulated through an exquisitely refined and formal æsthetic of allegory.[3] Bangla *Premākhyāns* explicitly trace their origins to the Persian *maṯnavī* and their vernacular flowerings in Avadhī, Dakanī, Urdu, and Hindavī.[4] Unlike

1 I follow the work of Thomasson who argues that fictional characters are 'artifactual,' that is, real abstract objects that have been created by their authors and thereby exist as such; see Amie L. Thomasson, "Fictional Characters and Literary Practices," *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 43, No. 2 (April 2003): 138–157; and for a more extended analysis, idem, *Fiction and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

2 Throughout the body of this essay the modern capitalized terms 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' will refer to the monolithic constructs of political identity in late colonial and contemporary South Asia. The adjectives *musalmāni* and *hinduyāni* designate the indigenous categories of orientation (as opposed to 'identity'). All Bangla terms are transliterated without changing them to their Persian, Urdu, Arabic, or Sanskrit counterparts, which would be misleading because the semantic fields are not always identical, so *bibī* rather than *bībī*, and so forth.

3 For a very nuanced survey of the *premākhyān* tradition, see Aditya Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379–1545*, ed., Wendy Doniger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). An excellent illustration of the Sufi doctrinal appropriation of the *premākhyān* can be found in Manjhan, *Madhumālatī: An Indian Sufi Romance*, trans. Aditya Behl and Simon Weightman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

4 For a superb study of the relationship of Bangla *premākhyāns* to their predecessors, see Mamtājur Rahmān Tarafdār, *Bāṃlā romāṇṭik kābyer āoyādhī hindī paṭbhūmi* (Ḍhākā: Ḍhākā Viśvavidyālay, 1971); see also Oyākil Āhmad, *Bāṃlā romāṇṭik praṇayopākhyān* (Ḍhākā: Khān Brādārs eyāṇḍ Kompāni, 1970). For the

the highly intentional and heavily symbolic *premākhyāns*, with their strict æsthetic drawn from traditional Persian poetics and Sanskrit-derived *rasa* theory, these popular Bangla tales of *bibīs* and *pīrs* make no attempt to deliver overt or ritual directives, nor do the shapes of the narratives enjoy a clear genre classification. Their æsthetic style demonstrates a working knowledge of both Sanskrit and Persian traditions referred not through refined application, but indirectly through allusion and homage and even through deliberately distorted partial applications of those formal æsthetic principles in an often sophisticated parody that belies their apparent simplicity. They share no formal structural requirements beyond vague characterizations as *kathās*, which can be glossed simply as 'tales,' and they convey a popular religious outlook that cannot be classified as traditionally theological. In short, they are popular narrative fictions informed by the general epoch, tales that for the last five centuries have appealed to a broad spectrum of the population without depending on sectarian claims. Although one of their primary functions is to entertain, they also seem to provoke other responses both positive and negative, a circumstance which hints at an important dimension of their religious work.

With a host of recognizable religious figures from traditions that today we would label Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and even Christian, and their commerce with a rather lengthy retinue of celestial figures, gods and goddesses, the tales are clearly fully cognizant of the multiple religious cosmologies operating in the Bangla-speaking world. But their precise status as religious texts is difficult to place because they are not overtly doctrinal or theological. Since the early nineteenth century, these tales have been eschewed entirely by Islamists and reform-minded factions, such as the Wahhabis and Salafis, who characterize them indiscriminately as imbecilic blasphemies; they are summarily dismissed. By the late nineteenth century this denigration became very public and vituperative in the print culture of the emerging Islamic discursive medium known as *musalmāni bāṅglā* or *dobhāṣī*.[5] So thorough was this smear campaign that one finds no mention of these texts today among the various Islamist literatures, only vague, formulaic admonitions against the dangers of *pīr* worship that were common in the later decades of the nineteenth and early decades of

relationship of the *masnavī* to the romance and love literatures of Urdu and its variant vernaculars, see Anna Suvorova, *Masnavi: A Study of Urdu Romance*, trans. M. Osama Faruqi (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

5 See Ānisuzzāmān, *Muslim-mānasa o bāṃlā sāhitya (1757–1918)* (Reprint: Ḍhākā: Pyāpirās, 2001), passim, esp. ch. 3; see also Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), esp. 207–253. The *nasihat nāma* literature was often focused on trying to 'correct' what were deemed erroneous views and practices by the so-called masses; see Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims, 1871–1906: A Quest for Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 120–122; and Sufia M. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity, and Language in an Islamic Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 65–76. See also Neilesh Bose, *Recasting the Region: Language, Culture, and Islam in Colonial Bengal* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

the twentieth centuries.[6] At the same time, Orientalist scholars saw them as 'syncretistic' works that confused what were—from the pristine perspectives of those romanticizing scholars—distinct and exclusive Muslim and Hindu categories of theology and praxis. This prompted researchers to lay these tales aside as texts unworthy of investigation.[7] Ironically, Bengali scholars of the same period who sought to establish a nationalist literary and linguistic history similarly dismissed these narratives as doggerel productions, which were at best fairy tales or folk tales, with all the negative connotations that label carries in the context of high literature.[8] Yet in spite of these various repudiations, the stories have endured among the general population, in some cases for more than six centuries, and many continue to be circulated today. If the texts represent some wayward sectarian form that deviates from the conservative articulations of Islam in Bengal, and if they fail to conform to any of the traditional schools of theology, surviving only as popular tales with no single indigenous genre, is there anything one can make of the religious æsthetic of these productions?

Fiction and Ideology

In their haste to set aside these tales, fundamentalists and scholars alike failed to recognize that these *kathās* articulate a sensibility and cosmology that must be termed Islamic, no matter how irregular by conservative standards. They make clear, however, that they are just as attuned to Hindu and other cosmological constructs. In this world, Āllā (as the name is

6 Typical of this was the vigorous warning against the corruption of bogus *phakir*s and *pīrs* in this final Kali age of degradation in Abbas Ali Najir, *Kalir phakīrer khelā* (Lakpur: by the author, 1920).

7 For my critique of syncretism, see Tony K. Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter through Translation Theory," *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2001): 261–288.

8 The emergence of *musalmāni bāṅglā* or *dobhāṣī*, is well documented in Qazi Abdul Mannan, *The Emergence and Development of Dobhasi Literature in Bengal* (*up to 1855 ad*), 2nd ed. (Dacca: Bangla Academy, 1974). The great linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterji refused to acknowledge *dobhāṣī* as a form of Bangla; see Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *The Origin and Development of Bengali Language*, 2 pts. in 3 vols. (Reprint: Calcutta: George Allen Unwin, 1975), 1:206. D.C. Sen saw the forms as primitive dialects; see Dinesh Chandra Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, rev. ed. (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1954), 683. An especially stinging critique of the effects of this classification as folk literature and the subsequent collecting strategy is cogently outlined in Giuseppe Flora, *On Fairy Tales, Intellectuals, and Nationalism in Bengal (1880–1920)*, Supplemento no. 1 alla Rivista degli Studi Orientali, vol. LXXV (Pisa: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 2002). Even the venerable Md. Enamul Haq virtually eliminated *dobhāṣī* texts from the condensed English version of his literary history; see Md. Enamul Haq, *Muslim Bengali Literature* (Karachi: Pakistan Publications, 1957). Literary historian Sukumar Sen was divided, opting to include Mānik Pīr and Satya Pīr material, but excluding *premākhyān* and nearly all other forms of *dobhāṣī* literature in his history; see Sukumār Sen, *Bāṅglā sāhityer itihās*, 4 vols. in 6 pts. (Reprint. Kalikātā: Eastern Publishers, 1383–1388 bs [ca. 1976–1981]), vol. 1, pt. 2: 465–491.

written in this Bangla) reigns in heaven, and all manner of *musalmāni* functionaries carry out their activities on earth with a steady traffic between the two spheres. Āllā intervenes in the lives of his subjects, especially the *pīrs*, those favored friends of God. Unlike the tales of the so-called historical *pīrs*, whose content and circulation are closely linked to the political arena, these tales of the fictional *pīrs* are less dependent on any explicit historical context—though certain narrative temporalities do suggest broad time frames. At the same time, they provide an oblique but often biting commentary on political issues without always explicitly identifying the objects of their ridicule.

The fact that these tales are admittedly fictional modifies the relationship of the narrative to any suggested Islamic doctrine, theology, or ritual and, at the same time, introduces an æsthetic that is generically religious, literary, and performative. In order to help clarify the nature of the religious quality of these texts—following Pierre Machery who follows Tzvetan Todorov—we must recognize that the worlds depicted in these fictions are autotelic, self-contained, and as a result are never subject to the truth test (the very means by which they have been dismissed by traditionalists and fundamentalists because they have read them as theological). The fictional worlds created in these narratives are independent of the world of ordinary things,[9] but that independence, I argue, opens an important space that by its very nature invites authors to critique prevailing doctrinal and theological norms as well as political institutions, and in some instances to explore new possibilities; that is, to imagine a different kind of world. Machery writes:

> . . . the autonomy of the writer's discourse is established from its relationship with the other uses of language; everyday speech, scientific propositions. By its energy and thinness literary discourse mimics theoretical discourse, rehearsing but never actually performing its script. But in that evocative power, by which it denotes a specific reality, it also imitates the everyday language which is the language of ideology. We could offer a provisional definition of literature as being characterised by this power of parody. Mingling the real uses of language in an endless confrontation, it concludes by *revealing* their truth. Experimenting with language rather than inventing it, the literary work is both the analogy of knowledge and a caricature of customary ideology.[10]

As a result of their nature as fictions, the popular stories of the *pīrs* can articulate only a simulacrum of ideology or religious doctrine, otherwise

9 Pierre Machery, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1978), 44–65.

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

the texts would cease to be fictional and would become forms of propaganda or manuals for instruction. While the *premākhyāns* are composed deliberately to instruct the adept in the most esoteric reaches of Sufi doctrine through allegory (and cannot then under Machery's definition be understood as proper fictions), the fictional tales of the *pīrs*, by virtue of their being fictions, are positioned to provide a parodic critique of prevailing theologies, both *musalmāni* and *hinduyāni*. Any conspiracy theory that would suggest that these authors set out intentionally to critique *musalmāni* and *hinduyāni* theologies or their general ideological bases removes these texts from the realm of literature. However, the fictions do not champion a clearly delineated doctrinal stance, rather, as I have argued elsewhere, this parodic function is an inevitable exercise in the *subjunctive*, an impromptu exploratory of alternatives to the world of strict agendas as found in the traditional categories of theology, history, and law.[11] That variation is significant.

Whereas the *premākhyāns* share a cosmology grounded in Sufi theologies, which they endeavor to illustrate—a perspective matched to overt theological propositions and realized through the personal experience of ritual (no matter how problematic for the followers of the traditional Sunni schools)—the *pīr kathās*, as true fictions, stand independently and require another tack for interpretation. Although they share no common structural genre, appearing variously as *kathā, kecchā, kāhinī, yātrā, pālā* and *pālāgān*, and *pāñcālī,*[12] their narratives participate in the generic structures of what is known in Western poetics as Romance. The plots clearly conform to both Frye's notions of the narrative structure of Romance (with the hero descending into a realm of chaos and darkness only to recover and set the world right thereby establishing a major intervention in the world order),[13]

11 One of the primary functions of these narratives—intentional or not—is an exploration of different possibilities, the different strategies, by which Islamic cosmologies (plural) can be insinuated into, be reconciled with, or accommodate and appropriate preexisting Bengali cosmologies; see Tony K. Stewart, "Religion in the Subjunctive: Vaiṣṇava Narrative, Sufi Counter-Narrative in Early Modern Bengal," *Journal of Hindu Studies* 6, no.1 (2013): 52–72. James C. Scott has argued that popular dramas and other public performances are an important way in which subalterns give voice to their discontents, often without the dominant classes fully understanding the nature of the critique; see James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); and idem., *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

12 In this context *kathā* and *kecchā* are essentially synonymous, both meaning tale; but the texts are also circulated as *kāhinī* or old story (often questionably glossed as 'history'), *yātrā* or public dramatic presentation, often including question-answer routines, *pālā* or *pālāgān* as the story punctuated with song, while the *pāñcālī* signifies a publicly performed dance-drama. For a recent study of these popular forms in Bangladesh that include performances of these tales of the *bibīs* and *pīrs*, see Saymon Zakaria, *Pronomohi Bongomata: Indigenous Cultural Forms of Bangladesh*, with a foreword by Tony K. Stewart (Dhaka: Nymphea Publications, 2011).

13 Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*, The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 1974–75 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976).

and Fuchs' take on their episodic style, what she called the 'segmented narrative' wherein each plot is interrupted to advance the others toward some kind of utopian end, which delays actually constituting the story itself.[14] As Romances, any kind of religious perspective will, out of necessity, be truncated and reduced to the most general contours consistent with all fictional tales.

The autotelic nature of the Romance seems to divorce the content of those tales from their historical time and place, making them somehow timeless. Yet the various references and allusions to political figures, sacred geography, and so forth, indicate certain temporalities that do situate them generally. While one cannot posit a direct causal link to any of the worlds depicted in those tales to what we recognize as 'real life' (that is, the historical experience of religion in the Bangla-speaking regions), there has to be some connection because of the conditions of their production. It is difficult to accept as 'factual' (referring to the prevailing Muslim religious perspectives today) a world where Āllā cruises the heavens in his celestial vehicle, where a *pīr* can capture Mā Gāṅgā (the Ganges River as goddess) in his shoulder bag, or Baḍakhān Gājī might muster an army of thousands of tigers. Yet those very images emerge from the historical context that made them possible. Otherwise it is very difficult to imagine the authors being stimulated to generate such imaginary worlds.

The seeming impasse created by granting the autotelic quality of the narratives (that would remove them from the real-life of religious legislation) is partially a function of their ontology, that is, the characterizations about their 'reality' is actually an attempt to address their status *vis-à-vis* that of 'things' in the ordinary world. The narratives-as-fictions stand quite apart as language-dependent and language-mediated realities, a product that takes its reality purely from discourse. Epistemologist Nicholas Rescher provides an opening. He 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 difficulties 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."[15]

Rescher's argument serves to pin down the elusive ontological nature of fiction and provides a furtive connection that is precisely the entry point we need to see how these fictions do their work. Arguing that all worlds are imagined—that is, they are the result of mental constructs—fictional

14 Barbara Fuchs, *Romance* (London: Routledge, 2004), 57f.
15 Nicholas Rescher, "On the Ways and Vagaries of Fictions" in *Studies in Epistemology*, Nicholas Rescher Collected Papers, vol. xiv (Leipzig: Ontos Verlag, 2006), 89–90.

worlds nonetheless present a very special case in the projection or perception of these worlds despite sharing roots in human cultural production.

> 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.[16]

For our purposes, the point is that only real-world authors have created these tales of *pīrs* and *bibīs*,[17] and it is their discourse that makes them possible. The discourses of history, theology, and law that define the bulk of Islamic literatures constitute different discourses. The fictional discourses of the *pīrs* and *bibīs* stand apart from the legal discourses and operate according to their own standards; they are of necessity deeply rooted in the imaginal world of their authors.

The Realm of the *Imaginaire*

As anyone who has examined the intellectual history of Islam knows, each of the traditional schools of law—Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali—seeks to establish the content of what they consider to be God's law, the *shari'ah*. In turn, each follows strictly its own constraining principles by which that law is to be interpreted, *ijtihad*, and seeks to apply those determinations through *fiqh*, that is, through morality, ritual, and social regulation. Consistency in these areas is sought by all, but they differ in the evaluations of the effectiveness (rightness) of the bases of authority and the order of their application or elimination. The fictional tales of *pīrs* and *bibīs* are of course governed by no such overt regulation, yet I argue that they are not produced indiscriminately and without constraints and that these constraints share generalizable features in common with those of the schools of law. The creators of these tales do not simply make up anything they want, rather there are limitations on what they can imagine, historically grounded limitations that are both restricting and enabling. These limitations define the discursive parameters of the *imaginaire*, which is the realm within which the imagination operates.

16 Rescher, "On the Ways and Vagaries of Fictions," 79.

17 From the perspective of the academic study of religion, normative assertions of any kind of divine origin or inspiration for stories or revelations of texts are impossible to investigate, much less affirm; so the working assumption can only be that textual and ritual production in religion is always a function of human production.

The discursive arena of any text is the realm of the *imaginaire*, a term which should not be confused with the imagination.[18] Rather, as I am using the term, the *imaginaire* is the 'space' where the imagination is exercised or where imaginative activity takes place. 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 conceptual perimeter. The *imaginaire* defines the 'realm of possibility' for any speaker or actor, one of the most compelling limitations being that of language. It is now widely accepted that the general proposition of the choice of language inevitably structures thought,[19] but historical context likewise dictates other structures of authority that place limits on what can be imagined, and so it is curbed by accepted practices and the definers of various modes of discourse, whether in social and legal systems, science, theology, or simply common sense. 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. 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, 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,[20] even in major paradigm shifts which are not quick and often very messy.[21] This is not to propose some new form of intellectual history; these are pragmatic considerations to help us control our understanding of these processes of creativity, inevitably produced in conversation with others at the time and before. In a sense, we are talking about Bakhtin's dialogic process,[22] as authors and other actors give voice to their perspectives and their conceptual worlds. My concern, however, is to learn how to map these worlds in consistent ways that will, in turn, point us toward issues of import.

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18 I do not deploy the term in the same manner as Sartre, who saw *l'imaginaire* as a special form of consciousness; his concept is closer to what I consider in English the 'imagination.' See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, trans. Jonathan Webber, rev. Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre (London: Routledge, 2004); Sartre's original text from the 1940 Gallimard edition was simply titled *L'imaginaire.*

19 See Edward Sapir, *Culture, Language and Personality*, ed. D. G. Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), and his student, Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality* (Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1956). Their theories, which seem to have overstated the case about the unthinkability of certain concepts in other languages, are not without their critics today.

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

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

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

Some years ago, while mining bibliographical entries for intertextuality I came across a small article by Jonathan Culler, titled "Presupposition and Intertextuality,"[23] which made me realize that the specific principles by which the scholars of the Islamic tradition had generated authoritative legal interpretations were actually a subset of a more generalizable set of propositions that is applicable to all literary forms. Culler's observations are not proposed as the basis of a system of interpretation, but rather highlight four features that any hermeneutic exercise should or could productively analyze to place texts into an imaginal landscape, an intellectual and even cultural history. As we have alluded, texts do not come into existence in a void, though their provenance may often prove elusive; these four factors help define the conditions that allow for the production of any text and can, then, guide its understanding. The two forms of presupposition are *logical* and *pragmatic*, and the two forms of intertextuality are *explicit* (or overt) and *implied* (or covert). These factors define a text's intellectual context, its historical conversation partners, and its implied audience, who are in turn invited to understand the text according to its own standards of production and consumption. They serve both as constraints on what can be envisioned by these authors in locatable historical contexts, and which equally serve as opportunities for these authors to innovate. How these same texts are later incorporated into new forms of discourse will naturally change their position vis-à-vis other texts and groups (especially obvious when they are co-opted for new histories or teleologies), but the initial situation (where the text represents only 'the present') allows us to uncover the terms of its initial creation. If we are careful in our delineation of these four elements, our exegesis of the content of texts, and our understanding of the initial function of these texts, should be much more reliable, and the relationship they bear to existing religious cosmologies should be better understood—that is, we will be better able to gauge the cultural and religious work of these fictional narratives.

Presuppositions: Logical and pragmatic

Every discursive arena is governed by a set of *logical presuppositions* or 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. The formal nature of logic, such as the mathematical basis of the syllogism, will be included here. It also includes other sources of authority that 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 *muʿtazila* traditions,

23 Johnathan Culler, "Presupposition and Intertextuality," *Modern Language Notes* 91 (1976): 1380–1396.

or the absolute denial of anything suggesting local cultural preferences or opinions by the conservative *hanbalite* school. The *imaginaire* is the realm within which the adjudication of these rules takes place; 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. A comparison of texts will surely reveal the range of what was acceptable among different communities of Bangla speakers. Cosmology is inevitably at the root of logical presupposition and vice versa, which means that all theological propositions fall under this heading, and so too do propositions such as the laws of physical and moral cause and effect (e.g., *karma*, which is prevalent throughout these *musalmāni* productions). The same is true for science, mathematics, legal codes, and related bureaucratic and institutional regulation, regardless of provenance.

Every discourse takes certain identifiable shapes by assuming certain structures that Culler labels *pragmatic presuppositions*. 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 lies outside the discourses of law and theology, one that 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. For instance, a Bangla version of the allegorical *premākhyān* of *Madhumālatī,*[24] which is itself a new creation based on the Avadhī version by Mañjhan, serves as a vehicle of instruction for Shaṭṭārī Sufi adepts as well as more popular story-telling entertainment in the *maṯnavī* tradition. A *pālagān* performance of the Madhumālatī romance, on the other hand, would likely situate the hero Manohar in local political terms, connecting him to contemporary power brokers—usually at their expense—in the course of what would be a highly entertaining and potentially stinging critical (but deniable) social commentary aimed at a decidedly local audience.

Further, genre is not limited to the outward literary form, but can also be formulated diegetically within the tales themselves. We can extend this concept to include the structured modes of discourse that populate the narratives. For example, when the antagonist presents himself in the *kathā* of Mānik Pīr initially as a merchant, the mode of discourse is replete with its own set of rituals and structured venues that intersect with the expectations and protocols of domestic and foreign courts; but when the same character assumes his persona as an itinerant *pīr*, he abruptly shifts to a

24 Muhāmmād Kabīr, *Madhumālatī*, ed. Āhmād Śariph (Ḍhākā: Bāṅglā Ākaḍemi, 1366 bs [ca. 1959]).

completely different set of standards commensurate to that calling.[25] The choice of genre or the switching of diegetic frames of authority within the narratives, regardless of genre, signals authorial perspectives that reflect historical expectations of discursive negotiation. In other words, the choice of form conditions expectations and audiences as much as when the genre for delivery is chosen.

Intertextuality: Overt and covert

Every text, with its incipient vision of like-minded community, inevitably invokes precursor texts, both literally and figuratively, as one allows text to be more broadly understood as any prior source of recognizable authority. 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 camouflages the vagueness of detailed content, leaving the audience with the sense of knowing more than 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. In this, overt intertextuality also serves to obviate, or at least lessen, the need to justify claims through other 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. Rather, it works through a rhetoric of association that often hinges on analogy of form. For instance, in the opening section of the *Mānik pīrer juhur nāmā*, the hero's father Badar Pīr is married to the princess Dudbibī, but prior to the wedding, when the four *mullahs* from heaven determine the astrologically precise time for the event, they deploy the Ketāb Qur'ān, which allows them to ascertain Āllā's favor for the marriage.[26] Here the Qur'ān obviously stands for authority and the source of all knowledge, whereas the function of the *mullahs* is precisely what *brāhmaṇs* do with their Sanskrit astrological texts (*jyotiṣa śāstra*). Thus, the impression for the

25 Tony K. Stewart, "The Tales of Mānik Pīr: Protector of Cows in Bengal," in *Tales of God's Friends: Islamic Hagiography in Translation,* ed. John Renard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 312–332.

26 Jaidi or Jayaraddhi, *Mānik pīrer juhur nāmā*, in *Punthi paricay*, ed. Pāñcānan Maṇḍal (Śāntiniketan: Viśva Bhārati, 1958), 313.

audience is one of doing things correctly and according to prescription, no matter that the Qur'ān seldom enjoys such bibliomantic function.

There are also precursors that are not textual. For instance, a fictional character from one story may suddenly intrude into another, or a historical character may show up in a fictional episode, changing the narrative by their appearance. Both of these types of appearances (often depicted as, but not limited to, flashbacks) are labeled analepsis. The heroine Lālmon in the famous tale *Lālmoner kāhinī* of Kavi Ārif, for example, was married to one young prince named Husāin Shāh, invoking the historical figure and all that his enlightened reign stood for.[27] The name situates the text historically because it had to have been composed after that legendary kingship. It also signals what most Bangla speakers see as an accommodating cultural perspective, for Husāin Shāh (r. 1494–1519) proved a champion of Bangla literature by commissioning the translation of texts such as *Rāmāyaṇ* and *Mahābhārat* into Bangla.[28] Similarly, *pīrs* and *bibīs* encounter or even seek the assistance of various Hindu goddesses, such as Lakṣmī, Caṇḍī, or Śītalā. As a rhetorical strategy, direct or overt intertextuality includes texts, people, events, and social and political structures, each one lending an authority that resists question.

Finally, a significant amount of the discourse defining the world of these early modern narratives hinges on unstated invocations of precursors, constituting an *implied* or *covert intertextuality*. For example, in Ābdur Rahīm's *Gājīkālu o cāmpāvatī kaṇyār punthi*, the sleeping hero Gājī is carried into Cāmpā's bedroom by curious færies who want to see the beautiful young woman and handsome young man side-by-side, an act of mischief that results in their immediate private betrothal. This sets the stage for the rest of the plot, which is the quest for reunion after the færies returned Gājī to his own room.[29] That episode perfectly mirrors the love story of Manohar and Madhumālatī, which in turn mirrors the tale of Qamar al-Zāman in *Arabian Nights*, thereby instantly signaling an expectation of a type of action, a type of leading character, and so forth, accomplished only by the invocation of the scene and no other reference.[30] Less explicitly, for instance in the shaping of the *umma*, however loosely defined in these texts, there is an implicit *imitatio muhammadi* at work that runs as an undercurrent to

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

28 So powerful is this association that some historians, who confuse the nature of the text and its discourse, use this as evidence that Husāin Shāh's daughter began the worship of Satya Pīr, even though in the tale Lālmon is the wife of a young prince sharing Husāin Shāh's name.

29 Munsi Abdur Rahīm Sāheb, *Gājikālu o cāmpāvatī kanyār puthi* (Kalikātā: Nuruddin Āhmmad at Gaosiyā Lāibrerī, 2001), 18–19.

30 Richard F. Burton, trans., *A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments, Now Entitled the Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* (London: Kama Shastra Society, 1885–1886), vol. 3: 212–348, vol. 4: 1–29; cited in the introduction to Manjhan, *Madhumālatī*, xxxi–xxxii.

whatever concerns might emerge about proper conduct for *musalmāns*.[31] There are numerous examples of these implied precursors, and they often function well beyond the confines of the texts themselves. The point here is that the intertextualities situate any text, and in our immediate concern they situate the narratives of the *pīrs* and *bibīs* in such a way that they become part of a shared discourse among the authors and audiences, in spite of the autotelic nature of the narratives themselves. 'Shared,' however, does not automatically signal 'identical'; thus, through a comparison of differences one can chart the subtle shifts in attitude or simply different perspectives altogether.

Select Episodes from the *Bonbibī Jahurā nāmā*

To demonstrate briefly how these features might be useful for understanding the world of a particular text, I want to look at a short passage retold from the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* of Mohāmmad Khater, which was composed in the 1880s; direct translations of key phrases are in quotations.[32]

> Berāhim's wife Phulbibī was unable to conceive, so Berāhim went to Mecca where he humbly petitioned Āllā for children. Fatemā was with the Prophet (*nabi*) in heaven (*behest*) and fetched the Qur'ān from its throne; the Prophet checked what was written and saw that Phulbibī was destined to be barren, but that two children—one boy, one girl—would be born in Berāhim's house. At the command of Āllā, Berāhim was to marry Golālbibī, the daughter of the *phakir* Śāhā Jalil. "God then determined it was time for the great event of the birth. Āllā summoned Bonbibī and Śājaṅgali, both of whom who were residing in heaven, and issued this command: 'You will be born to a *bibī* named Golāl in the home of Berāhim . . ." And so they descended with the express mission of confronting Dakṣīṇ Rāy and chastising Dhonāi.

After the marriage and once Golāl had become pregnant, tensions with Phulbibī festered and flared to anger.[33]

> On a rash promise to his unhappy first wife, Berāhim took his pregnant second wife Golālbibī and abandoned her in the forest. Golālbibī's cry of distress generated sympathy among the wild animals who came to her aid, tending her as she gave birth to twins: a girl first and then a boy. Golālbibī felt incapable of raising both,

31 This is, of course, the impulse behind the *aḥādīth* traditions.
32 Munśī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* (Kalikātā: Nuruddīn Āhmmad at Gaosiyā Lāibrerī, 1401 bs [ca. 1994]), 1–5. There are only minor variations in the many print editions of this text.
33 Mohāmmad Khater, *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā*, 11–19.

so after consideration, she abandoned the girl. The wild animals—tigers, deer, and others—took it upon themselves to raise this little girl, and so she grew into her rôle as Bonbibī, Mistress of the Forest. After some years, Bonbibī managed to catch up with her brother, Śājaṅgali, and together they traveled to Medinā where they became the students or *murid*s of one of the descendants of Hāsen.[34] After studying, they visited the grave of Fātemā to ask her blessings where a disembodied voice directed them to go to the land of the eighteen tides or the Sunderbans. They then visited the tomb of the Prophet (*nabi*) where they praised him as "the *guru* of all mendicants (*phakir*s)" and requested his imprimatur in their quest to establish the *khalifā* in that swampy place. His sanction came in the form of special hats, which they accepted; they made their obeisances, and left.

When they reached the edge of the swamplands, they were warned of a powerful landlord named Dakṣīṇ Rāy who controlled the fabulous wealth of the place: timber, honey, wax, and salt. When they entered the region and Śājaṅgali paused to give the call to prayer, the sound rolled across those low-lying islands like thunder. Dakṣīṇ Rāy was intimidated by the power of this call, so he quickly ordered his second, Sanātan, to investigate. He had immediately realized it was not the voice of his friend Baḍakhān Gājī, with whom he made peace after a lengthy battle. Sanātan reported back: he had espied a young man and a young woman, both dressed in black robes 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 was furious that they had not first approached him for permission to enter, so he summoned his army of shape-shifting ghouls (*bhūts*) and hungry ghosts (*prets*) and prepared to show them who was in control. Rāy's mother, Nārāyaṇī intervened and advised him not to fight a woman because even should he win, there would be no victory, but should he lose, the humiliation would be permanent. Rāy conceded and generously allowed his mother to fight as his proxy: let a woman fight a woman.

Nārāyaṇī gathered her army: "ghouls (*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

34 Based on its explicit appearance in other texts, the name Hāsen is most likely a variant of Hāshim, Muhāmmd's great grandfather; see for instance Sāyeb Munsī Ābdul Ohāb, *Gāji kālu o cāmpavatī kanyār punthi* (Kalikātā: Munsī Ābdul Hāmād Khān. Reprint: Kalikātā: Śrīmahāmmad Rabiullā at Hāmidīyā Press, Es Rahmān eṇḍ Sans printer, 1315 bs [ca. 1908]), p. 1.

> 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." Her hordes advanced on Bonbibī and Śājaṅgali from all sides.
>
> The twins were worried, but the elder sister Bonbibī reassured her brother that he need only call on Āllā for protection. He again belted out the call to prayer which rattled the skittish legions, causing them to scatter in all directions. Bonbibī's own loud roar (*huṃkār*) paralyzed the rest of the demonic masses and she rained destruction down upon them. Nārāyaṇī rallied and let fly her arrows, but Bonbibī always saw them coming, so with the *kalimā* wet on her lips, those arrows passed through her body as if she were made of mere water. Nārāyaṇī unleashed her most fearsome weapons: the *ṣaṭcakra*, the *gadācakra*, and finally the ultimate *dharmmacakra*. They roared through the air like angry missiles but again Bonbibī tasted the *kalimā*, planted her staff, and the fiery weapons fizzled out. Nārāyaṇī then struck hard at Bonbibī, but she remained untouched as the gleaming sword turned into harmless flowers by the grace of Fatemā. Bonbibī and Nārāyaṇī proceeded in hand-to-hand combat for the rest of the day, neither one getting the upper hand, until Bonbibī felt herself giving way. She petitioned Khodā for help from heaven and through an intermediary he granted her the additional power (*baraka*) she needed. Bonbibī mounted and then sat on the chest of Nārāyaṇī, squeezing from her the very breath of life until she capitulated; then Bonbibī relented. Being the mother of mercy, Bonbibī graciously accepted Nārāyaṇī as her vassal, but agreed to share the rule of the land . . .

The next episode of the story follows the pitiful and helpless child Dukhe who, having been made over to Dakṣīṇ Rāy by his uncle Dhonāi, called on Bonbibī to intervene and protect him.[35]

> . . . Śājaṅgali was about to battle Dakṣīṇ Rāy and "dispatch him to the realm of Yama" when Baḍakhān Gājī himself intervened and cooled him down. Śājaṅgali could not understand how a god-fearing *gājī* warrior could be friends with a demon (*rākṣas*) like Dakṣīṇ Rāy, sufficient to mediate on his behalf. As they faced off, Bonbibī's own summons rang insistently in their ears, so the three of them went before her with hands pressed together in supplication. She wanted to know just how it was that this Baḍakhān Gājī was the friend of Dakṣīṇ Rāy. Gājī explained that he was the son of Śāhā Sekandār and that he had previously defeated Dakṣīṇ Rāy; as a

35 Mohāmmad Khater, *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā*, 26–27.

result he allowed Rāy to share power in the region. Then Baḍakhān reminded Bonbibī that Dakṣīṇ Rāy was her *de facto* son, because she had defeated his mother Nārāyaṇī in battle, and then offered her protection and grace in sharing the land. That made Nārāyaṇī's offspring her own. Bonbibī acknowledged the truth of it and so a second rapprochement was achieved.

Interpreting the Parameters

Although these are but three small snippets from a considerably larger text, they are sufficient to illustrate the defining parameters of the discursive arena in which the fictional tale of the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* operates. The two biggest, genre and language, we have already discussed, but other pragmatic presuppositions can be seen at work in the ways the cosmos is traversed and survived.

The cosmos imagined in this text treats the heavens and their multitudes of celestial inhabitants much as the order of a purāṇic structure. Heaven or *behest* is a clearly defined space 'up there' where Āllā holds court with Mohāmmad and Fatemā and various assistants, which is populated by the pious and where the Qur'ān itself sits on its throne. The reference to the Qur'ān is an overt intertextual claim, but its use to divine the future is roughly analogous to the rôle of the Bengali god of fate, Bidhāta, who writes the destiny for each newborn. Āllā's ordering Bonbibī and Śājaṅgali to an earthly birth in order to combat the unholy actions of Dakṣīṇ Rāy and then Dhonāi is reminiscent of the purāṇic-style *avatār* descents, suggesting a parallel mechanism for divine intervention. The casting out of Golālbibī while pregnant with twins, in the manner of Sītā in the *Rāmāyaṇ* (a covert intertextual reference), anticipates some kind of special intervention, although the decision to abandon the female twin in favor of the male signals a commonly held Bengali cultural assumption common to both *musalmāni* and *hinduyāni*.

Access to Āllā and his power comes in several distinct forms: by meditating on him while uttering the *kalimā* (used in a way equivalent to a yogic *mantra*), or, following a more recognizable *musalmāni* approach, by praying at his tomb. Those mechanisms, however, are replicated among other holders of power in clear hierarchical terms. One need only call on the righteous individuals immediately above, Berāhim petitioned Āllā directly, as Bonbibī advised Śājaṅgali to do when he was in need; however, the child Dukhe was instructed not to call on Āllā, but to call on Bonbibī for help. In all cases, there is an assumption of supplication (servant to master) and kinship (junior to senior) as the model for devotion: to seek the protection of a higher power is to assume subservience with respect to the holder of power, and with that attitude a very real social relationship is established that guarantees the desired protection. Similarly, this reflects the relationship of disciple (*murīd*) to teacher (*murshid*), which in turn

depends on structural symmetries of power—indeed, much of the action is to determine who is above and who below—as can be seen in the conflict between Nārāyaṇī and Bonbibī, or in the previously attested conflict between Dakṣīṇ Rāy and Baḍakhān Gājī, or when Bonbibī and Śājaṅgali approach Mohāmmad as the *guru* of all *phakir*s. The issue in these (and in other cases in the larger text) do not hinge on establishing the rightness of religion *per se*, but rather in fixing the relative powers available to different types of practitioners. In the end, the cosmology that emerges as most encompassing features Āllā as the sole God and every other figure below him, with gods and *yogīs* and *pīrs* and *bibīs* operating with similar, relative forms of power.

Other features of the imagined cosmos include a number of more or less malevolent figures common to *hinduyāni* classifications—and here we see the *musalmāni* appropriation of a *hinduyāni* cosmos. Ghouls or *bhūts* are individuals who at death are unsatisfied and do not transmigrate, and so come back to torment the living. *Prets* are karmically pernicious, hungry ghosts who are greedy to the point of fetishizing particularly vile and abominable appetites, in pursuit of which they harass the living. And finally, there are *yoginīs* or witches, who are literally women who practice *yoga*, but because they are women the exercise of the powers obtained always tend to nefarious ends. In the larger picture, *bhūts*, *prets*, and *yoginīs* will all be ranked lower than morally upright humans, and in this text they constitute the followers of Dakṣīṇ Rāy and Nārāyaṇī. In previous tales, the armies of Dakṣīṇ Rāy and Baḍakhān Gājī were composed of crocodiles and tigers respectively, though it should be noted that later in the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā*, Dakṣīṇ Rāy does deploy his crocodile minions, and in some editions even sharks, in defense of his honey and wax. Śājaṅgali easily dispatched them while promising to send Dakṣīṇ Rāy to the realm of Yama, the land of the dead, another explicitly *hinduyāni* cosmological construct with associations of hell. When challenging the authority of the pious Śājaṅgali, both Dakṣīṇ Rāy and his mother will be consigned to their own special hell (Yama's abode) that is set aside within the larger *musalmāni* cosmology. But the change in the makeup of the armies suggests that the characters Dakṣīṇ Rāy and Nārāyaṇī are morally reprehensible, a not so subtle hint that they are no longer *hinduyāni*, but in the eyes of the author more Hindu in the polarizing attitudes of the times.

That the adventures of Dakṣīṇ Rāy and Baḍakhān Gājī appear in prior texts makes them analeptic characters, both of which serve as overt intertextual references. The earliest extant version of this story is the *Rāy maṅgal* of Kṛṣṇarām, which dates to the late decades of the seventeenth century.[36] The next extant *Rāymaṅgal* is by Haridev, but in that text Rāy does not battle Gājī, rather he greets him as brother because they are both favored and

36 Kṛṣṇarām Dās, *Rāymaṅgal* in *Kavi kṛṣṇarām dāser granthāvalī*, ed. Satyanārāyaṇ Bhaṭṭācāryya (Kalikātā: Kalikātā Viśvavidyālay, 1958), 165–248.

appointed by God.[37] In Kṛṣṇarām's version, the conflict between Baḍakhān Gājī and Dakṣīṇ Rāy is the result of an insult. A merchant on a trading voyage performed a *pūjā* worship to a mound in the image of Dakṣīṇ Rāy at a shrine along the route, where Rāy was styled a demigod born of the legendary King Prabhakar and wife Līlāvatī, daughter of Dharmaketu, and now controller of much of the land and resources of the region.[38] The unwitting trader failed to pay any, much less commensurate, respect to Baḍakhān Gājī, a prominent warrior saint who lived in the forest with his band of tigers. Infuriated by the insult, Gājī destroyed the image and then attacked Dakṣīṇ Rāy. As they engaged, the minions of both of their tiger armies either deserted, were knocked unconscious, or died until only the two of them—Dakṣiṇ Rāy and Baḍakhān Gāji—were left standing. In the end, the protagonists slew one another with each subsequently revived by God, who brokered a peace. Significantly, God or Īśvar takes the form of Satya Pīr, his physical body appearing half white and half black, and he carried a copy of the Korān in one hand and the Bhāgavata Purāṇa in the other. He granted dominion over the Sunderban to Rāy from a fixed base in the land of the eighteen tides, while Baḍakhān Gājī remained itinerant, though any judgement he made or that was made in his name was recognized with full legal authority and equal or complementary to Rāy's own rule. In that text, Dakṣīṇ Rāy is a man who rode a horse, though he occasionally mounted a tiger, but in the Bonbibī tale—as the son of Daṇḍabakṣan Muni and Nārāyaṇī, altogether different parentage from the previous texts—he resorted to the odious side of his considerable yogic powers as a shape-shifter himself, and periodically assumed the form of a tiger to terrorize people and demand his tribute in human sacrifice. That transformation again points to the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* revalorizing the powerful landlord into a more menacing religious enemy; but this revalorization runs counter to the explicit statement in both Kṛṣṇarām's and Haridev's respective *Rāymaṅgals* wherein both Dakṣīṇ Rāy and Baḍakhān Gājī were favored by God, hints of which again surface in the story of Dukhe in the Bonbibī text but remain ambiguous in the Bonbibī story itself as Dakṣīṇ Rāy and Dukhe—both non-*musalmāni* characters—submit and accept her protection. Even though each story stands alone (its autotelic nature), the explicit references to other figures inevitably create fictional histories of characters, weaving a considerably more complex narrative, and one that, unsurprisingly, often yields contradictions that seem to mirror some of the ambiguities of everyday life.

In the story of Dukhe, Baḍakhān Gājī introduces himself as the son of Śāhā Sekandār, another overt intertextual reference in the form of analepsis, this time with a possible historical figure; this same reference is found

37 Haridev, *Rāymaṅgal* in *Haridever racanāvalī: rāymaṅgal o śitalāmaṅgal*, ed. Pañcānan Maṇḍal, Sāhitya Prakāśikā 4 (Śāntiniketan: Viśvabharatī, 1367 bs [ca. 1960]), 1–172.

38 Kṛṣṇarām Dās, *Rāy maṅgal*, 166–167.

in the earlier text of *Gājīkālu o cāmpāvatī kaṇyār puthi*.[39] The obvious historical referent is Śāhā Sekandār, second in the line of the Ilyās Shāhi dynasty who ruled 1358–90 CE. Some historians have succumbed to the temptation to read the texts of both the *Rāymaṅgal* of Kṛṣṇarām and the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* of Mohāmmad Khater as testament of some factual connection, surmising that these tales tell of actual historical conflicts that occurred in the misty past. But because of the nature of the tales as fictions, we can only evaluate the effect of this allusion to a historical figure. Because the full name is never given, we must assume that the figure of Śāhā Sekandār is as fictional as every other character in the tale. But the invocation provides a perspective for understanding the outcomes of both fictional texts, for the historical Sekandār, like his father Ilyās, in battle with the Tughluq rulers of Delhi, was reputed to have taken refuge in the islands of southern Bengal, a strategic retreat that resulted in stalemate for both. The 'history' of the father repeats itself in the son as Dakṣīṇ Rāy brokers a peace with Baḍakhān and again as Nārāyaṇī and Dakṣīṇ Rāy with Bonbibī. Remembering the autotelic nature of the narrative, the function of this reference is what is important, and that reference points to rapprochement as a solution to conflict.

Finally, the overt references to both Mohāmmad and Fatemā provide another set of analeptic figures who invoke the traditions of the Shi'ah, but seem also to provide a parodic and indirect commentary on tomb worship. Fatemā and Mohāmmad are both very much alive and active in heaven with their powers accessible through their tombs. The worship at the tomb is not effected until both twins have achieved their own credentials as spiritual masters by studying with a descendant in the line of Āli—the obvious Shi'ah connection again as overt intertextual reference—that gives them the right to petition Fatemā at her grave. There is a fairly common notion that the *dargā* or tomb of the saint is the real court of God,[40] and here Fatemā's tomb acts as a direct pipeline to that realm, to divine intervention signaled by the disembodied voice that gave them instruction. That grace of Fatemā later aids Bonbibī by protecting her from Nārāyaṇī's sword, giving her the power to evade the terrible weapons hurled by Nārāyaṇī—notably, each of those *cakras* or discs invokes the weapons deployed by the warriors in the Bangla retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇ* and *Mahābhārat* (more covert intertextual references). Fatemā's tomb lies in the same compound as that of Mohāmmad. Once again, the connection to God in his heavenly court (*behest*) is immediate and direct, and the twins (now themselves *murshids*) can approach Mohāmmad directly as the *guru* of all *phakir*s, the real heavyweight (as the term *guru* means) among teachers—that is, the teachers' teacher, whose actions inspire the *imitatio muhammadi*. Confirmation

39 Abdur Rahīm, *Gājikālu o cāmpāvatī kanyār puthi*, 1 and passim.

40 See Anand Taneja, "Saintly Visions: Other Histories and History's Others in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 49, no. 4 (December 2012): 557–590.

of their status comes through the presentation of special hats (in the text, no human agency is indicated), which serve as the physical mantel of authority, signaling they are ready for their missions. There are, of course, no details about how the twins conducted their worship, or if they simply prayed with intent. Once established, this connection seems to be available to the twins simply by praying or meditating, providing immediate access to God's *baraka* or power. Significantly, no other tomb worship was mentioned. In the historical context of the 1880s, when tomb worship was a very hot topic, one has to wonder if the characters' actions seem to hint at some middle position on the availability of power through tombs, but not just any *phakir's*.

In this brief exercise, we can see that the four parameters that defined the discursive arena of the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* help us to situate the text in its historical place and with its literary and religious interlocutors. Because the text operates through images and allusions rather than explicit theology, it can only hint at the matters in question, such as protection from the vagaries of the swamps and wetlands, and who controls the wealth and access to natural resources.[41] Yet in this extremely truncated exercise, we can see potentially significant shifts in the way the author parodies tensions, how he traffics in stereotypes rather than doctrine, and how he can imagine a *musalmāni* cosmology expanding to accommodate and appropriate a more generalized Bengali cosmos. To extend the analysis to multiple tales—invited by the multiple intertextualities—would not only help us to understand indirectly the changing perspectives of their creators, but also to map the issues that occupied their imagination and to see where prevailing notions of the world were stretched into some new shape.

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41 The work of Annu Jalais has well documented this in contemporary culture; see Annu Jalais, *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics, and Environment in the Sunderbans* (London: Routledge, 2010).

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