

Introduction

BENGALI TALES FROM THE LAND OF THE EIGHTEEN TIDES

What would you do if that white fly buzzing around your head landed on the wall and started giving you marriage advice? Or what could possibly be your response if the mendicant Sufi you often see at prayers should in the blink of an eye shape-shift into a giant ogre, enormous fangs bulging from a bloody maw? These events, and many more like them are not uncommon in the stories (*kathās*) of miracle-working Sufi saints (*pīrs*) that have circulated in the Bangla-speaking world for most of the past millennium. The stories are romances filled with wondrous marvels, where tigers talk, rocks float and waters part, and færies carry a sleeping Sufi holy man into the bedroom of a Hindu princess with whom the god of fate, Bidhātā, has ordained his marriage. Each of the five stories in this anthology features unlikely heroes and heroines, intrepid oceangoing traders, fickle gods and goddesses, prophets and holy men, and the royal whimsy of kings and wealthy landowning zamindars. The protagonists encounter predicaments faced by every human being, but the presence of marvels beyond the ordinary signals creative solutions on a heroic scale. Characters revel in the skillful navigation of the quirks of everyday life, adroitly maneuvering through the obligations of pressing kinship, juggling the tensions of conflicting allegiances, and cleverly satisfying competing social and religious demands, which are inevitably political. While the

protagonists, both male and female, are nominally religious, Sufi saints, the texts are in no way sectarian statements or theology. They are literature, adventure stories of survival that underscore the need for people of all social and religious ranks to work together in hostile environments. They explore ways to overcome the physical challenges of living in the Sundarban mangrove swamps of southern Bengal, which both abound in natural resources and teem with myriad tigers, crocodiles, and dread diseases; and to ameliorate the occasional hostilities born of social differences of caste and economic class.

In addition to their timeless marvels, familiar from all great story-telling traditions, these tales have a historically conditioned cultural import for South Asia. While they entertain with their convoluted plots—very much in the vein of *A Thousand and One Nights*, or when the animals take center stage, as we find in the parables of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*—they subtly introduce an Islamic perspective into a Bengali world that was initially in this early modern period traditionally Indic. Whether read or sung, or staged in often raucous theatrical productions still today, they do not intone theological propositions, apart from the simple injunction to worship God, who is the God of all. They never propose anything resembling an imposition of *sharī‘ah* law or any other legislative code than to conduct oneself with dignity and respect for others. In their inviting tone, they translate a generic Islamic history and cosmology so that it comes to seem natural to a Bengali imagination. It is readily intuitive that the heaven fashioned by the Hindu god Kṛṣṇa, widely recognized as *vaikuṇṭha*, is understood to mean *bihisht*, the Islamic paradise found in Persian poetry, or that the *masjid* (mosque) and *mandir* (temple) are somehow functionally equivalent, but not fungible.¹ But contra the all-too-common narrative that today charts Islam’s entry into Bengal as a series of military and political events—although, make no mistake, military politics were involved—the long-term transformation of the Bangla-speaking world into a Muslim-majority society

1. For the dynamics of this translation process, see Tony K. Stewart, “In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter through Translation Theory,” *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2001): 261–88 anthologized in *India’s Islamic Traditions: 711–1750*, edited by Richard M. Eaton, 363–92 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003); and in *Figuring Religions: Comparing Ideas, Images, and Activities*, edited by Subha Pathak, 229–62 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013).

was more subtle. These tales demonstrate how wondrous stories undertook the work of adding a natural Islamic substrate to local culture. Of equal import, these romances performed a cultural work that ran in the opposite direction, gently writing Bengal into the larger realms of Islamic literature, finding a place for it in the vast early modern Islamic world that Shahab Ahmed calls the “Balkans to Bengal” complex.²

The ethical issue that binds all of the narratives together is how to balance living honorably and morally in a world fraught with checkered allegiances, while somehow not allowing its vagaries to blind one to a larger reality—that is, how to be in it without being of it. It is a restless, often frustrating search to achieve the impossible, like finding a needle at the bottom of the sea, a feat that one of the stories attests could only be performed by the ageless and perfected ideal Sufi al-Khiḍr (in these stories, Khoyāj Khijir) to help the hero Gāji Pīr survive the horrible ordeals inflicted on him by his disgruntled father. The search for love and acceptance lies at the heart of those odysseys, but the elastic relationship between divine love and its worldly forms generates a constant, shifting tension. These concerns lie at the forefront in the north Indian allegorical romances created by Sufi authors, and although these Bangla tales adopt some of the form and spirit of those allegories, they eschew their analytical formality of aesthetics to explore in more ordinary terms how the indigenous Bengali construction of pure love (*prem*) equated to the Islamic world’s equivalent (*‘ishq*). They reimagine, over and over again, the higher reaches of the sublime as fundamental to everyday Bengali life. To experience such love, whether in human terms or divine, was to embrace a larger moral universe whose quirks were routinely, but usually indirectly, explored in the situation creativity demonstrated by the stories’ characters. They capture real-life situations their audiences recognize, thrown into sharp relief by the fantastic, which is the reason for much of the tales’ appeal and makes them classics of Bangla literature.

The tales’ heroes and heroines take their places beside, indeed, interact with, the gods and goddesses of Bengali Hindu mythology. Blurring the distinctions between heroic romance and mythology, they appropriate those myths. Dating from the early fifteenth century,

2. Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

the first of these extraordinary Bengali Sufis to emerge was the holy man Satya Pīr. In his narrative beginnings, he was understood to be a composite form of the popular *hinduyāni* deity Nārāyaṇ fused either with the *musalmāni* God, Khodā, or Allāh (Āllā, as it is spelled in Bangla), or with the Prophet Muhāmmad. He always appears in the tattered mantle of the itinerant Sufi mendicant, but with the social markers of both a *brāhmaṇ* priest and various ascetic practitioners. As Kṛṣṇahari Dās describes him:³

He wears the dress of a *phakir*,
 the hair on his head smeared the color of mud,
 the Prophet's patched scarf cinched at his neck.
 His lotus body shimmers brilliantly,
 four times more effulgent than a full moon
 perched above dark clouds thick with rain.
 The sacred thread drapes his shoulder,
 a chain belt hangs at his waist,
 in his hands trembles the staff of one's aspirations.
 A short string of anklets jingle
 in time with his dagger's clink
 to each clopping step of his wooden sandals.

Kṛṣṇahari Dās, *Baḍa satya pīr o sandhyāvatī kanyār punthi*, 214

This sartorial image signals a new religious orientation. As all of his tales attest, to worship Satya Pīr was to alleviate one of the most pressing issues of this early modern society: penury. The tales make clear that poverty makes it virtually impossible to lead an ethically sound life, and such a life is made even harder in an environment of conflict. Satya Pīr encourages people to recognize that all humans share in this existential predicament, and that sharing can be the foundation of a genuine amity and the basis for good government.⁴ This impulse

3. Kṛṣṇahari Dās, *Baḍa satya pīr o sandhyāvatī kanyār punthi* (Kalikātā: Nurūddin Āhmād at Gāosiya Lāibreri, n.d.). There is an earlier translation found in Tony K. Stewart, "Alternate Structures of Authority: Satya Pīr on the Frontiers of Bengal," in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, edited by David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000), 25.

4. On Satya Pīr's mission, see Stewart, "Alternate Structures of Authority," passim, and Tony K. Stewart, *Witness to Marvels: Sufism and Literary Imagination* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), ch. 6.

embodies the concept of a properly settled, well-functioning community, described as *ābādī*, that is, “cultivated.” Today, many might regard the combination of Hindu and Muslim as unthinkable, but that stark binary is largely a product of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when religious affiliations had become political identities based on exclusion. In these early modern stories, orientations are better understood as markers of difference that are malleable and porous. Religion is more a matter of what one does than of what one believes; it is enacted, gender is enacted, social standing is enacted, all driven by the push for a universal morality and a well-fashioned society.

The heroes and heroines of these tales are indigenous to Bengal, and they cross-populate from one story to another in a closed set, hence the choice to translate them together. Although several of the characters and events repeat, the tales do not constitute a cycle. Literary historians have somewhat mistakenly characterized them as fairy tales or folktales, but those labels impose expectations on the reader that imply in the South Asian context that the tales lack literary merit. While they are certainly akin to those genres in spirit, the stories involve a kind of timelessness, taking place in an indeterminate age, long before the present, though not without occasional allusions to historical events. That timelessness draws in readers without restriction. Yet unlike most fairy and folktales which tend to be as non-specific in their geographic locales as in their temporality, the action in these stories tends to take place largely in, or while passing through, a very real part of the landscape of the Bangla-speaking world, the Sundarbans, the southern mangrove swamps of the *Āṭhārobhātī*, the “low-lying lands of the eighteen tides,” as the territory is locally known. Place-names that we do not recognize today sometimes occur in them, but the region’s rivers are always precisely identified, its cities and ports, mosques and temples, are precisely situated, and the vagaries of its intense climate, tides and currents, and oppressive heat ring true. And when a trader’s adventure carries his ship further south, down the east coast of India and back again, the authors extend their reach, accurately depicting significant landmarks and pilgrimage sites, such as the temple of Jagannāth in the city of Nilācal (Puri) in Odisha, while locating their stories in the ancient legendary landscapes of past epics, including the Isle of Lankā (generally assumed to be modern Sri

Lanka), as depicted in the *Rāmāyaṇ*. But most of these tales take place in the wild jungly islands of the Sundarbans.

Defined by the braided distributaries of two of the largest rivers in the world, the Gāṅgā and Brahmāputra, the Sundarbans form the planet's largest river delta. Many of the stretches and diversions of Gāṅgā and Brahmāputra have different local names—notably, the Bhāgīrathī, or Padmā, and the Jamunā, which combine to form the Meghnā.⁵ The Royal Bengal tigers of the Āṭhārobhāṭī are legendary, magnificent beasts, whose exploits under the tutelage of Sufi masters loom large in a number of these narratives. The region is, of course, also home to several species of crocodiles—the mugger, the giant salt-water, and the ghariyal, whose tapered snout ends in a distinctive cartilaginous boss—denizens of a different sort, who often provide ready opponents to face off against the tigers, but can also aid and abet the *phakir* or *bibī*, once enlisted in their cause. And of course there are different species of cobras, most commonly king and speckled cobras, as well as a variety of kraits and vipers, and non-venomous keelbacks and pythons, to name only a few of the better-known snakes, though in these stories they tend to play only bit parts. The Sundarbans are densely rich in natural resources. The mix of fresh and brackish waters of the mangroves have made the region a prime source of hearty timber—the primary tree locally called *sundari*⁶—but also of honey and wax collection, salt extraction, and, most recently, a locus of shrimp farming, accelerating the destruction of the fragile environment, a natural buffer between the powerful typhoons blowing in from the Bay of Bengal and the alluvial floodplains that constitute most of Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal. Unsurprisingly, the natural riches of the mangrove biome attract humans, who intrude in these tales on the habitats of tigers, serpents, and crocodiles.

5. The waterways of the delta are constantly migrating, carving new straits and passages to the Indian Ocean, piling up silt to create new islands, engulfing others, sometimes shifting riverbeds scores of miles. The places named in these stories are specific and often consistent from one story to the next, but it is impossible to derive a map of any accuracy from them; many of the river settlements the stories name that can be found today are landlocked, miles from the rivers that once fed them.

6. The most common is the species *H. fomes* of the genus *Heritiera* in the Malvaceae family, but conservationists report that nearly half of the world's species of mangrove trees can be found there.

Just as they do in real life, humans and beasts inevitably threaten one another in the stories, and negotiating those encounters plays a major role in them. Invariably, it involves the mediation of a Sufi master, who preaches a balance both among the peoples of the Sundarbans and between them and the delta's nonhuman fauna.

Completed in 1686 ce, the second oldest tale in this anthology, Kṛṣṇarām's *Rāy mangal*—the auspicious narrative of Dakṣiṇ Rāy, Lord of the South⁷—perhaps first sounded the alarm about the fragility of the Sundarbans' environment, what with too-greedy humans' laying waste to the mangrove swamps' rich resources. God Himself had delivered a dire warning about the future of the land, Kṛṣṇarām writes. After a short opening tale involving woodcutters, the bulk of the first half of his story has two protagonists, who become mutual antagonists—the Sufi warrior saint Baḍa Khān Gāji and Dakṣiṇ Rāy, a demi-god in the lineage of the Hindu god Śiv. Fighting over issues of public humiliation, of pride and prestige—but notably not of religion, as we understand it today—they slay one another in battle, which would seem to put an end to the quarrel. In the magical manner of romances everywhere, however, Baḍa Khān springs back to life. He sheds his old body and assumes a new one, a special boon from the Prophet Muḥammad. It takes God to intervene and resuscitate his opponent, Dakṣiṇ Rāy. After both are revived, they stand humbly before the divine presence, chastened by his scathing indictment of their petty hostility, a not-so-subtle message about the hollowness of apparent differences in social standing and religious affiliation. The two enemies become brothers, an eventuality that was reexamined as the story was told and replayed over the next several centuries, yet always ending in a delicate balance between them.

Significantly, Kṛṣṇarām tells us that God chose to appear before them as Satya Pīr, whose popularity was already well attested. After chastising his two recalcitrant devotees for their small-minded antagonism, Satya Pīr turns his attention to the hecatombs of tigers they have slain, whose corpses litter the field around him. First, he revives the lot of them through the power of his glance, then he dramatically pauses to warn the top tiger, Khān Dāudā, of the danger of humans,

7. Kavi Kṛṣṇarām Dās, "Rāymangal," in *Kavi kṛṣṇarām dāser granthāvalī*, edited by Satyanārāyaṇ Bhaṭṭācārya (Kalikātā: Calcutta University, 1958), 165–248.

the hazards of tangling with the aboriginals who populate the region, and the need to be wary of any other people who might venture into the Sundarbans:

The vile savages of these wilds are unpredictable animals. Should you encounter them, they will break your necks, and for this reason you should avoid them. Should you hunt them to eat, you should be no less wary than when you meet ordinary human beings. After twelve years or so, the cubs in your streak may not always find the hunting successful.

Kṛṣṇarām Dās, *Rāy maṅgal*, vv. 424–25

Setting aside for the moment the author's characterization of the indigenous inhabitants of the region—the so-called aboriginals, *ādibāsīs*, here called *bāḍ*—as somehow subhuman and fit for tigers' eating, his warning is prescient: the tigers' cubs may starve because of human harvesting of the Sundarbans' flora and fauna at an alarming rate. The message could hardly be clearer: animals and humans must get along, find a balance, just as aboriginal and exploiter must, just as *hinduyāni* and *musalmāni* peoples must. That seemingly simple refrain ripples through all the tales. Balance is engineered and maintained only through the intervention of the Sufi *pīr*, a holy mendicant who repeatedly orchestrates an alliance between the two sets of apex predators—kings, their merchants, and aboriginals, on the human side, and tigers, representing the animal half of the equation. Yet the tales' heroes tend to advocate for and defend those caught in the middle: farmers, woodcutters, honey collectors, salt workers, and fishermen, those most intimately bound to the land and most familiar with its dangers.

An old Bangla saw stresses the unremitting danger lurking in the landscape—*ḍāṅgāy bāgh*, *jale kumir* (“tiger on dry land, crocodile in the water”). Though the cobra on occasion interlopes into the equation, the tiger would seem to have been the most feared of the many zoological threats, hence the increasing pressure on its dwindling populations as clashes with humans increased. The already fearsome tiger was widely believed to possess a shape-shifting power in addition to its terrifying stealth, and in these tales the tigers seem to stand in for all forms of existential precariousness, dangers both seen and unseen. These majestic creatures are, moreover, often mocked in the stories, with their individual idiosyncrasies presented in comic relief, perhaps a way of somewhat nervously coping with their extreme danger. The

litany of complaints that one hears from the tigers once they are persuaded to vent their frustrations to the *pīr* is like a mirror held up to the human inhabitants of the islands, who recognize in them reflections of their own fix tions on their appetites—territorial, culinary, and sexual—as well as their woes—broken teeth, arthritis, and a slower gait as they grow older. The message seems to be twofold: the frustrations and ailments that afflict people generate a knowing response, but Kṛṣṇarām makes clear to the reader that animals suffer too, like humans.

Diseases such as smallpox and cholera, were endemic to the region, so driven by the desire to protect themselves, Bengalis have historically sought a way of peacefully co-existing by anthropomorphizing those threats. Centuries before Kṛṣṇarām composed his *Rāy mangal*, Manasā was recognized as the goddess of all serpents, her favorite being the cobra. A little later, the goddess Śitalā was understood to have extended her domain to the control of smallpox and other diseases of the skin, ranging from cowpox and measles to warts and wens. Kṛṣṇarām also composed a *mangal kāvya* depicting Śitalā's exploits along with her henchman, Jvar or Jvarāsūr, the fever demon, which suggests that in the eyes of many, these pestilential threats were very much all of a piece. A little later, Śitalā acquired a cousin-sister, Olābibī, also known as Olādevī or Olāicaṇḍī, who was soon recognized as the *musalmāni* matron and *hinduyāni* goddess of cholera and, by extension, of water-borne ailments such as hepatitis and dysentery. Leprosy and elephantiasis make cameo appearances in these tales, but they fall to deities less central to the narratives. To tame the most towering threat of all, the tigers, tales stretching over several centuries tell how people turned to the extraordinary powers of the trio of Dakṣiṇ Rāy, Baḍa Khān Gāji, and Bonibibī, who gradually come to team together. Their stories are instructive for their listeners, few of whom would have entered the mangrove forests without invoking their powers of protection.⁸

8. Among the several ethnographic portrayals in English, with a focus on the strategies utilizing Bonibibi, see Annu Jalais, *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans* (London: Routledge, 2010); in Bangla, see for a nearly comprehensive survey of all the region's prominent gods and goddesses, *pīrs* and *bibīs*, and their tales in popular performance, Debabrata Naskar, *Cabbiṣpargaṇār laukik debdebī: Pālāgān o lok saṃskṛti jijñāsā* (Kalakātā: De'j Pābiliṣiṃ, 1406 bs [ca. 1999]).

These allied *hinduyāni* deities and *musalmāni* miracle-working saints are still individually and collectively honored and worshipped by the inhabitants of the Sundarbans and other parts of Bengal, Odisha, and Jharkhand today, without regard to sectarian distinctions—just as Satya Pir argues they should. Over the past few centuries, the local communities that call the Sundarbans home have pragmatically turned to whatever works to protect them. Just how this current state of inter- and intra-sectarian cooperation and collaboration eventually came about is part of the cultural work of the stories in this anthology; it is a celebration made possible by the rejection of sectarian exclusion and the promotion of common kinship ties. Differences among communities are recognized, but given the precariousness of life in the littoral, antagonisms weaken the population as a whole and cannot be tolerated. That their protagonists are mainly Sufi *pīrs* and *bibīs*, holy men and women of extraordinary power, makes the tales nominally religious, but the religious perspectives, both *musalmāni* and *hinduyāni*, tend to be generic in tone, projecting only simulacra of sectarian specifics. Save in the broadest strokes, theological these tales most definitely are not. What they are first and foremost is narrative literature about the necessity of having a helping hand to survive in a hostile environment, whether the trader's precarious oceangoing voyages to lands unknown, the plundering of the wilds of the jungle, or simply the unpredictability of encountering powerful individuals adamant about the importance of their different social and religious backgrounds. One should not expect lectures or overt didacticism from any of these authors, apart from an occasional aside or a framing dedicatory passage.

Miraculous happenings are not the exclusive province of these fictional romances, however, and it is important to distinguish them from similar stories found in the historical record in the Bangla-speaking world that depict the marvelous exploits of Sufis. Take, for example, the well-documented life of the warrior-saint Ismā'il Gājī, who flourished in the reign of Ruknuddin Bārbak Shāh (r. 1459–1474 ce) and was martyred in battle with the Rājā of Mandāran in northern Odisha. Eyewitness and later accounts report that Ismā'il's decapitated head carries on the fight in one direction across the land of Bengal, while his body did the same in a different direction, the latter declared

to have further dismembered itself in order to multiply its fighting presence; today different tombs are said to house his arms, legs, torso, and head.⁹ In the early modern period, the stories of Ismāil Gājī and other famous historical Sufis, such as Shāh Jālāl of Sylhet (ca. 1271–1346 ce), Baḍa Khān Murid Miñā aka Shāykh Nūruddīn Quṭb-i ‘Ālam (d. 1415 ce), were composed in Persian, eventually some in Urdu, and few in Arabic. The genres signify “biographical acts,” “hagiographies,” “histories,” “diaries,” and so forth. The Bangla tales of the *pīrs* and *bibīs* in this anthology, however, are generally called *kathās*, stories or fictions. Not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries do the legends of the historical *musalmāni* saints find expression in Bangla, but even then the genre markers do not overlap with the *kathās*, preferring instead *itihās* (history), *carit* (biography), and *caritāmṛta* (hagiography, lit. the nectar or essence of actions). As a result, none of the fictional characters are mentioned in those historical accounts, nor are those historical figures ever invoked in the fictional *kathās*. They operate in discrete discourses, with virtually no crossover, though it would be hard to imagine that today a reader of the latter would not be familiar with the former.

This “in-between” story literature of Sufi saints—that is “not folk-tale or fairy tale” and “not history or hagiography”—constitutes a corpus generated by more than a hundred authors in the early modern period. Taken collectively, the surviving hand-written manuscripts number a fraction under eight hundred and account for the second largest body of early modern Bangla writings; only the *vaiṣṇav* compositions exceed them in number. The earliest surviving manuscripts in this corpus date from the mid-1600s and include the very oldest Bangla books to survive the rains and floods, the mold, the white ants, and human neglect, all of which ravage the old hand-made paper.¹⁰ That survival attests to a widespread popularity, but the shape these writings took was very much conditioned by the symbiotic

9. The sources of these stories are scattered, but are mostly summarized, although not completely, in Girīndranāth Dās, *Bāmlā pīr sāhityer kathā*, 1st ed. Kājipāḍā, Bārāsāt, Cabbīś Pargaṇa: Śehid Lāibrerī, 1383 bs [ca. 1976].

10. For a comprehensive list of these earliest manuscripts, see Stewart, *Witness to Marvels*, 203, n. 17.

relationship they had with another genre of early modern Bangla tales, the *mangal kāvyā*, semi-epic poems extolling the auspicious appearances and interventions of various gods and goddesses. Goddesses—Manasā, Caṇḍī, Annadā, Śītalā, Śaṣṭhī, Kālikā, Sāradā, Subacanī, and Gangā—dominate that genre, but gods—Śiv, Dharma, Pañcānan, and Dakṣiṇ Rāy—are sometimes favored, too.¹¹ They tell of the harrowing adventures of merchants, of cities being carved out of the jungly wilderness, and the plagues of disease and wild animals.

The very earliest of the extant *pīr kathās* follow the general structure of the *mangal kāvyā* adventures in extolling the exploits of Satya Pīr. Appearing a little more than a century after the initial tales about Satya Pīr, Kṛṣṇarām's *Rāy mangal* would seem to be one of the first crossover tales of the genre to introduce and promote the prominence of the Sufi saint, indeed, to elevate the *musalmāni* Baḍa Khān Gāji to a status equal to that of the *hinduyāni* demi-god Dakṣiṇ Rāy. It is from this point in the literary history that the stories of the *pīrs* take on a life of their own. In these new *kathās*, which constitute the bulk of the stories in this anthology, Sufi saints came routinely to be promoted as the equals of any god or goddess in the Bengali *hinduyāni* pantheon. New forms of divinity were required to right the wreckage of the Kali Age, the last era of a debased humanity, and the solution found in the composite image of Satya Pīr soon stretched to include all *phakirs*: *musalmāni* saints were promoted as the solution to the problems that ailed the *hinduyāni* world, who should be recognized for their positive interventions.

In their initial symbiosis, the *pīr kathās* parodied the *mangal kāvyas* in the sense of positive mimicry, but eventually the parodies began to turn the *mangal kāvyā* genre on its head. The *pīr kathās* began to challenge the *mangals* or auspicious manifestations of the god or goddess with the stories of the descent of their own *pīrs* and *bibīs*, who could be counted on to domesticate the wilds, impose order, and promote

11. For the most comprehensive literary history of the *mangal kāvyā* genre, see Āśutoṣ Bhaṭṭācāryya, *Bānglā mangalkāvyer itihās*, 6th ed. (Kalikātā: E. Mukhārji āyāṇḍ Koṃ Prāibhet Limited, 1381 bs [1975]).

the general weal of the population.¹² The stories spread their fame and glory, their *jahur* or *jahurā*, and the titles of the books that served that function style them as *jahurā nāmā*, “chronicles of majestic fame,” a clear equivalent to, if not direct translation of, the literary genre of *mangal kāvyā*. In this functional sense, as parodies, the stories should be seen as complementary to the *mangal kāvyas* rather than in direct competition, because a parody also preserves that which it parodies.¹³ The *pīr kathās* began to expand their scope in works such as Śekh Khodā Bakhś’s *Gāji kālu o cāmpāvatī*, composed about 1750 ce, whose approximately 18,000 lines of poetry¹⁴ make it equivalent in size to many of the *mangal kāvyas*, and it emerged just when the production of the latter began to wane. *Pīr kathās*, on the other hand, continued to be composed up to the cusp of the twentieth century. Mohāmmad Khater’s late nineteenth-century retelling of the *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* is the newest composition in this anthology.¹⁵ Sent by Khodā Himself, the female Sufi, Bonbibī, consolidated the whole of society within the mangrove swamps and became Mother to all the inhabitants of the Āṭhārobhātī. That tale brings the anthology up to the present. The honey gatherers, salt workers, and woodcutters who populate the mangroves depend even today on her beneficence, a manifestation of her *kerāmat*, the famous miracle-making power wielded by Sufis, and bask in the righteous well-being that emanates from her *baraka*, that divinely bestowed charisma that signals God’s blessing and which envelopes those fortunate enough to fall within its orbit.

The adventures of the *pīrs* and *bibīs* evidently struck a chord somewhere in the Bengali psyche, establishing an equivalence of characters and cosmology that normalized the Sufi world in the Bengali cultural

12. Domesticating the frontier for habitation is central to the thesis proposed by Richard M. Eaton in *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

13. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985, repr., 2000), 72–74, 93.

14. Khodā Bakhś, *Gāji kālu o cāmpāvatī*, in *Bānglā sāhitye gāji kālu o cāmpāvatī upākhyān*, edited by Ābul Kālam Mohāmmad Jākāriyā (Dhākā: Bāmlā Ekāḍemī, 1396 bs [1989]), 1–307.

15. Munsī Mohāmmad Khater Sāheb, *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā* (Kalikātā: Śrī Rāmlāl Śil at Niu-Bhikṭoriyā Pres, 1325 bs [?] [ca. 1918]); the original date of composition was 1880.

landscape. The *pīrs* and *phakirs*, the *bibīs*, the *gājīs* became the equivalents of *vaiṣṇav* mendicant *vairāgīs*, of *nāth siddhas*, of ascetic *sannyāsīs*. And this is certainly a large part of the cultural work these tales performed, for they did not seek to impose a new religion imported from outside, but to locate their holy figures in the traditional Indic cosmology of Bengal. These stories are not just commemorative of how Islam came to Bengal, but of how they served to naturalize, to insinuate Bengal into Islam. Writing Bengal and Bengalis into the literature of the wider Muslim world, they give us a glimpse of the way Bengal made Islam its own.

THE TENSIONS IN THE TALES

While the alleviation of hardship provides a sustained and consistent undercurrent to all the stories, the large, existential issues of social organization and religious reconciliation constitute the very stuff of the “big romance,” the kind of tale that chronicles adventures reminiscent of hero mythology around the world. But in these stories, a frequent twist transforms protagonist and antagonist into allies.

“THE AUSPICIOUS TALE OF THE LORD OF THE SOUTHERN REGIONS”: THE RĀY MANGAL OF KṚṢṆARĀM DĀS

The first story in the anthology extols the virtues and benefits of worshipping Dakṣiṇ Rāy, a Hindu godling in the lineage of Śiv, who is master of the Sundarbans.¹⁶ In the initial episode, Rāy is presented as a jealous, vengeful deity who demands human sacrifice, but once appeased, restores his victims. The second episode is the most famous; as noted above, it testifies to a confrontation with the Sufi warrior-saint Baḍa Khān Gāji over social slights and insults. Both field large armies of tigers, but ultimately the confrontation is reduced to the two fighting solo in a pitched battle. Both die, both are revived, and Satya Pīr brokers a lasting peace by insisting that these two miracle-working leaders function as brothers of equal stature, for honor and respect are prerequisites for any kind of social recognition and rapprochement. The somewhat unexpected resolution subtly implies that Hindu and

16. Kṛṣṇarām Dās, “Rāymangal,” in *Kavi kṛṣṇarām dāser granthāvalī*.

Muslim communities both have standing in Bengal and must learn to co-exist. In the final installment, Rāy demonstrates his protection and benevolence to his devotees by rescuing the son of a merchant who has gone on a trading voyage in search of his father.

“SCOURING THE WORLD FOR CĀMPĀVATĪ”:
THE *GĀJI KĀLU O CĀMPĀVATĪ KANYĀR*
PUTHI OF ĀBDUL OHĀB

The second tale complicates this uneasiness between Hindu and Muslim by seeking to resolve their seemingly irreconcilable positions through explorations of the nature of love, or the “little romance,” though that diminutive hardly does justice to its compelling power.¹⁷ Composed a few years after the *Rāy maṅgal*, the same Baḍa Khān Gāji renounces his royal upbringing and eschews his designated kingship to pursue the life of a mendicant Sufi *fakir*. His half-brother renounces with him. But soon the tensions that had previously erupted into battle between Baḍa Khān Gāji and Dakṣiṇ Rāy are now displaced onto a new set of tensions that pits the Sufi ascetic’s love for God against the amorous love Gāji bears for a Hindu woman. After a trick played by færies that results in Gāji’s midnight betrothal to the princess Cāmpāvati, followed by their pre-dawn separation, the well-known trope of *viraha*, “love in separation,” dominates the narrative. This recurring theme is easily the most prominent in the literary and religious world of Bengal. The search for re/union—spiritual and carnal—ends up with Baḍa Khān having to fight Dakṣiṇ Rāy, his betrothed princess’s hired protector. Gāji again prevails, this time enlisting Dakṣiṇ Rāy into service, after which the Muslim Sufi is united with the Hindu princess and properly married. The tension of worldly human love pulling against the spiritual love for God impels the action: the oldest brother, Julhās, absent from most of the narrative, embodies a traditional married love; Gāji’s half brother, Kālu, embodies the Sufi’s ascetic renunciation, which favors divine love; while Gāji, also a Sufi, but married, seems to argue it is possible to enjoy both.

17. Sāyeb Munsī Ābdul Ohāb, *Gāji kālū o cāmpāvati kanyār puthi* (Kalikātā: Munsī Ābdul Hāmād Khān; repr., Kalikātā: Śrīmahāmmad Rabiullā at Hāmidiyā Pres, Es Rahmān aṇḍ San Printer, 135 bs [ca. 1908]).

“GLORIFYING THE PROTECTIVE MATRON
OF THE JUNGLE”: THE *BONBIBĪ JAHURĀ*
NĀMĀ OF MOHĀMMAD KHĀTER

The third tale, composed more than a century later, obliquely reconfigures the two sets of tensions—Hindu versus Muslim; human love versus divine love—into a struggle between a benevolent, compassionate justice and rapacious greed.¹⁸ That biting commentary on just rule in the face of entrepreneurial excess reverses expectations when a new character, a female Sufi mendicant named Bonbibī, becomes the champion of the Sundarbans and everything in them. In his willingness to trade the life of his young nephew to Dakṣiṇ Rāy for fabulous boatloads of honey and wax, a venal merchant pillaging the Sundarbans’ natural resources shows himself devoid of morality. Dakṣiṇ Rāy, now reduced to controlling just a small area of the Sundarbans, shape-shifts into a tiger to receive the boy as a blood sacrifice, reminiscent of the opening episode of Kṛṣṇarām’s *Rāy mangal*. The boy appeals to Bonbibī, now the ruling matron of the entire forest and Mother to all, who flies to his aid. In the ensuing scrap, the boy is saved, but Dakṣiṇ Rāy is shielded from Bonbibī’s wrath by the same Baḍa Khān Gāji, who this time is the one to counsel rapprochement. Bonbibī acquiesces to his wisdom. The boy is sent home, laden with riches, and, rather than punishing the uncle who tried to sacrifice him, treats him benevolently, marries his daughter, and becomes the kind of ruler of whom all subjects dream. His just rule, based on public-spirited generosity, brings back to the fore the trope of ameliorating widespread destitution as the foundation for an ethical life, underscoring the need for humans to manage the vulnerable Sundarbans better, according to the ideal of *ābādī*, noted above. Many readers will recognize Bonbibī’s story from Amitav Ghosh’s retelling in his novel *The Hungry Tide*.¹⁹

“WAYWARD WIVES AND THEIR MAGICAL
FLYING TREE”: THE *SATYANĀRĀYAṆER*
PUTHI OF KAVI VALLABH

The fourth tale, the earliest tale of the lot, is considerably shorter than the previous three, and chronicles one of the many mad adventures of

18. Khater, *Bonbibī jahurā nāmā*.

19. Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (London: Harper Collins, 2004).

Satya Pīr, relating various permutations of the popular themes.²⁰ In this particular tale, the activities of good merchants are sabotaged by the machinations of their shameless, selfish wives until the men's virtuous younger brother and his equally virtuous wife set things right by spreading the worship of Satya Pīr, which ensures an ideal world. The author depicts the divinity of Satya Pīr as consonant with Nārāyaṇ, Kṛṣṇa, Śiv, Śaktī, and, of course, Khodā, while invoking a range of popular stories and far-flung ritual practices that humorously skewer virtually every community in Bengal.

“CURBING THE HUBRIS OF MOSES”:
THE STORY OF KHOYĀJ KHIJIR

The anthology concludes with the earliest Bangla rendition of the story of Khoyāj Khijir (Arabic al-Khiḍr, Persian Khwaja Khizr). Taken from Saiyad Sultān's *Nabīvaṃśa*, a monumental seventeenth-century rendering of the life of Muhāmmad, it retells the famous Qur'ānic story of God turning to Khijir to curb Musā's (Moses's) hubris.²¹ Khijir is touted in Islamic literature as the teacher of all the great Sufi saints, which these stories tell us includes the Bengali figure of Satya Pīr. Khijir figures in several of the tales, not only intermittently popping into the various narratives of Satya Pīr, but also interjecting himself into the life of Baḍa Khān Gāji, always to give timely instruction and assistance. Khijir helps Gāji find the needle at the bottom of the sea, the final test of his status as a *jindā pīr*—the highest recognition any *pīr* can hope for, a level of accomplishment universally recognized, but never self-proclaimed. Tying the Qur'ānic figure of Khijir directly to the tales' protagonists enfolds these new Bangla stories directly into a larger Islamic literature and history, equating these *pīrs* with the pantheon of Sufis known throughout the Islamic world.

20. Śrī Kavi Vallabh, *Satyanārāyaṇer puthi*, edited by Ābdul Karim, Sāhitya pariṣad granthāvalī no. 49 (Kalikātā: Rām Kamal Siṃha at Bangiya Sāhitya Pariṣat Mandir, 1322 bs [ca. 1915]).

21. Saiyad Sultān, *Nabīvaṃśa*, edited by Āhmād Śariph, 2 vols. (Ḍhākā: Bāmlā Ekāḍemī, 1978), 1670–87.