

Non Historical or Fictitious Pir of Bengal: a Brief Discussion (13th C.E to 20th C.E)



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Abstract

Pir cult in Bengal is exported from outside India and it is the distorted form of Sufism or Sufi movement. The Pir is worshipped by people of all religion to secure worldly desire as well as they consider the Pir as the savior from all hazards of nature or natural calamity. That is why fictitious Pir arise. We may divide the Pirs as historical and non historical. Historical Pir is mainly living or deceased human being. But non historical Pirs are not all human being, some are imagined, some are Hindu deities transformed into Pir and worshipped by Hindu style and Muslim style. Fictitious Pirs had no Dargah or mazar, purification made on animals and tree etc. The fictitious Pirs are mainly worshipped by subaltern toiling masses of Bengal.

Keywords: Pircult--- Historical Pir – Non- Historical Pir --- Fictitious Pir – Hindu Deities – Pirification Of Natural Object --- Subaltern Mass.

Introduction

The concept of Pirism or Pir-cult emerged from the old concept of Sufism. Pirism is mainly the Islamic hotchpotch of Persia and other Middle East country. The Persian word Pir bear the same meaning of Buddhist word “Ther”. Both these two words mean old man or aged person. The Buddhist worshipping of” Chaitya” or the grave of the Ther influenced vehemently the matter of Pir puja (Pir parosti) .Now-a days the system of Pir parosti is followed by the Bengali Muslims(believer of Pir) irrespective of economic class or educational background. But the follower of theological Islam or original Islamic tenets always keep safe distance from Pir –cult⁽¹⁾

The early converted Muslims of Bengal simultaneously practiced idolatry and thronged in the Dargah to be redeemed by the Pir, whom they offered puja, from their real-life distress and evils. Hence, these Dargah turned into holy-places for pilgrimage, where people offered puja for different wants, like ‘good’ marriage or male child, or development of business, a practice continuing in Bengali popular culture till recent times. Different Mazar, or shrine of Pir, were established at different districts of Bengal, where Ursh, the ceremony of offerings to the respective Pir, have been observed at some fixed date. This cult of ‘Pir puja’ going against the doctrine of orthodox Islam has been particularly seen popular in this part of the world with the enthusiast participation of the Muslims from the lower social strata. There are Historical Pir and Non- Historical Pir in Bengal. The non historical Pirs are to be equated with Hindu Deities.

Asim Roy have classified the Pirs known in Bengal into two broad groups of historical-legendary characters and of totally fictitious and unreal pirified religious objects and spirits, focusing on the contributions of the former, heterogeneous as they were, to Islamization in the form of conversion of the Bengali masses. But a proper and adequate appreciation and evaluation of the folk or little tradition of Islam in Bengal underlines the significance of the nature and composition of the body of the fictitious Pirs⁽²⁾

Aims of the Study

There are various historical literatures, research work, Puthis etc. which dealt with the Pir culture of Bengal from the very beginning of Islamic rule established in Bengal. But good number of them focused light on Historical Pirs, mainly from Arab, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan etc. Hence my study would like to focus on the fictitious Pirs or non historical Pirs, who are

equivalent to Hindu Deities. Here I would like to discuss how the Hindu deities became Muslim Pir and a syncretistic tradition spread in Bengal through Pir puja. Hope this study may fulfill, at least partially, the gap in the existing historiography of Pir Cult in Bengal.

Review of Literature

So many scholarly works have been done on Pir cult of Bengal. We may mention a few for this study. Most of the work dealt with Historical Pir of Bengal, but many of them focused light on Non historical or fictitious Pir of Bengal. Dr. Girindra Nath Das, in his book, Pir Sahitya, categorized the Pir of Bengal into Historical and Non- Historical. He established his discussion using Puthis written on Pir of Bengal by mostly Muslim writers. Dr. Waqil Ahmed in his book Banglar Pir Sahitya – O- Sanskriti, dealing with primary and secondary sources gives us vivid descriptions of non- historical Pir as well as historical Pir. Asim Roy in the book Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal dealt with Pir cult and Pirification of Hindu Deities and Animals and other natural objects. Enamul Haque, in his famous book Bange Sufi Pravab, dealt with Pir cult and non historical Pir. According to him Pir cult is the byproduct of folk Islam in Bengal. Ananda Bhattacharya, in his book, Bange Sufi Andolon described about Sufi movement in Bengal and also mentioned historical and non historical Pir. Muzaffar Alam, in his book Languages of Political Islam in India, described about Pir culture and tradition and their practices. Alamgir Jalil, in his book, Bangladesher Pir Darvesh Parichiti gives us vivid descriptions of various Pirs of Bengal.

Non historical or fictitious Pir of Bengal

The Muslims who do not have knowledge on theological Islam or those minds even not enlightened by Islamic education are the believer of Pirism and the beliefs and ideals regarding Pir is very active in their mind. Hence the believer of Pirism started worshiping the historical Pirs (Sufi), (Pir parosti), and in course of time they crossed the boundaries of Sufis and Pirs and started various other Pirs those who are to be called the non historical and fabricated Pirs. Probably the local Hindu god and goddesses turn into Islamic Pir by the Muslims, they became non-historical and fabricated Pirs or imaginary Pirs' ⁽³⁾ The Indian Muslims had adopted the practices of Hindu asceticism, with numerous and bewildering groups of Faqir. ⁽⁴⁾

Here I would like to discuss about the non-historical Pir of Bengal or Fictitious Pir

Ghora Pir

In Bogura district, near Sonatola rail station, the annual fair or ursh is organized of this Pir. Clay horse is being sold here. In Maldah, Bardhaman, Howrah, Mednipur and 24 parganas clay horses being sacrificed in the name of Ghora Pir. Dogmatic general Muslims (generally Muslim woman) believed that if anyone sacrificed clay horse in the name of Ghora Pir, lame son or daughter may get recovered. (Census of India, Bengal part)

Pir Ma—Chandali Saif

The grave of this Pir is at Gangasagar in 24 parganas (s). He is to be called Nou-Pir or (Boat-Pir). The local sailors believed that if anyone falls in

distress in the sea or Ocean this Pir will help them to get rid of the distress.

Langta pir and Pir Sohakala

The mazar of Langta Pir (NAKED PIR) is at Sonamukhi of Bgura district and Pir Sohakala is at Kasba (Bangladesh). Both Hindu and Muslims paid homage to these Pirs. By their grace one may get rid of various diseases and problems.

Tena Pir

Tena Pir is very famous in the North-West Bengal. People generally tied thread and clothe in the branches of trees nearby the mazar this Pir; they made Mannat during the thread tying,

Pir Sodu and Pir Sonagazi

Generally these two Pirs may be called "Pir of Prostitute" (Ganika Pir). Pir Sodu is worshipped, not only in Bengal, but all over the Aryabartya. The prostitutes are mainly worshipped Pir Sodu. The mazar of Pir Sonagazi is at Sonagachhi at Calcutta. Both the Hindu and Muslim prostitutes are the disciple of Pir Sonagazi. We can trace a grave of a Pir at Premchand Boral Street (Harkata Gali) of Bowbazar, Calcutta, the name of the Pir is unknown, and all the prostitutes are the follower of this Pir.

Jurma or Jumma Pir

The grave or mazar of this Pir is at Bowbazar, Calcutta. This Pir is to be equating with the Hindu Goddess Lakshmi. This Pir meant for trade and commerce, so mainly the Marwaris of Calcutta worshipped this Pir.

Kumbhira Pir

Influence of this Pir is noticed at Gaur of Maldah district. In a pond this Pir live in the form of crocodile. The name of the pond is Pir Pukur. This is very unnatural. This is the example of Pirification of animals.

Bon Bibi

In some places of 24 parganas (Mainly Sundarban Area) the grave or mazar of this female Pirani is identified. We can collect knowledge about the miraculous activities of this Pirani from Bon Bibir Puthi, she is the savior of woodcutter and Honey collector (Moule) of Sundarban area from the attack of tiger.⁽⁵⁾ . It has been regarded as an example of fusion of Islam and animism that is of "Muslim hagiology grafted on animism"⁽⁶⁾

Olabibi

She was a fictitious Pirani (female Pir) in west Bengal, mainly in 24 parganas South and North, Kolkata, Nadia, Bardhaman, Bankura, Birbhum, Olabibi is worshipped. Olabibi is also famous as Olaichandi. Olabibi is Muslim oriented and Olaichandi is Hindu oriented. Some common villagers called her Bibi Ma. But as Olabibi she is famous. Literally ola means coming down and utha means vomiting. Hence Olabibi is the Pirani or goddess of Cholera or ola utha. Two types of images are seen of Olabibi – in the Hindu dominated area Olabibi is look like Lakshmi and Saraswati (goddess). In the Muslim dominated area Olabibi looks like an aristocrat Muslim teen age girl. In the village we may trace the Than or Sthan (place of worship) of Olabibi under mainly Neem or Banyan tree, Where the people offered puja or hajat –

mannat in the name of Olabibi. In some places Olabibi is worshipped in the Mandir, made of bricks.

It is well campaigned that Olabibi, in some villages, is not worshipped solely, she is worshipped along with her six sister – they are Asanbibi, Jholabibi, Ajoibibi, Chandbibi, Bahadbibi and jhetunebibi. They also famous as Satbibi or satbauni. Binoy Ghosh opined that the satbauni are mainly forest goddess. Some researcher opined that saptamatrika of south India became satbauni and in Muslim rule they became Satbibi. Sunderlal Hora wrote that Ola and Jhola are believed to be two sisters, the former presides over the disease of cholera and the latter of small pox⁽⁷⁾ the subaltern people of all religions of Bengal worshipped Olabibi, to get rid of various diseases, mainly cholera and also for worldly affairs.

Panch Pir

Panch Pir or five Pirs have been very influential in Bengali Muslim society. In various districts like Midnapur, Burdwan and 24 Paraganas, Panch Pir has been worshiped for a long course of time. The identity of Panch Pir appears rather obscured. The cult was popular with both Muslims and Hindus in and out of Bengal. The shrine of Panch Pir was usually a small tomb with five domes, or a simple mound at the foot of either a banyan tree or Pipal tree. Offerings of goats, fowls, and sweetmeats were made to the Pir to ensure birth of children, recovery from an incurable illness, or even success in a particular venture. In the forest that overgrew the old city of Sonargaon in east Bengal, there was a popular shrine of Panch-Pir containing five unfinished tomb.⁽⁸⁾ Popular beliefs concerning this quintet of divinities provided no common list of name for them. The pantheon varied widely from place to place and occasionally stretched even to include characters ranging from Amina Sati, a faithful wife who died along with her husband, to Bhairon, a Hindu godling.⁽⁹⁾ There is a Darga of Panch Pir at Sonargaon in Bangladesh. The sailors uttered the name of Panchpir before starting the sea journey along with the name of Pir Badar. As Abdul Karim opines, the five Pirs are Gazi Milan, Manik Pir, Ghora Pir, kumbhira Pir and Madari Pir, and the practice of worshipping them started in the fifteenth century.⁽¹⁰⁾ However the concerned five Pirs are identified as Gazi Mian, Pir Badar, Jinda Gazi, Seikh Farid and khwaja Khijir. While the Shia sect of Muslims believes that the idea of Panch Pir is derived from “Panch Tani Pak, “ who are Hazrat Muhammad, Hazrat Ali, Fatima, Imam Hasan and Imam Hussein⁽¹¹⁾ On the contrary, the Sunnis trace the origin of Panch Pir in Muhammad and his four friends ‘Char Yar’. The five are then Muhammad and four Khalifas, Abu Bakar, Omar, Osman and Hazrat Ali. Some have traced the cult to the five Pandava brothers of the Mahabharat fame⁽¹²⁾ (James Wise suggests that five is a lucky number and that it may well have been used loosely as half-a – dozen is used in English⁽¹³⁾. Of the five Pirs in Bengal Ghazi Mian was the most favourite of people. The identity of Panch Pir is or five Pir is uncertain, varying in different parts of India. This cult may be traced to the five Pandavas of the Mahabharata or to five Dhyani Buddhas⁽¹⁴⁾.

Manik Pir

The greatest figure in the category of Pir was Manik –Pir, whose wide recognition as the guardian-Pir of the village folk, protecting the cattle, promoting its fertility, as well as agricultural prosperity, family health, and happiness, enshrined him the hearts of the village folk, both Muslim and Hindu. Muslim mendicants (Faqir) and village bards sang ballads glorifying the pir⁽¹⁵⁾. Manik –pir’s identity cannot be easily established. While sharing some of the characteristics of the Hindu God, Siva, he also came close to resembling as his disciple.⁽¹⁶⁾ A song about him gave further support to this saivite association, according to which the cry of vam vam, a common practice among saivite mendicants. Kalu-Ghosh’s mother offered him five small coins in the name of Panch –Pir. Manik refused to accept cash, and asked for milk and curds. Kalu’s mother played a trick on him, as a result of which all their cattle and even the milkmaid died. The mother came to realize her folly and begged for pir’s mercy. Manik took pity on her, struck his staff (Asha) on the ground, and everything came back to life again.⁽¹⁷⁾ The first birth of a calf in the west Mymensingh district was usually followed by cooking in the cowshed itself a sweet made of sugar, rice, and molasses, which was offered on a banana leaf-tip to the Pir. Served on banana leaves, the food was later shared by the votaries, after which the used leaves were hung up on the walls of the cowshed. Offerings of milk and fruits were made to Manik Pir in northern and southern parts of the state. Folk songs after Manik Pir, “Manik Pirer Gaan were composed and sung by a great mass of people. In south Bengal there has been a festival at north Bengal is known as “Madari Bans Tola, in memory of Madari Pir. In some places, the Bengali Muslim folk made Pirs of local non-Muslim divinities or objects or worship. In the Mymensingh district, Manik -Pir appeared as the purified Hindu God, Kartik, and the rites and fertility beliefs pertaining to his adoration were almost identical with those of local Kartick celebrations (Kartik-Vrata). The Pir was resorted to be unmarried –Girls for suitable husbands and my married women desiring pregnancy. To the west of the Brahmaputra River the twentieth day of the Bengal calendar month of Phalgun and the nineteenth in the east were chosen for this observance, called Manik -Pir’s Shirmi.

Satyapir

In the early twentieth century specially in western and northern districts of Bengal, a tradition of offering puja to Satyapir – for the Muslims- and Satyanarayan – for the Hindus – was initiated. It is difficult to trace the history of such interesting religious practice. The puja system of Satyapir – or Satyanarayan is similar to that of Goddess Manasa or Chandi. In fact, Satyapir has no idol but a wooden plank, whereas the edibles offered are same as those to Hindu Gods. This suggests a continuous overlapping between Hindus converted to Islam; they transported their older ideas of supernaturalism imposed on deities into a new concept of Pirism. A Satyapir, a sort of superhuman power. There is a story, original name being Mansoor Hallaj. He was slain as he preached “I am the truth”. After his death

from his burned to ash, but from the ash the same words, "I am the truth" were heard. That is how he came to be identified as "Satyapir" ⁽¹⁸⁾. Satyapir added a whole new dimension to the syncretistic process of purification. Purification in this particular instance seemed to relate more appropriately to the phenomenon of sanskritization, which applied to the Hindu society, than to Islamization. On close scrutiny the Satya Pir myth and cult emerges as a Brahmanical device to absorb the increasingly popular Pir cult ⁽¹⁹⁾. As was the case with other popular Pirs the identity of Satyapir seemed rather obscure, indeed even more than others. ⁽²⁰⁾

Between the purely fictitious and the indubitable historical Pirs there existed a number of Pirs of dubious origin who became associated with particular beliefs, and those beliefs often seemed more important than the Pir connected with them. In North Bengal the beliefs and practices about Ghazi Miyan, also called Ganja Dulha or Salar Chinula, were closely associated with marriage and fertility. Ghazi Miyan was identified with Salar Masud, the nephew of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazani, who was known to have died in a battle against some Hindu chiefs at Bahraich in Oudh in North India. Ghazi Miyan in Bengal believed to have died on the day set for his marriage. The second Sunday in the second month of Jaistha in the Bengali calendar was set for the celebration of what was known as "the wedding of Ghazi Miyan" ⁽²¹⁾.

Khawaza Khizir

Another example of fictitious Pir is Khwaza Khizir, associated with beliefs in water-spirit. A highly controversial figure, of general renown in the Muslim world and often identified with the prophet Ilyas, Khwaza was believed to reside in the seas and waters and to ride upon a fish ⁽²²⁾. The people propitiated him at the first shaving of a boy, at marriages, and during the rainy seasons by launching in rivers and tanks small paper boats, decorated with flowers and candles. ⁽²³⁾

Nora Pir

Nora-pir's favor was solicited in order to fulfill a desire or a wish. People took vows in the name of the Pir, tied a knot called Nora on a wisp of grass or hay, and placed it under a banyan tree (*ficus bengalensis*). ⁽²⁴⁾

Trinath Pir or Trailokya Pir

In the same district, another pirified Hindu object of worship was Tinnath-pir, who seemed no other than the Nath trinity, Adi-nath or Lord Siva, Matsyendra or Mina-Nath, and Raksa-nath, collectively called by Hindus Trinath (three-naths) or its corrupted form, Tinnath, or Tinnath-thakur. In the Alapsingh region, Muslims resorted to this Pir for the recovery, on one hand, of lost cattle and, on the other, from illness. A supplicant promised the Pir three, five, or seven rounds (*kalki*) of hemp after the fulfillment of a particular wish. On the actual fulfillment of the wish the promised quantity of hemp. Mainly this Pir is worshipped by the Hindu subaltern masses ⁽²⁴⁾.

Khunribibi

She is also a fictitious Pirani, the savior of lame tiger, crocodile and lame animals that is why she

is called so. Another theory is that she was a lame person, so called *khunribibi*. She has no image, but there is a mazar of Khunribibi in kendua village, Basirhat sub division in north 24 parganas. The ursh (death anniversary) is observed on the last day of Pous (Bengali month). She is worshipped and honored by the toiling mass, those who are continuously battling with nature ⁽²⁵⁾.

Pagal Pir

He was a fictitious Pir, an example of the amalgamation of Hindu – Muslim cultures of the medieval period, an amalgamation of Lord Siva and Muslim Dervish. In various places of south Bengal we may trace the Dargah of Pagal Pir. He is also known as Pagla Pir or Pagla Baba, or Pagla Gazi. In Jhalgachhi village of Barasat Subdivision in North 24 Parganas, there is a Dargah of Pagal Pir. Muslims worshipped as Pagal Pir and Hindus worshipped as Pagal Thakur. This is the good example of syncretistic tradition of Bengal. ⁽²⁶⁾

Bibi Barkat

She is a non historical or fictitious Pirani. In the village Katakhal, there is a Dargah (imagined) under Hingal Ganj Police Station of north 24 parganas. We may gather some knowledge about her from 'Ma Barkater Mejmani', written by Muhammad Alimuddin Saheb. Both Hindu and Muslim toiling masses, those who lived on Water and Jungle, worshipped her to seek protection and get rid of the hazards in jungle ⁽²⁷⁾.

Conclusion

The Bengali Muslim, in course of time, changes their religious identity by mixing the theocratic Islam with popular Islam. Practically the popular Islam becomes the part and parcel of the Muslim of Bengal's religious life. Sometime they forget to maintain original Islamic tenets as they were not aware about theology of Islam. Hence Pir cult or Pirbad crept strongly into the life of Bengali Muslim. In the Dargah of Pir the devotees light the candles and incense-stick and make *sijda* (bowing down heads.), in the way Hindus perform their rituals. This is significant to note that making *sijda* to any object or person other than Allah is not permitted in theory of "Wahdahu-la-sharik," that is, Muslims should bow their heads to the Rab, the creator (Allah), not to any of His creations. However, the tradition of Pirism instances how cultural/ religious infiltration as well as overlapping could re-appropriate and restructure a religious doctrine at the level of practice. A number of superstitions of common people, not well versed in shariat, have been traced to be operating in ways of worshipping the Pirs. However, as tried to be discussed in this study, these ways are part of the changing relationship between religion and living life experience of the toiling mass. The non historical Pirs are mainly Subaltern Pir and worshipped by the subaltern masses.

Footnotes

1. *Enamul Haque, Bange Sufi Pravab, pg, 130 and J.N.Sarkar, (article), Islam in Bengal, in The History of Bengal, edited by N.K.Sinha,pg, 575.*
2. *Asim. Roy, Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal.*

3. Enamul Haque, *Bange Sufi Pravab*, pg, 139.
 4. J.N.Sarkar,(article), *Islam in Bengal, in The History of Bengal*, edited by N.K.Sinha,pg, 578.
 5. .Enamul Haque, *Bange Sufi Pravab*, pg, 139—141
 6. J.N.Sarkar,(article), *Islam in Bengal,in The History of Bengal*, edited by N.K.Sinha,pg, 577.
 7. Girindra nath Das, *Pir Sahitya*, pg, 375.
 8. James Wise, *The Muhammadans of Bengal*, pg, 44
 9. Risley, *Imperial Gazetteer*,pg, 435, as quoted by Asim Roy.
 10. Abdul Karim, *Social History of Bengali Muslims*
 11. E.A.Gait, *report on Census of India, Bengal Part*, vol—5, pg, 180.
 12. .Risley, *Imperial Gazetteer*, pg, 435
 13. 13, James Wise, *The Muhammadans of Bengal*, pp—44-45.(as quoted by Asim Roy 213)
 14. J.N. Sarkar,(article), *Islam in Bengal, in The History of Bengal*, edited by N.K. Sinha, pg, 577.
 15. 15. C. Roy, *On Tree Cults in Midnapur*, pp—244—248.(as quoted by Asim Roy, pg, 210)
 16. S.B. Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, pg, 371
 17. Asim Roy, *Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, pg, 212.
 18. *Census of India 1901, report on Bengal*, vol—5, pt.-1, pg, 179-180
 19. Asim Roy, *Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* pg, 214.
 20. Asim Roy, *Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, pg, 214—215.
 21. *Ibid*, pg, 218
 22. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol—II, Pg, 865.
 23. *Census of India, 1901*, vol—5, pg, 179
 24. Girindra Nath Das, *Pir Sahitya*, pgs, 382 – 385., for details we may consult Enamul Haque and Asim Roy.
 25. Griridra Nath Das, *Pir Sahitya*, pgs, 378 – 379.
 26. Griridra Nath Das, *Pir Sahitya*, pgs. 386—389.
 27. Griridra Nath Das, *Pir Sahitya*, pgs. 413 –416.
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