

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

BANTER AND BRICOLAGE AT THE BURIAL CHAMBER:  
DIALECTICAL DEVOTIONALISM IN BANGLADESH

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

BY

BERTIE MOONTASIR KIBREAH

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

JUNE 2019



৭৮৬

যাঁরা আমাকে জীবন নিয়ে গড়ে তুলেছেন  
নিরন্তর প্রেরণা যুগিয়েছেন আমার সকল সৃষ্টিকর্ম

To those who nurtured me and gave me life,  
and provided unending encouragement in my every creative endeavor

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	v
Note on Transliteration	xi
List of Figures	xiii
List of Tables	xiv
Abstract	xv
Prologue	1
Chapter One Poetics, Pieties, and Bengali Muslim Subjectivities	12
Chapter Two Modalities of Bôyāti Musicianship	65
Chapter Three Compositional Devotionalism in Discursive Bicār Gān Performance	138
Chapter Four Gestured Positionalities and Debate Consolidation	215
Chapter Five Enshrining Debate: Sacred Spaces, Sonic Terrains, and the Teleologies of Tombs	242
Chapter Six Mothers of In(ter)vention: The Fakirāni in Bangladesh	297
Epilogue	348
Appendix: A Selection of Song Lyrics	358
Glossary	368
Bibliography	385

## Acknowledgments

This dissertation is the result of not only a rewarding and illuminating graduate student career at the University of Chicago, but many more layers and years of research and personal inquiry. I am eternally grateful to the talented scholars that agreed to be a part of my rather large committee, both original and newer members: Philip Bohlman, Martin Stokes, Muzaffar Alam, Kaley Mason, Lars Christian-Koch, and Anna Schultz. Each of these individuals have provided me with a unique set of angles from which to structure my work that have repeatedly proved beneficial throughout the dissertation writing process.

Phil Bohlman, a deeply respected ethnomusicologist and painstaking editor, has always been ready to engage with my work whenever I have been ready. His vast insights into the many sub-fields of ethnomusicology and anthropology is breathtaking, as is his remarkable ability to discern the issue at hand and weed out peripheral material was critical to the completion of my dissertation. I am not sure that there are many faculty members, certainly not as renowned as Phil, who would maintain a relationship with a student who has taken several detours toward thesis completion, and yet he has continued to inspire and urge me in the manner of a genuine mentor.

I began working with Martin Stokes, now at King's College London, during my early years as a graduate student, when he held an appointment in the Department of Music and served as Director for the Center for Middle Eastern Studies. Martin has an unparalleled ability to draw on a range of critical theories—in ways that are always insightful and demonstrative of his exhaustive training, yet never feel overburdened with abstraction. This is an extraordinary gift,

and I am thankful to have learned from him through various classes and workshops. I am also grateful to Martin for properly introducing me to the academic work on Sufism, a vast and somewhat impenetrable topic to many young scholars.

As a graduate student, I took a course on Mughal history with Muzaffar Alam and was instantly mesmerized by his encyclopedic knowledge of events, dates, and interactions over various milieu. Alam Sahib is a phenomenal historian, and easily moves between various political and administrative histories of Indo-Islamic culture, through the medium of Arabic, Persian, Hindi, and Urdu. I knew that working with him would be critical to solidifying my understanding of Bengali Muslims due to the ease in which he articulates both the arguments of classical Islamic theology and the religious and cultural practices of Indian Subcontinent Muslims.

Kaley Mason, now at Lewis & Clark College, has always been an amazing and hands-on resource for graduate students, and has provided me with endless opportunities to discuss various topics, not only in his office, but in his home and around his family. His academic interest in how music serves as a vehicle for cultural dignity, and how performers in turn shape movements for social change, has always been inspiring to me, and has instigated a level of reflexive thinking in my own writing. During his appointment at the University of Chicago, Kaley spearheaded the development of the South Asian Music Ensemble in the Department of Music, a special repertory ensemble that I would later direct over my graduate student career. I cannot overstate the value of the experience I have had with this ensemble, not only because it rekindled a personal interest of mine in performance but also greatly expanded my understanding of South Asian music through the diverse and incredibly gifted artists that have joined the ensemble over the years.

Ethnomusicologist Lars Christian-Koch has had a long and intimate relationship with Bengal, including the bāul community, and has provided me with an endless amount of insight and advice over the years. As Director of both the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin, Lars has a particularly profound understanding of archival work, the history of sound recordings, curation, and organology. Thanks to him, I have been repeatedly reminded of how invaluable the discovery of audio recordings can be in supplementing one's fieldwork, textual research, and writing. Lars was also a visiting fellow at the Franke Institute for the Humanities at the University of Chicago on more than one occasion, and I will always cherish the memories I have of playing tabla in his office, as he leisurely explored various compositions and rāgas on his sitar over our lunch hour.

Anna Schultz is the newest addition to my committee. This timing could have not been more perfect, as she is incredibly accommodating and possesses a vast knowledge of the devotional musics of South Asia. In many ways, her individual comments on my work have been the most perceptive, and she has been so kind to peruse my chapters, despite just acclimating to a new appointment at the University. I feel so honored to have the opportunity to learn from her, something I would not have experienced had I defended one year earlier.

I am also very indebted to my team members at the Franke Institute for the Humanities, where I have been employed throughout most of my graduate student career. As a Humanities Center, The Franke Institute has been an ideal place for me while I have written this thesis, but I have also learned a great deal there about the administrative side of academia, as well as the various projects of leading scholars across the Humanities Division. However, my office at the Franke has always been a remarkably short walk away from the Regenstein Library stacks,

something that any graduate student would be thrilled to have, but few do. It seems fitting that I have not only given talks at the Franke Institute, or have received Franke funding for conferences, but have also defended my thesis in the Franke seminar room. To the directors of the Franke Institute during my time there, Jim Chandler and Françoise Meltzer, I extend my sincere thanks because they gave me a flexibility that most graduate students who are employed while studying do not have, and Françoise in particular has been so genuinely interested in the progress of my dissertation. To the staff of the Franke Institute, especially Mai Vukceovich, Harriette Moody, and Margot Browning, I could not have finished this work without your friendship and support. I have benefited in innumerable ways from your professionalism, camaraderie, and kindness.

I would be amiss to not thank my colleagues and co-collaborators Rehanna Kheshgi and Ameera Nimjee, amazing young ethnomusicologists in their own right. Both Rehanna (St. Olaf College) and Ameera (University of Puget Sound) possess a drive and excitement about scholarship that is captivating. From Rehanna, I began learning about the many intricate relationships between Bengal and Assam, and the future potential of my own work with regard to these regions. Ameera has especially been a dear and supportive friend, and through her introduction to kathak dance, both my tabla drumming and my understanding of classical, regional, and popular musics of South Asia have been challenged and invigorated.

In Bengal, and especially Bangladesh, I wish to thank a number of individuals who greatly enabled the progress of my fieldwork. From the *bôyāti* world, I am so very grateful to the artistry of Parimal Boyati, Kajol Dewan, Momtaz Begum, Aklima Begum, Kangalini Sufia, Aleya Begum, Mukta Sarkar, Abul Sarkar, Shah Alam Sarkar, Malik Sarkar, Latif Sarkar, Rajjab

Dewan, Sunil Karmakar, and also the recently deceased Hajira Bibi, Aynal Boyati, Abdul Halim Boyati, and Abdur Rahman Boyati. I have also had the privilege to be educated by the numerous scholars and practitioners at the shrine of Lālôn, who have maintained a beautiful tradition with loving care and sincerity. From the music industry, I am grateful for the time given to me by top grade performers such as Firoza Begum, Anusheh Anadil, Maqsoodul Haque, Rathindranath Roy, Farida Parveen, Habib, Kiran Chandra Roy, and Mustafa Zaman Abbasi. I also sincerely thank Jauhar Ali Rizvi and his extended family, Salauddin Sumon, and Saymon Zakaria for their provisions, discussions, and advice. Unfortunately, there are too many other people to mention here who were absolutely critical to my interactions at Dhaka University, the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, the Bulbul Lalitakala Academy, the Bengal Foundation, Bangla Academy, the Nazrul Institute, Bangladesh Betar, and the Chhayanaut Sangeet Vidyatan. I am grateful to them all. To my many remaining friends and contacts all over Bangladesh—especially through their connections to shrine cultures in Dhaka, Chittagong, Sylhet, Faridpur, Rangpur, Mymensingh, Comilla, Rajshahi, Kushtia, and Barisal—I have gained so much from your deep knowledge, hospitality and selflessness.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to my wife, Khalada Sultana Milon, herself an amazing scholar of Bengali literature, and an invaluable resource for me. Not only has she been enormously patient and steadfast throughout these years of writing but, as a seventh “member” of my committee, has critically reviewed documents and translations on my behalf that only she could do with such finesse, diligence, and perspicacity. My young children Marwa and Maahi, too, have not only been a (mostly) pleasant distraction to my writing, but have occasionally

provided their own feedback, in the delightfully dispassionate and unapologetic way that children can provide clarity, whenever I have sat down with them with my dotārā lute in hand.

Lastly, I thank Bangladesh. Bangladeshis living abroad are quick to clarify that their country is in fact a prosperous and progressive one, that despite the corruption and mayhem which flood news reports, the booming private sector and stimulated youth are changing the fate of their nation. But if I am to be honest, I am most grateful for Bangladesh's obscure place in the peripheral footnotes of history. In the 1971 Concert for Bangladesh, a famous benefit performance for refugees surviving both Liberation War-related atrocities and the devastation of the Bhola cyclone, George Harrison sang, "such a great disaster, I don't understand but it sure looks like a mess." After independence, Bangladesh quickly fell off the radar for many, perhaps compounded by another war in Vietnam and the young nation's quick nosedive into political ineptitude. Yet I honor and am beholden to this unfortunate outcome. My own ambiguities as a Bangladeshi American seem to be situated in a strange mirroring of Muslim Bengal's long-enshrouded otherness, and as I have strived to know her through song, I have consequently acquired something invaluable, even if somewhat intangible, about music and myself.

BMK

## Note on Transliteration

Bengali does not have a standardized system for transliteration in academic writing. Most scholars, especially those trained in or focusing on Indian Bengali, tend to use a type of pseudo-Sanskritic system of diacritics. While this transliteration scheme highlights Bengali's etymological and orthographic development as a Prakrit-derived language, it fails to represent its actual pronunciation, which is unique to the eastern Indo-Aryan language family. My intention to partially deviate from this scheme is informed by this dissertation's focus on Bangladesh. For the average speaker in Bangladesh, Bengali is largely understood and celebrated on its own terms, and linguistic associations with other languages are often trivialized or not readily known. Utilizing an overtly Sanskritic scheme for transliteration, therefore, seems inconsequential to representing non-Indian Bengali and Bangladeshi subjectivities. Throughout this work, I have chosen to utilize an approach that mixes conventional Sanskrit-derived diacritics, with other symbols in the International Phonetic Alphabet that more accurately represent Bengali phonemes. My overall method is somewhat influenced by the British poet, writer, and translator William Radice. A few additional Bengali letters are absent in this phonetically-based transliteration, as they do not have a unique phoneme but are rather markers that elongate conjoining phonemes or are conventional orthographic features in words that are otherwise silent.

A guide to the Bengali transliteration scheme used in this work is described below. I have used this system throughout my thesis, except when specifically referring to foreign words used in Bengali, or the literary cultures associated with such terminology. In these cases, I defer to standard transliteration schemes common to Sanskrit/Hindi or Persian/Arabic.

o	inherent vowel, as in <b>awe</b>
ô	inherent vowel, same as <b>o</b>
ā	as in the Spanish <b>mañana</b>
æ	as in <b>apple</b>
i	identical to ī although sometimes short, as in <b>insist</b>
ī	as in <b>immense</b>
u	identical to ū
ū	as in <b>bamboozle</b>
e	as in the French <b>la tête</b>
oi	a diphthong, combining o with i
o	as in the Spanish <b>el teléfono</b>
ou	a diphthong, combining o with u
ṛ	as in the Spanish <b>río</b> ; a fairly uncommon sound in Bengali except for certain Sanskritic words
k	as in the Spanish <b>la casa</b>
kh	as in <b>break house</b>
g	as in the Spanish <b>el gato</b>

gh	as in
ŋ	as in <b>bang</b>
c	as in the Spanish la <b>ca</b> sa
ch	aspirated palatal c sound
j	as in <b>jack</b>
jh	as in <b>bridge house</b>
ɲ	palatal n sound
ʈ	retroflex t sound
ʈʰ	aspirated retroflex t sound
ɖ	retroflex d sound
ɖʰ	aspirated retroflex d sound
ɳ	retroflex n sound
t	as in the Spanish el <b>telé</b> fono
ʈʰ	aspirated dental t sound
d	as in the Spanish el <b>día</b>
dh	as in <b>dog house</b>
n	as in <b>neon</b>
p	as in the Spanish el <b>pap</b> el
ph	as in <b>flip house</b>
b	as in the Spanish el <b>ba</b> ño
bh	as in <b>club house</b>
m	as in <b>money</b>
ɟ	identical to j
r	similar to the Spanish r, but not rr (except in certain forms of vernacular Bengali)
l	as in <b>lake</b>
ʃ	the palatal sibilant, but identical to the dental sibilant in sound
ʂ	the retroflex sibilant, but identical to the dental sibilant in sound
s	the dental sibilant, but pronounced like <b>ship</b>
h	as in <b>house</b>
ɽ	retroflex r sound
ɽʰ	aspirated retroflex r sound; a fairly uncommon sound in Bengali except for certain Sanskritic loan words
y/w	as in <b>yacht</b> or <b>wait</b> ; in Bengali this letter is sounded as a “y” when preceded by the vowel a or i but sounded as a “w” when preceded by an o or u; the y/w sound is always medial and never occurs at the start of a word

## List of Figures

1.1	The bōyāti Farhad Ali Boyati and his disciple Bilal Chaudhury	15
1.2	An undivided map of the Presidency of Bengal (1930)	19
1.3	A performance of pālāgān by Razzak Raja	54
1.4	Sunni Bengali girls in a stylized Shī‘a procession	61
2.1	The bōyāti artist Parimal Sarkar	71
2.2	Obituary of Lālôn, date October 31, 1890	82
2.3	The performer Asim Baul	90
2.4	The bhāṭiyāli contour	102
2.5	The bicched contour	103
2.6	The bāul contour	104
2.7	Dotārā player Shamsuddin Haque Liton	106
2.8	A common strumming pattern on the dotārā	108
2.9	The bānglā ḍhol drum	109
2.10	Entranceway to the mausoleum of Shāh Ghāzi-Kālu-Campābatī	118
2.11	An original Urdu lyric written in Bengali script by Ramesh Sheel (1877-1967)	131
3.1	Some common binary templates in bicār gān, as displayed on VCD covers	143
3.2	The bōyāti artist Mukta Sarkar	181
3.3	A ḍhuli drummer and various accompanists	192
3.4	A pandal announcing an annual festival honoring Abdul Halim (1929–2007)	208
4.1	Video stills demonstrating gesture, or iḡārā, in a bicār gān debate	224
4.2	Negotiating debate strategies	233
4.3	The common structure for a sequence of pālā-s in a bicār gān debate	235
5.1	A blindfolded bāul couple undergoing the initiation ceremony	256
5.2	Four national monuments in Bangladesh	264
5.3	Three itinerant troupes associated with vernacular performances in Bengal	268
5.4	Four major shrines in Bangladesh	270
5.5	Central districts in the bōyāti belt	277
5.6	Three types of shrines as venues for bōyāti performance	279
5.7	The artist Ripan Dewan at the bōyāti shrine of Shāh Ṣufī Dewān Mālik Chānd	282
5.8	The tomb of the recently-deceased saint Hazrat Shāh ‘Abdul ‘Azīz	284
6.1	A war-era poster produced by the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting	313
6.2	The reverse of a U.S. picture sleeve to George Harrison’s song <i>Bangla Desh</i>	314

## List of Tables

3.1	The strophic form of the composition <i>thākte mānuṣ cene nā re</i>	149
3.2	Common saint-composers and their associated <i>kerāmôt</i>	171
3.3	Some truncated melodic motifs used in <i>bicār gān</i>	182
3.4	Some stock rhythmic patterns used in <i>bicār gān</i>	183
3.5	Examples of notable <i>chāyā</i> , or compositional imagery, used in <i>bicār gān</i>	211
4.1	Various gestures incorporated in the production of <i>ijārā</i>	221
5.1	Some shrines and their associated regional debate styles	289

## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines the bôyāti community of Bangladesh, a network of Sufi bards and interlocutors who engage in a shrine-based debate performance, and the manner in which their aggregative musicality is structured around an extemporized form of compositional devotionalism. Individual elements of this stylized genre's versified, saintly, musical, and gestured components combine in creative ways in order to navigate a spectrum of Bengali Muslim subjectivities, the sprawling routes of shrine networks within the nation, and the bôyāti community's own liminal identity in popular discourse. This study seeks further to articulate how a discursive and dialectical performance of song and narrative reifies an evocation of otherness brought on by three major border configurations in the twentieth century, a lengthy and complicated relationship with Muslim piety, and distinctive geopolitical relationships between Bangladesh and other South Asian nation states, the greater Muslim world, and its own transglobal citizenry.

## Prologue

This thesis seeks to complicate the vernacularized, liminal, and interventional qualities of a musical devotionism in Bangladesh. I focus on the somewhat obscure but increasingly familiar *bôyāti* community and their contemporary relationship to a rich shrine culture, one with varying degrees of relevance to *bôyāti* artists, and a stylized, dialectical performance tradition known as *bicār gān*. I bookend my writing with a historical and literary discussion of Bengali Muslims, as well as of the interaction between traditional song compendiums and the musical economy of Sufism and Sufi femininity in Bangladesh. However, my central arguments revolve around an examination of the *bôyāti* community itself—Sufi bards with a highly amalgamated approach to musical style—and the spiritual ecology of Sufi shrines in Bangladesh—a bewildering array of mausoleums endorsing divergent pietistic sentiments.

Ultimately, *bôyāti* musicality is a vast repository of genres and forms, and has never focused on the particulars of one genre, musical disposition, or form of patronage; these alignments have changed over milieu. The regional domain of Sufi shrine performance, too, provides an advantageous space for the bricolage of *bôyāti* artists and the debate genre to unfold since traditional shrine culture in Bangladesh is a place of dubiety. The spiritual objectives of pedigreed brotherhoods, the dissimilar ways in which institutionalized Sufism has interfaced with conservative or revivalist dogma, and the cultural appropriations of Sufi heritage by the Bangladeshi state make the vast array of shrines throughout the nation remarkable sites of a pointillistic piety that complicates the purity or stability of a precise devotional truth.

In contemporary Bangladesh, the community of bôyāti artists and the shrine venue converge through the genre of bicār gān—a highly stylized, rhetorical, and dialectical performance between two bôyāti artists in an impromptu setting—ruminating on a variety of religious and non-religious topics. Overall, an examination of this community, its repertoire, and the shrine venue is an aggregative musical reflection of Bengali Muslim piety through the ages. Outwardly, the discursiveness of bicār gān reflects the sense of “otherness” that Muslim Bengal has long felt in relationship to presiding bureaucracies and cultural hegemonies over eras of time. Internally, bicār gān also reflects various impressions along a continuum representing gradations of “Bengali-ness” and “Muslim-ness” that can be heard through the musical arrangements of a vast song tradition that is central to its repertoire.

My utilization of the term “Bengali-ness” is partially inspired by Mridula Nath Chakraborty’s edited volume *Being Bengali: At Home and in the World* (2014), in which various authors elaborate on the implications of Bengali-ness through examinations of national identity formation, caste and class, gender and sexuality, modernity, sacralization, literary development, as well as border negotiations, migration patterns, and transnationalism. While inquiries into identity have assumed an overwhelming place in both scholarly and more public discourse, attempting to better understand why identity maintains such a vital place in the contemporary human imagination is particularly pertinent for both Bengali, the sixth largest spoken language in the world, and the Bengal delta, a geopolitically and socioeconomically strategic region in South Asia. On the one hand, a sense of Bengali-ness is powerfully consolidated through a common language, and Bangladesh, the focus of this dissertation, is one of the few nation states in the Indian Subcontinent today whose demographics are largely shaped by one remarkably

overarching linguistic majority. On the other hand, the region of Muslim Bengal and contemporary Bangladesh, in particular, has undergone an unprecedented series of transformations over milieu that have increasingly complicated the implications of Bengali-ness. Ideas of Bengali-ness significantly amalgamated for the first time in the fifteenth century, but underwent further permutations under Mughal and British rule, through the nineteenth-century sociopolitical and literary movement known as the Bengal Renaissance, and was further informed by a variety of regional distinctions over the course of three major border alignments in the twentieth century. In addition, the spectrum of Bengali-ness has been coupled by more recent yet unprecedented waves of sectarianism and religious fundamentalism, dramatic political reversals in bureaucracy, the nature of a liminal yet progressive economic growth, and a massive global dispersion of those who consider themselves Bengali.

In a similar fashion, my use of the term *Muslim-ness* reflects the broad ambit of religiosity amongst Bengali Muslims, and is partially a play on the term *Hindutva*, which is often translated as “Hindu-ness.” While this analogy might seem contentious, the term *Hindutva*—despite the modern-day politicization of this term and its associations with rising and unapologetic Hindu conservatism—is in fact a word that has had different meanings for different groups over the last century.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, *Muslim-ness*, when defined as a state of being Muslim, should not necessarily be understood in reactionary terms, as a means of reifying solidarity through a supposedly homogenized majority, or as a rationale for brutally asserting cultural hegemony. Rather, *Muslim-ness* is an inclusive term that represents the gamut of Muslim-inspired sensibilities that have been a part of the religious landscape of Bengal over centuries,

---

<sup>1</sup> The original popularization of the term *Hindutva* is generally credited to Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966) in 1923 (Bhatt 2001).

from deeply conventionalist forms of piety to speculative and skeptical frameworks. In addition, the term *Hindutva* is an amalgamation of the words Hindu and *tattva*, the latter, according to various schools of Indian philosophy, evokes a “that-ness” in Sanskrit, referring to the poignant yet sometimes indeterminate characteristics of a particular principle or reality. In Bengali, the correlating term *tôttô* is used by certain musicians, including *bôyâti* artists, to describe the discursive and malleable elements of their song repertoire. As such, a *nāmāz tôttô* song is on “prayer-ness,” while a *nôbî tôttô* song is on “prophet-ness.” Bengali-ness and Muslim-ness are therefore a reflection of past and present constructions of social identity that maintain concurrent meaning in contemporary Bangladesh, reflecting the abiding precariousness with which Bengali Muslims have understood their own cultural associations, and between the various notions that having giving meaning to their ethnic distinctiveness and religious orientations.

The main argument in this dissertation posits that the *bôyâti* artist’s performance of *bicār gān* in Bangladesh provides commentary on Bengali-ness and Muslim-ness through a certain musical sublimation that is supplemented by a nexus of religious, geographical, and managerial authorities that inform shrine venues. This phenomenon stimulates a particular form of devotionism, one that exhibits a number of distinctive features.

First, this devotionism represents a style of musical navigation, a larger performance process that focuses on the transitional exchange of ideas in the devotional moment. More generally, pietism is understood through the lens of devotional experience and practices, and sometimes as a reaction to formalism and intellectualism.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the moniker devotionism typically refers to the quality or state of an individual or group that is markedly characterized by

---

<sup>2</sup> Consider, for example, the seventeenth-century religious movement originating in Germany.

religious devotion. In both Indic and Islamic forms of worship, the nature of devotionism is also commonly emphasized as a practitioner-focused phenomenon. For instance, in Hinduism, the ubiquitous term *bhakti* (“attachment,” “participation,” or “purity”) generally refers to devotion to, and love for, a personal god or a representational god by a devotee. In classical Sufism, *samāʿ* is the ritualized “hearing” of devotionism through prayer, song, and dance, thus engaging in the close act of listening in order to achieve spiritual growth and closeness with divinity.

The *bôyāti* artist’s mediation through *bicār gān* is distinctive in that, while it certainly elicits a devotional reaction or response by those who partake in its performance, the complex musical generation of *bicār gān* on stage critically enacts a devotionism itself. In particular, it features an aggregation of diverse song styles, poetic sensibilities, and approaches to storytelling that have been in circulation for milieu. As a rhetorical debate, the charm of *bicār gān* lies in its ability to negotiate, interpret, and rehash individual sonic and lyrical ideas, thereby providing a unique and highly stylized commentary on the layered and conflicting tropes of Bengali-ness and Muslim-ness.

Secondly, as a result, this compositional devotionism is not a riposte to or dispassionate deflection of dogma or religious convention, but embraces various aspects of scholarly and popular piety. It is not simply understood to be unapologetic or primordial in tone, but subtly mediates concurrent and conflicting ideas of religiosity. Its ultimate sacredness lies in this bricolage (Lévi-Strauss 1966, Derrida 1978, Hebdige 1979). Like the bricoleur, the *bôyāti* is not overly concerned about the coherence of words or ideas, and often uses terms and concepts without acknowledging the validity or truth of the system that produced these ideas. In the debate

genre of *bicār gān* in particular, the *bōyāti* understands the relevance of the elements of devotionalism not as something eternal and immutable, but as something provisional and shifting. Furthermore, the *bōyāti* is in a particularly favorable position to recreate with whatever is at hand because the nature of *bōyāti* musicality is profoundly inclusive. In this way, the performance of *bicār gān* is a running and impromptu exegesis on liminality through the devotional act of expressing the inexpressible. Furthermore, the manner in which this devotionality mediates pietistic streams is acutely attached to the shrine venue. In *bōyāti* performances at Bangladeshi shrines today, the Sufi notion of saintly intercession is somewhat trivialized, and is overridden by a stronger emphasis on the sonic intercessions of musical and nonmusical materials on stage. Delicately bypassing the overriding centrality of a corporeal sacredness, this performative material itself represents the devotional act, while the singer and shrine are the conduits for its sublimation.

Thirdly, this devotionalism is cherished—by those who perform it and participate in it—as deeply immersed in the regional pride of Bangladeshis, which itself is tied to longstanding celebrations of decentralized landscape that symbolize an inherent aspect of the territory. This reverence for the localized is neither situated in a general history of otherness nor within the notion of “great” and “little” traditions (Redfield and Singer 1954),<sup>3</sup> but in a geographically-centered agency where divergent streams of piety—popular, revivalist, speculative—have long coalesced and been investigated, challenged, or reinterpreted with creativity and rigor in Muslim Bengal. The idea of the rural conjures the powerful but thorny relationship between piety and

---

<sup>3</sup> As Richard Wolf has argued, “ethnomusicologists have continued to use the terms ‘great’ and ‘little’ even as they fell out of common use in anthropology, perhaps because they seem to parallel indigenous terminological distinctions like *mārga* and *deśī*” (2009:13). Consider, for example, Sheldon Pollock’s discussion of Sanskrit literary traditions as being distinguished by “cultural practices of the great ‘way’ and those of ‘place’” (2002: 21).

resistance (Foucault 1978, Mahmood 2004), and Bengali Muslim authors, proselytizers, and statesmen have repeatedly engaged, physically and figuratively, with this domain in order to accentuate a sense of communal identity. However, this introspective engagement has always had outward manifestations—in the face of an urban Bengali Hindu renaissance, Pakistani governance, and myriad forces that shape contemporary Bangladeshi relationships with other nation states of the Indian Subcontinent, larger Asian economies, and the non-Bengali Muslim world.

By way of introduction, the opening chapter of this dissertation focuses on the particularities of a precursory literary heritage as it developed in Muslim Bengal. Here, I provide a select overview of literature and scholarship that has informed Bengali Muslim devotionism through a lengthy and convoluted history of poetry, sociopolitical reorientations, and exhibition. I also speculate on the origins and development of the *bôyāti* community through various texts.

Since *bôyāti* musicianship is an accumulation of many musical, theological, or aesthetic choices, the second chapter seeks to delineate how one might grasp the foundational qualities of contemporary *bôyāti* performance. I consider seven distinctive musical modalities that inform *bôyāti* musicianship, including Islamic constructs of erudition and exegesis, the legacy of Hindu Bengali devotional song, the compositional style of Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Urdu-language lyricism, and the semi-classical music form. Overall, these modalities might be understood as belonging to a continuum, with the first modalities having a more direct consequence on the artistic processes that govern modern *bôyāti* performance, and the latter half increasingly affecting the form and sound of *bôyāti* music.

The third and central chapter examines the individual components constructed around a song base that comprise the debate genre known as *bicār gān*. I examine its versified, saintly, thematic, and musical building blocks—and the manner in which these elemental ingredients are creatively rerouted through a performance by evoking a range of sentiments using biographical, syntactical, or sonic allusions.

The fourth chapter turns to an analysis of non-musical elements of the *bicār gān* debate. I consider the manner in which gestures draw attention to the multiple devotional positionalities a *bōyāti* embodies on stage, both inner states and inter-performer states, through a variety of stylized gestural acts that exhibit both expository and transformative qualities. In the second part of this chapter, I reincorporate the materials discussed in Chapter Three in order to offer a broader analysis of the overarching performance. I scrutinize the general disposition of rhetorical weight in *bicār gān* in order to grasp to what end its dialectical unfolding is moralized by the ambience of a Sufi-tinged propriety.

The fifth chapter assesses the ambience of the staged debate at shrines through evaluations of geography, pedagogy, pilgrimage, patronage, and arbitration. I argue that the *bōyāti* community's alliance with shrines as musical venues in Bangladesh provides them with a strikingly productive platform for performance. On the one hand, local shrine committees who aim to find relevance in a bewildering array of disparate pilgrimage networks in Bangladesh are increasingly open to the prospects of solemnizing *bōyāti* performance at their shrines. On the other hand, *bōyāti* artists themselves are drawn to the musical impermanence of shrine stages, which allows them to experiment and broaden their skills at these somewhat more discrete

locales, with little hindrance from disruptive crowds or the demands of larger shrine bureaucracies.

The concluding chapter aims to situate and examine the rise of the fakirāni in popular discourse, or the female Sufi musician in Bangladesh, emerging from her prominent place in the bōyāti community. A central discussion here concerns women bōyāti artists and their negotiation through various notions of womanhood and motherhood—as shaped by state propaganda and the music industry, but also the unique phenomenon of rural village piety—that ultimately converge and move beyond the world of bicār gān and vernacular Bengali performance.

This dissertation was written over the course of three major fieldwork trips to sites in and around Bangladesh, as well as several smaller follow-up visits. Given that the bicār gān debate and its related shrine venues are not an urban phenomenon, and that bōyāti artists themselves primarily converse in various registers of Muslim Bengali speech, a considerable amount of effort was required to both productively interface with such musicians and familiarize myself with the complexities of a broader devotional terrain. Beyond conducting important documentary analysis in archives and through the works of other scholars, as well as having critical interactions with experts beyond the bōyāti community, my site-based research was three-fold.

Firstly, formal and informal interviews with bōyāti artists was absolutely essential to evaluating and interpreting this musical performance tradition and its related features. Importantly, my personal communications with bōyāti artists almost always involved a dotārā lute in hand. Not only did the pedagogical encounter of learning music from them while engaging in discussion prove to be an effective way of breaking down barriers, but it allowed for the practical demonstration of many subtle musical maneuvers required to generate bōyāti

devotionalism on stage. Furthermore, I believe that in many instances this hands-on approach to the interview process aided in building camaraderie with many bôyāti artists precisely because they see themselves as not only musicians but scholars in their own right. Sitting and playing music together established a certain rapport that often diminished the burden of having to particularize my position as an ethnomusicologist, or as someone who “looked” Bengali yet, in many ways, was not. Rather, these “musical” interviews reinforced our shared interests in learning and playing, and helped to bring out more detailed discussions freely over tea and tuning.

Secondly, my observational research was primarily enhanced by the use of hundreds of hours of single or multiple still camera video recordings. Analysis of video recording has proved useful for many ethnomusicologists over the decades and, in the South Asian context, has been critical to works ranging from Regula Qureshi’s detailed examination of participatory reaction to qawwālī devotional music (1986) to Matt Rahaim’s intricate look at the interplay of gesture and vocal exposition in the khyal tradition of Hindustani music (2012). The main advantages for producing video recordings of bicār gān relate to the fact that bôyāti artists largely remain stationary and standing on stage and, in addition, as a long-form performance genre, artists and audiences alike generally neglect the imposition of the camera over the course of the debate’s leisurely rendering. As an ethnographical tool, the power of the camera’s ability to capture empirical data was necessarily, because the visual material produced with the camera has the potential to both show a perspective of fieldwork that is not obstructed by the personal recollection of the fieldworker, as well as simultaneously capture the random or divergent acts happening elsewhere on stage or in the audience.

Thirdly, and finally, given the hyper-regionalism of this material, it became essential for me to limit the scope of my detailed analyses of the expansiveness of bôyāti musicianship, the rhetorical style of bicār gān, and the complexity of its shrine venues, in relationship to other sacred spaces in Bangladesh. In addition to conducting broader research on shrine performance throughout Bangladesh, and within various regions of the bôyāti belt, my in-depth examination was therefore limited to a handful of bôyāti artists and shrine performance sites within the districts of Faridpur, Rajshahi, and Gopalganj. Focusing on these three adjacent regions—where I had particularly developed a familiarity with localized musical networks and forged productive relationships with artists, audiences, and shrine administrators—allowed me to selectively draw conclusions on the nature of devotionism in an otherwise sprawling and confusing performance tradition while situating such material in the broader discussions of genocide, modernity, sociopolitical turmoil, spiritual economies, mobility and agency, class and gender, and the repercussions of various forms of movement that further inform the shape of my writing.

## Chapter One

### Poetics, Pieties, and Bengali Muslim Subjectivities

Strange to say, the reformed Muhammadans of Dacca still cling to many Hindu superstitions in spite of the denunciations of the Maulavis.

—James Wise<sup>1</sup>  
*Notes on the Races, Castes, and Trades of Eastern Bengal*, 1883

This opening chapter focuses on the particularities of a precursory literary heritage as it developed in Muslim Bengal. This exposition functions as an indirect introduction to the bôyāti community of Bangladesh, a loose network of bardic Sufi musicians that are the central object of study in this dissertation. I claim that bôyāti musicianship is situated in the multifarious dimensions of Bengali Muslim devotionality through a lengthy and convoluted history of poetry, sociopolitical reorientations, and exhibition. However, as a living tradition, bôyāti artists and their music are grounded in both the past and the present, in antiquated and newfangled approaches to piety. Furthermore, this continuum allows for the seemingly contradictory tropes of the obscure and the fashionable to intermingle in a devotionality that poignantly articulates incongruity through conjecture, hyperbole, and absurdism.

This chapter mainly lays the foundation for this dialectical bricolage through an examination of literary subjectivities over epochs, summarizing the historical formation and evolution of a Muslim poetic style in Bengali, particularly through the compositions of certain religious texts and the social environments of their authors, drawing on select written genres and a body of scholarship that has examined Bengali Muslim identity politics. Through this varied history, I seek to articulate contemporary complexities found in Bengali Muslim subjectivity

---

<sup>1</sup> James Fawns Norton Wise (d. 1886) was a British civil surgeon and historian of Dhaka.

through song, which traverses layers of poetic style, musical constructions, scholarly pursuits, devotional impressions, and cultural agitations over various milieux. Numerous components of this patchwork, I argue, must be critically understood in relationship to one another in order to make sense of a larger trajectory of mediations that concurrently problematize what it means to be both Bengali and Muslim. In the final section, I reintroduce the bôyāti community of Bangladesh, considering not only how their musical disposition mirrors this striking literary history but how the Bengali literati have subsequently viewed them. The premise of this investigation is that a more resilient understanding of Bengali-ness or Muslim-ness can be articulated through discrete interconnections between the production of lyrical content and the reception of its sounded performance, which is extensively scrutinized in the subsequent chapters and lies at the heart of bôyāti discursiveness. This perspective seems particularly critical for such an endeavor, given the many obscurations which are found along the investigative trajectory. I ultimately seek to examine the legacy of poetry, music and mystical thought in Bengal on its own terms, how it functions as an exceptional vessel for expressing and sublimating ideas of self-identity through myriad bureaucratic endeavors, literary achievements and popular discourses.

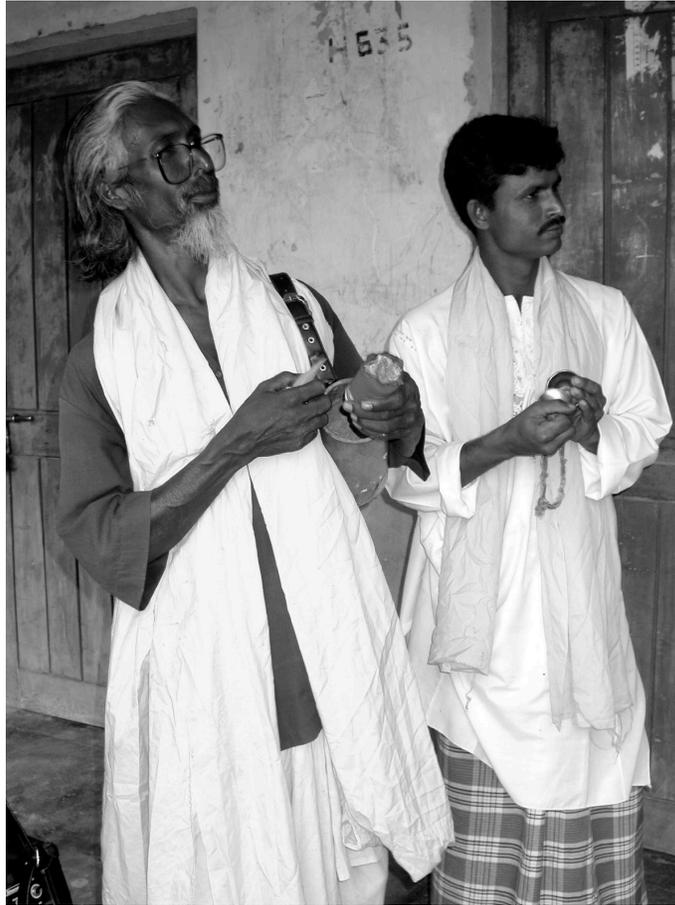
### **The Bôyāti in Literature: A Brief History**

In order to understand something of the manner in which the prism of Bengali Muslim piety has transmuted and endured in the independence era through its poetic structures and spiritual institutions, it is important to examine bôyāti artists and their popularity in vernacular performance. For a number of reasons, the evolution of the bôyāti community's decisive place in historic East Bengal remains perplexing, though literary references over the past century which passively comment on bôyāti musicianship provide some insight. The shape of contemporary

bôyāti performance, however, seems rooted in the early twentieth century, when a notable concoction of pointillistic themes and dialectical interplay in staged bôyāti venues would popularize, and offer a profound medium through which Bengali Muslim subjectivities could be musically articulated. As will be elucidated in subsequent chapters,<sup>2</sup> the emergence of this art form is further strengthened by a particular tradition of mystical song which would also proliferate in the same era, pioneered by a coterie of regional saint-composers mostly situated in the agrarian east, whose poetic sensibilities and spiritual inclinations would simultaneously contain retroflexive snapshots of Muslim pietism while maintaining an aesthetic open-endedness. While these two entities—bôyāti artists and a modern mystical song canon—burgeoned in separate but interactive environments, the musical bond that they formed became all the more meaningful through the performance spaces of Sufi shrines in contemporary Bangladesh in the later half of the twentieth century. Rather than simply representing the “inner” or “less orthodox” dimensions of Islamic heritage in Bengal, the Sufi shrine has come to represent a composite history of Islam in the region, and the various projections of Muslim-ness that have endured through milieux. Together, the enigmatic and multifarious expanse of shrine cultures in modern Bangladesh, a specific song-poem tradition, and the pioneering efforts of bôyāti artists, has cleverly negotiated a large and seemingly disconnected bricolage of popular devotional and non-devotional sentiments, retaining resilience as Muslim Bengal has undergone further transformations with regard to its literary heritage, politicized constructions of place, and the cultural economy of its people in the twentieth century.

---

<sup>2</sup> Chapter Three introduces the genre of *bhāb sōngīt*—a collection of songs which originates in the same era and across geographical and devotional spaces—representing a body of pieces that have exemplified regionalism through a canonized heritage of nonaligned spiritual personas.



**Figure 1.1. The bôyāti artist Farhad Ali Boyati (left), and his disciple Bilal Chaudhury (right).**

Like the word *bāul*,<sup>3</sup> which has long been scrutinized with extensive etymological inquiry, the word *bôyāti* seems riddled with multiple origin theories. A plausible notion, however, seems to be that it is inspired by the Arabic *bay'ah* (“sale” or “transaction”) which, in Sufi terminology, refers to an oath of allegiance to a sheikh, or the larger initiating act of joining a brotherhood by dedicating oneself to a sheikh in exchange for spiritual knowledge. While the shape of the *bôyāti* song canon has shifted in different directions over eras of time, their central

---

<sup>3</sup> This separate but interconnected community, which will be further discussed in Chapter Two, comprise only a small fraction of the Bengali population, yet their influence on the culture of Bengal is far more considerable. In 2005, the *bāul* tradition of Bangladesh was included in the list of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.

association with Sufi piety has remained an integral part of their overall identity. Another plausible definition is connected to the Bengali word *bāynā*, which is related by root to the Arabic *bay‘ah*, referring to remuneration delineated through written contract for services rendered. While *bōyāti* artists emphasize a deep attachment to Sufi conventions of style and decorum, they are also typically quite frank about their profession as entertainers: as one artist put it, *āmrā bāynār māddhōme gān bājnā kōri*, “we sing according to agreed-upon fees.” While audience members may directly and stylistically offer (or pin) monetary notes on the musicians during an impassioned performance—which is seen as an act of deference, as in *qawwālī*—the nature of the *bōyāti* artist’s performance is significantly informed by terms stipulated at the time of hire, including repertoire, length of performance, and sometimes specific polemical points to be highlighted on stage. This malleable and ultimately sellable aspect of their performance philosophy also seems to be an enduring facet of their musical style.

As will be repeatedly examined throughout this work, the *bōyāti* community, despite being seemingly advantaged in representing Bengali Muslim subjectivities, have not particularly received the attention of either Bengal Studies scholars or the Bangladeshi intelligentsia. Within Bengal, the *bāul* community have long been purported to represent Bengali vernacular thought and performance, especially through the preoccupations of the Bengal Renaissance,<sup>4</sup> the Subaltern Studies Group,<sup>5</sup> the pioneering achievements of Bengali polymath Rabindranath

---

<sup>4</sup> The Bengal Renaissance, (Bengali: *bānglār nōbōjāgōrṇ*) was a cultural, social, and artistic movement in Bengal the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, and was dominated by Bengal Hindu intellectual proclivities.

<sup>5</sup> The Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) and their anti-essentialist approach, one of history from below, has focused more on what happens among the masses at the base levels of society than among the elite. Notably, the SSG has consisted of pioneering Bengali scholars such as Ranajit Guha (b. 1923), Dipesh Chakrabarty (b. 1948), Partha Chatterjee (b. 1947), Gyan Prakash (b. 1952), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (b. 1942). With the influence of the SSG, the particulars of *bāul* philosophy and its quirky descriptions of love and devotion have been commonly examined through the lens of poetic subversion through colloquial art.

Tagore (1861–1941),<sup>6</sup> and various twentieth-century forays into New Age spirituality.<sup>7</sup> These initiatives—drawn to the distinctive musical styling, ideology and social organization of the bāul community—have repeatedly trivialized bôyāti musicianship, a phenomenon that might be better characterized as an aggregative pastiche of devotional sounds and themes. In addition, bôyāti attachment to Sufi practice and shrine culture has further underplayed their significance in the public eye, reflecting the liminality of contemporary views on saintly intercession and its position between a timeless Muslim heritage and the areligious qualities of Bangladesh’s ethnolinguistic nationalism.

This chapter’s focus on poetics and pieties attempts to summarize the literary works and revivalist ideologies that uniquely developed in East Bengal, the enduring qualities and points of contention that have long influenced the shape Bengali Muslim thought. In this manner, one can better investigate the ways in which Bengali Muslims have viewed themselves and their identity with regard to their Hindu brethren, Urdu-speaking Muslims of North India, and the broader Islamic world. This insight brings clarity to the processes of music-making in the bôyāti world, and their penchant for juxtaposing or repositioning a range of pertinent devotional dispositions through a stylized debate performance.

### **Tropes of Bengal and Bangladesh, Islam and Bengali Muslims**

Bengali Muslims—a large ethnoreligious group found across regions of East India and Bangladesh, as well as through a sizable global network—are frequently regarded as one of the largest non-Arab Muslim communities on earth (Roy 1983, Cashin 1993, Eaton 1996, Jahan

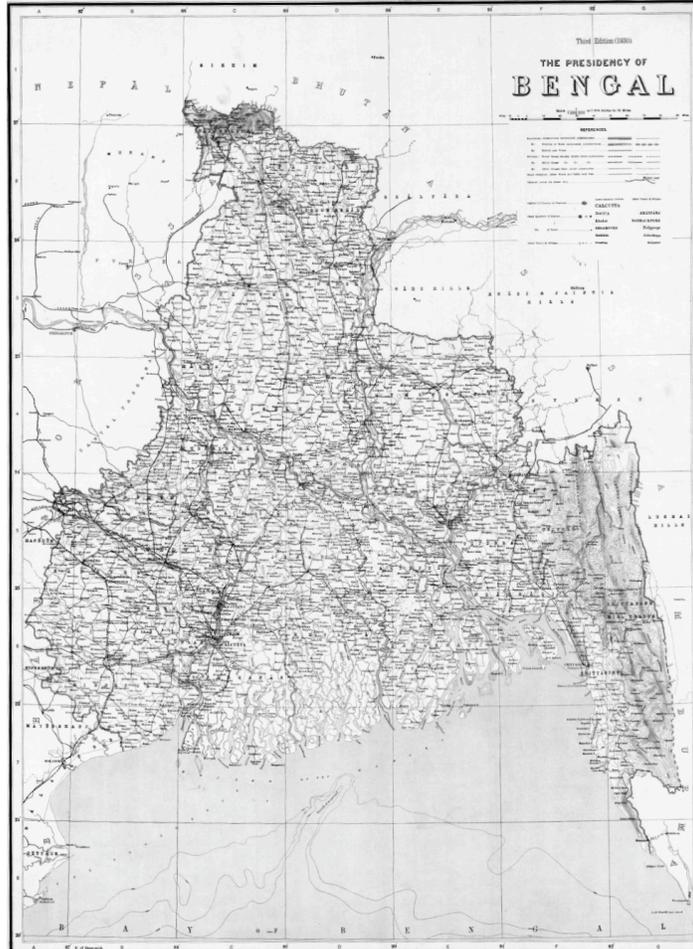
---

<sup>6</sup> Tagore wrote of number of Bengali pieces in the style of bāul song, and his epiphanic interactions with the bāul community had an enormous influence on his writings, cultural beliefs, and compositional strategies.

<sup>7</sup> Helen Croveto’s work on the Hohm Sahaj Mandir (Hohm Innate Divinity Temple) discusses a new religious movement that has achieved international status under the name “Western Bāul-s” (2006).

2001, Riaz 2004, van Schendel 2009, Lewis 2011, Chowdhury 2011, Irani 2018). Despite this striking statistic, South Asianists have frequently glossed over or conflated Muslim epistemologies in their various attempts to understand what constitutes Bengali-ness. In many ways, the region of Bengal is simultaneously a central regional study in South Asia and yet one that has been largely ignored. More recently, a selection of edited volumes has combined the knowledge of scholars of Bengal's eastern and western provincialities, and with wonderful rigor (Chakrabarty, Majumdar and Sartori 2007; Mridula Nath Chakraborty 2014; Alexander, Chatterji and Jalais 2016). Yet, the broader implications of more Muslim-focused scholarship in Bengal repeatedly suggests a certain disconnect. Scholarly focus on the premodern era vividly highlights a phenomenal outpouring of indigenous Muslim literature, metaphysical musings, and saint-composers. A lack of continued examination of such matters in the last century seems to imply that this heritage was somehow trivialized by the stratagems of modernity, that ideas of what it means to be both Bengali and Muslim have been sabotaged and parochialized by crippling waves of insularity, identity crises, and fundamentalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Over the last century alone, Muslim Bengal's history has itself been muddied by a range of obscurations, including the quandary of Hindu cultural hegemony in the postcolonial era, a remarkable and consequential slew of partitions or border realignments, and lingering internal strife regarding linguistic and religious heritage within the nationstate of Bangladesh. For many decades, the broader scope of contemporary discourses on Bengal has been heavily one-sided, predominantly considering Bengali-ness through the broader traditions of Indic theology, the sociocultural contours of Bengali Hindu reform movements, or the administrative machinations



**Figure 1.2. An undivided map of the Presidency of Bengal that was published under the direction of General C.H.D. Ryder, Surveyor General of India (Third Edition, 1930).<sup>8</sup>**

of the West Bengali state (Dimock 1989, Seeley 1990 and 2004, Capwell 1986, Radice 1998, Korom 2006, Hatcher 2008 and 2014). Consequently, existing writings on Muslim Bengalis have often been conflated with the larger scholarship on other Indian Muslims and, as such, these latter works have commonly been informed by historical issues surrounding Mughal administrative policies (the Muslim imperial power which ruled large portions of pre-modern South Asia), distinct Urdu-medium socio-religious movements (mobilized by the lingua franca of

---

<sup>8</sup> The original version was first published in 1923, in the decade after the Partition of Bengal (of 1905) was rescinded by the Viceroy of India (in 1911).

a large Muslim demographic outside of Bengal), or contemporary India-Pakistan relations (from which the emergence of Bangladesh has been peripherally understood).

Research on Muslim Bengal has nonetheless produced a small but convincing body of work, though a canonical selection has remained historically-centered, drawing on textual analyses of the speculative metaphysical rhetoric of medieval or premodern Sufi authors (Roy 1983, Cashin 1993, Eaton 1993, Salomon 2017), or philological reconstructions of overlooked Bengali Muslim works through the cultural environs of their authors (Stewart 2004 and 2010, Irani 2018, d’Hubert 2018). In comparison, a burgeoning volume of publications are more contemporary, fixated on the incongruences of political Islam-s and Bangladeshi governance, or various matters related to interclass conflict, gender relations or the structure of public protest movements with regard to these overriding issues (Jahan 2001, Riaz 2004, Elora Chowdhury 2011, Nusrat Chowdhury 2019). While the first body of scholarship has considered pertinent impressions of mysticism in the Muslim Bengali idiom, it has characteristically severed itself from the complex layers of popular sentiment that inform modern Bangladeshi notions of religiosity. The second body of work, that of the recent expansion of Islamic factions in contemporary politics, remains conversely ahistorical in conception, failing to reconcile with the classic and enduring forms of piety that abound in poetic expression. Both ends, while recognizing the potency of religious discourse, seem to gravitate towards either end of a spectrum, perhaps a reflection of the lingering trope within the discussions of the Islamization of South Asia that anthropologist Charles Lindholm has aptly described as “dualist” and “essentialist” (1996). While one end argues that Muslim practices on the subcontinent are generally characterized by a high degree of “syncretism” and are thoroughly woven into the

multicultural fabric of the region, the other argues that South Asian Muslims are and have been historically moving closer to visions of conformity held in common throughout the Islamic world.

In the meantime, a broader range of scholars (and increasingly non-scholars) of Islam have begun to address multiple and contesting interpretations in Islamic intellectual history in order to counter dominant, essentialist understandings, yet ongoing contestations over “moderate” and “extremist” interpretations continue to define the scope and approach to much research (Lewis 2011). Historically, the academic study of Islam has tended to conceive as its object a discursive tradition based upon the prescriptive authority of foundational texts such as the Qur’ān and Aḥādīth<sup>9</sup> and their multiple elaborations. This has, as a result, allowed for a growing body of literature that attends to the centrality of sainthood, shrine culture, mystical poetry, and music as constitutive elements of Islam. Closely examining contemporary Islam amongst Bengali Muslims, however, complicates this framework by suggesting that a normative Islamic moral order using poetry, music, and communal ritual simultaneously embraces, in varying degrees, the prescriptive authority of foundational texts and the associated tropes of classical Islamic knowledge in Bangladeshi society today. Examining the manner in which these teleologies interact concurrently with one another through the dynamically open-ended spaces of Bangladeshi shrines and the prominent aesthetic flavor of indeterminacy in Bangladeshi vernacular performance suggests an on-going process that shapes Bengali-ness and Muslim-ness, one that provides another angle from which to examine contemporary discussions of critique, blasphemy, and free speech that seem to plague the Muslim world.

---

<sup>9</sup> The documented sayings, actions or approvals of the Prophet Muḥammad.

## Sounding Bengali: Language and Devotional Song

môṅ tōrū pāncô indi tōsu sâhâ âsâ bohôl pāt phol bâhâ	the mind is a tree, the five senses its branches hope bears fruit and leaves in abundance
bôrgurubôṅṅe kuṭhârê chijô kânhu bhônôî tōrū puṅô nô uijô	cut off the branches with the guru's words, like an axe Kanhu says, the branches will not grow back
bârhôî so tōrū subhâsubhô pāṅî chebôî bidujôn gurūpôrimāṅî	the tree grows in the water of good and evil the guru is witness, the wise pull it up
jo tōrū chebôî bheu nô jāṅôî sôri pôriâ re mūrḥô tā bhôbô māṅôî	the one who cannot fathom the mystery of tree-ripping is a fool that is stuck in this worldly existence
suṅo tōrūbôr gôṅṅ kuṭhâr chebôî so tōrū mûl nô đâr	the tree in the void and the axe in the firmament, uproot the tree, leaving neither its roots nor branches

— *Charyāpada* 45  
Kānhupādānām<sup>10</sup> / Rāga Mallārī<sup>11</sup>

Despite its continued focus in the many time-honored disciplines of South Asian scholarship, musicological work in recent decades has increasingly steered away from devotional traditions in the Indian Subcontinent. This phenomenon may be partially a result of a steady interest in popular or regional genres of performance that, despite being traditionally grounded in devotional sentiment, seem inversely to situate notions of the inherently devotional as a part of antiquity, a part of the canonic or monolithic arts of South Asia. No doubt, this contemporary academic bent also reflects the long history in which South Asia has been scrutinized—including the influence of Indology, which has focused on philological and theological approaches to

---

<sup>10</sup> Kanhu (n.d.) was one of the most prolific poets of the known Charyāpada poems in the proto Bengali known as Abahaṭṭha.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps related to the ancient Malhār family of rāga-s, traditionally associated with torrential rains.

cultural study<sup>12</sup>. However, the remaining work that persists on examining devotional music and performance in South Asia—by ethnomusicologists and others—frequently attests to its abiding, metamorphic, and even non-pietistic value in modern life, ultimately suggesting that the efficacy and pervasiveness of its rich and long-standing devotional themes continue to saliently express ideas ranging from the sociopolitical to the quotidian. For example, in his experimental and novelistic ethnography *The Voice in the Drum*, Richard Wolf narratively explores how the themes of South Asian Muslims and their neighbors coming together, moving apart, and relating to God and spiritual intermediaries resonate across ritual and expressive forms such as drumming and dancing (2014). Alternatively, in her seminal work *Singing a Hindu Nation*, Anna Schultz examines the manner in which the political and the devotional are powerfully combined in Maharashtrian kirtan congregations through both intense musical involvement and personified nationalist devotion (2013).<sup>13</sup>

Scholars of Bengali literature often refer to a loose anthology of short poems, known as the Charyāpada or Charyāgīti (Bengali: *côṛjāpāḍ*, “poems of experience”), as the earliest specimens of proto-Bengali literature (see above poem). Palm-leaf manuscripts of the Charyāpada were first rediscovered in the early twentieth century by Haraprasad Shastri (1853–1931)—a Sanskrit scholar as well as archivist and historian of Bengali literature—at the Nepal Royal Court Library, where many such poems were preserved in the Tibetan Buddhist canon.

---

<sup>12</sup> In the wake of eighteenth-century pioneers like William Jones (1746–1794), Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765–1837) or August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845), Indology as an academic subject emerged in the nineteenth century and, in the context of both British India and the disciplinary focus of Asian studies in general, shaped the romantic Orientalism of the time. The Asiatic Society was founded in Calcutta in 1784, Société Asiatique founded in 1822, the Royal Asiatic Society in 1824, the American Oriental Society in 1842, the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft in 1845, and the Japanese Association of Indian and Buddhist Studies in 1949 (Milewska 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Another important work that might be mentioned here is Zoe Sherinian’s *Tamil Folk Music as Dalit Liberation Theology* (2014), which demonstrates how Christian Dalits (once known as untouchables or outcastes) in southern India have employed music to protest social oppression and as a vehicle of liberation.

The Charyāpada essentially emerged from the Vajrayāna tradition of tantric Buddhism in the Pāla Empire, an imperial power during the Late Classical period (ca. eighth-twelfth centuries) on the Indian subcontinent which originated in the region of Bengal (Sen 1999). While theories of their exact period of origin differ, it is commonly suggested that the Charyāpada were written sometime between the tenth and twelfth centuries (Sen 1948, Shahidullah 1967, Sankrityanan 2084, Bhattacharya 2015) and in the Abahaṭṭha form, a critical stage in the evolution of the Eastern group of Indo-Aryan languages. As such, the Charyāpada are often referred to as the oldest collection of written verses from which the modern languages of Bengali, Maithili, Assamese, and Odia evolved (Ghosh 2010). From the existing documents, the Charyāpada seems to have been composed over various milieux and in various geographical areas of East India, by several dozen authors collectively known as *siddhachārya*-s.<sup>14</sup> Shastri himself noted that these poems were composed in a highly symbolic language, possibly meant to be deciphered through a tantric guru, which he referred to as *sōṇddā bhāṣā* (“twilight language”) or *ālo ādhāri* (“light and darkness”) (in Caudhurī 1980). Others have further added that the Charyāpada may have been spontaneously composed in a manner which articulated the poet-practitioner’s enlightened state in a ritualized tantric gathering of music, dance, and festivity (Shaw 1994).

One of the most notable features of the Charyāpada, however, is that in addition to using figurative or allusive language to comment on spiritual practice and metaphysical realities, it also provides critical glimpses into the social lives of the authors and their environment, including geographical locations, depictions of social customs, and the lives of hunters, boatmen, potters

---

<sup>14</sup> For example, the author Luipa is believed to have been from Kamarupa, while Sarahapa from present-day Guwahati; both are part of the ancient kingdom of Assam. On the other hand, the authors Kukkuripa and Bhushukupa are believed to have been from Bengal (Chatterji 1926).

and other traditional artisans. Further, the Charyāpada were clearly poems meant to be heard, as the paratexts of Charyāpada manuscripts list various rāga-s to which the lyrics were subsequently tuned.<sup>15</sup> Thus, this compilation of song-poems critically draw attention to the manner in which mystical thought and melody were sonically infused into the primeval stages of the Bengali language.

### **The Emergence of Bengali Muslim Poetics**

In a display of penitence, cross your arms and bow  
pay respects to Satya Nārāyaṇa<sup>16</sup>  
the one imagined in the Veda<sup>17</sup>  
the embodiment of the Kali Age<sup>18</sup> on earth  
the Lord Khudā<sup>19</sup>, Niranjan<sup>20</sup>  
Rām<sup>21</sup> and Raḥīm<sup>22</sup>, the two who are one  
They are no different in the heavens  
nor in the Qur’ān and the Purāṇ<sup>23</sup>  
To steer through this expanse of sin  
let Satya Pīr<sup>24</sup> be your helmsman  
allow no other to enter your heart.

— Kiṅkar Dās, 1322 BS [1915]

---

<sup>15</sup> Over a dozen rāga-s are mentioned in various Charyāpada manuscripts. Some have remained critical to contemporary classical music performance, such as Kāmod and Bhairavi, while others may have been regional or progenitorial versions of contemporary rāga-s, such as Mallāri (possibly related to the current Malhār family of rāga-s) or Bangāl (possibly related to the hybrid Bangāl Bhairav in the Bhairav family of rāga-s). The most common rāga in the Charyāpada anthology seems to be the archaic Patamanjari. Many of these rāga-s, and any insights into how the Charyāpada were composed in them, has been lost to antiquity.

<sup>16</sup> A manifestation of Viṣṇu, one of the principle deities of Hinduism. In Bengal, the folk deity Satya Nārāyaṇa was worshipped in conjunction, and later conflated with, the localized Muslim religious figure known as Satya Pīr.

<sup>17</sup> A large body of religious texts originating in ancient India, constituting the oldest layer of Sanskrit literature and the oldest scriptures of Hinduism.

<sup>18</sup> In Indic cosmology, the last of four stages through which the world goes through as part of a cycle of epochs. It is typically characterized by contention and debasement.

<sup>19</sup> “Lord” in Persian, used commonly amongst South Asian Muslims to refer to the God of Islam.

<sup>20</sup> A Sanskrit term, meaning “spotless,” “unsullied”, or “devoid of all objectifications.”

<sup>21</sup> A major deity of Hinduism and the seventh avatar, or manifestation, of Viṣṇu.

<sup>22</sup> “The Merciful,” in Arabic, and one of the ninety-nine names of Allah.

<sup>23</sup> A vast genre of Indian literature concerning a wide range of topics, particularly legends and other traditional lore.

<sup>24</sup> “Elder” in Persian, commonly used amongst South Asian Muslims in the context of Sufī saints.

The evolution of Bengali culture over epochs has occupied the minds of many scholars, poets and statesmen. Originally peripheral to Hindu civilization based in North India, Bengali culture was subjected to various forms of Sanskritization, followed by centuries of invasions (1204–1757) which resulted most notably in the Islamization of Bengal. Despite the many conflicts and interactions between Sanskritization and Islamization, which uniquely manifested itself in poetry and song, the later colonization of Bengal by Britain (1757) led to a critical process of Anglicization—unprecedented in many other parts of colonized South Asia—which created a new middle class in Bengal that, in turn, created a form of elitism among the Bengali Hindu upper caste (Chatterjee 2011). After British rule ended (1947), ideas of Bengali-ness mushroomed into a profusion of positionalities that reflected a divergent range of doctrinal, reformative, and domestic issues that profoundly affected both its Hindu and Muslim constituencies.

One of the most alluring aspects of this history is the very nature of the creative forces that emerged from these processes, at once deeply and unapologetically steeped in regional thinking and indigenous production, yet invariably informed by the substantial cultural and political entities that subsumed its domain. For example, with regard to Bengal’s complex histories of borders and bureaucracies, it is striking to consider how the Islamization of Bengal unfolded not through a ruling elite (whose primarily economic interests neglected to play a significant role in popular religious transformation), but a subordinate class of Sufi missionaries with varying degrees of specialization in Islamic knowledge (Roy 1983, Eaton 1993, Uddin

---

<sup>25</sup> “The Pācāli of Satya Nārāyaṇ,” *pācāli* is oral and (later) written narrative form of songs and stories in Bengali.

2006). Ultimately, these minor clerics and mystics received land grants from the larger Muslim establishments as potential cultivators, similar to the manner in which a system of grants were historically distributed in many Central Asian and Middle Eastern territories, in order to establish religious or educational institutions. Yet, as both holy men and land clearers, this body of individuals helped to facilitate the transformation of densely forested areas of East Bengal into productive wet rice-cultivating regions (Eaton 1993). Simultaneously, they succeeded in forming new villages around these newly fertilized lands and eventually, with modest means, built small mosques and shrines throughout the area. In this unusual amalgamation of religious, agricultural, and civilizational fronts, a class of scholars, religious teachers, and preachers of various religious expertise burgeoned and, due to the traditional absence of an Islamic priesthood or lack of close administrative regulation, did so with semi-autonomous provinciality and great innovation.<sup>26</sup>

In this manner, and through an auxiliary series of power nexuses and their accompanying world views—including a larger Mughal governing body situated in Indo-Persian culture and the more Brahmanical orientation of Bengal west of the Ganges—a Bengali Muslim identity formulated, expansive and potent, and yet curiously situated thousands of miles from established Muslim centers in North India or those Muslim communities south of the Deccan Plateau. A significant and well-preserved literary tradition ensued, articulating this process. For example, the speculative and epic work *Nabīvaṃśá* by the Bengali poet Syed Sultan (1550-1648) offers a genealogy of Islamic prophets and, in doing so, suggests that Adam, the first man, was born on an island in the Bay of Bengal and was given cattle, yoke and plow by *khodā nirōñjōn* (Persian:

---

<sup>26</sup> According to Richard Eaton, this very process is reflected in many of the traditional names of towns and villages in East Bengal. For example, suffixes like *-kaṭi* (cognate with the English “cut”) are plentiful, as in the towns of Swarupkaṭi or Jhalakati in the Barisal District. These names seem to reflect the process of land clearing and civilization building in rural Bengal (1993).

*khodā*, or “lord”; Sanskrit: *niranjana*, or “unsullied”), whereby tiling the land was decreed to be his agrarian destiny (Eaton 1993).

Over centuries, this body of literature would proliferate, reorienting focus from an autochthonous and localized shrine culture to adaptations of classical Persian works into Bengali, more conjectural theological treatises that engaged with broader East Indian teleologies, and didactic or exegetical compositions focusing on Islamic ritual and etiquette. As print medium and readership also changed alongside thematic restyling, the evolution of this poetic continuum became a discombobulated treasury of works, while retrospectively perceived fault lines made it exceedingly difficult to surmise affiliations between one end and the other, between the groundbreaking and exploratory works that instigated a Bengali Muslim literary tradition and those works that attempted to more consciously appropriate classical Persio-Arabic writings into order to enrich and substantiate that tradition. Yet a significant portion of this tradition consistently straddled orality and aurality with written word, composed or conventionalized through raga-based contours or folk motifs, or popular prosodic patterns traditionally associated with recitation and performance. Because of its medley of highbrow and vernacular mediums, as well as edifying and suppositional material, an examination of some of these critical genres and styles can not only shed light on the evolution of a Bengali Muslim devotionism through song and poetry, but also on the processes through which notions of piety and cultural worth developed and diversified amongst an eclectic collective of thinkers, composers and their receptive audiences as they negotiated ideological, social and geographical boundaries over time. As I will later argue, contemporary Bangladeshi Islam’s impactful and serpentine relationship to this robust heritage of words and tunes allows us to reconsider Sufism’s continued importance—

one that is neither solely a scholarly and institutionalized tradition nor a popularist and grassroots movement—by alternatively focusing on its routinely complex relationship with piety, politics and popular culture.

### **The Muslim Literary Voice in Middle Bengali**

Most traditional volumes that have set out to provide an overview of the Bengali language and its literature connote the emergence of a distinctive Bengali Vaiṣṇava stream as the pinnacle achievement of the *môddhō jûg* period (Middle Bengali, ca. fifteenth-eighteenth centuries). Regarding a Brahmanical hesitance toward moving beyond the Ganges into East Bengal, Tony Stewart suggests that those areas “tended to yield more readily to Muslim development because of certain explicit restrictions on brahmana settlement and the more general fact that much of that land was insufficiently domesticated for Hindu habitation of a kind favored elsewhere” (2004: 261). In addition, Sufia M. Uddin further states that while Brahmins attempted to harmonize Vedic religion with the region’s existing Indigenous cults, the results were mixed at best, and “while the Shiva and Vaishnava [sects] enjoyed state patronage from Hindu kings such as the Senas prior to the arrival of Indo-Turkish conquerors, the conquerors did not provide such patronage” (2006: 25). In comparison, the Vaiṣṇava movement gained considerable attention throughout large sections of Bengal, in part due to its non-Brahmanical inclusiveness, such as its preference for devotionism over ritual, and to the perceived power placed in the hands of the devout, especially with the use of Bengali over Sanskrit. This literary and sociopolitical movement was particularly solidified through the outpouring of Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī literature in Bengali—initially influenced by the tremendous body of works surrounding the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa legend which preceded it—and the highly influential movement

instigated by saint-reformer Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu (1486–1533)—through the rise of the Gauṛīya Vaiṣṇava tradition in the heart of undivided Bengal, which catalyzed a more distinctively East Indian musical-poetic form through the medium of Bengali.<sup>27</sup>

While the concurrent emergence of Bengali Muslim poetry and song would come to interact with Vaiṣṇava imagery and music, its ultimate contributions in literary analyses have been historically shrouded by the explosive contributions of the Vaiṣṇava tradition in the Middle Bengali period (Dimock 1998, Cantú 2011). Whereas Vaiṣṇava poetry and imagery’s highly emotive rhetoric was in a sense a response to Brahmanical hegemony and Vedic subjugation, the blooming tradition of Bengali Muslim poetry and song in its inception attempted to articulate the pietistic sentimentalities of a newfangled community, one which eventually reflected uniquely formed Muslim class distinctions that would produce separately-oriented traditions of compositions. Thus, unlike the foundations of the Gauṛīya Vaiṣṇava tradition and its consolidated devotional call, the developing compositional achievements of Bengali Muslims would arise and increasingly diverge, which in effect produced a certain literary alienation. Another element of ambiguousness in Bengali Muslim compositions related to the fact that, while the authors themselves made critical headway in thematic or conceptual terms, they often relied on poetic forms/performance genres that were already in existence and shared by both Hindu and Muslim

---

<sup>27</sup> Founded in 1966 in New York City by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977), The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) would reintroduce the Gauṛīya Vaiṣṇava tradition and reach a diverse and global audience through and its stylized and democratized promulgation of the Hare Krishna mantra, the dominant vessel through which Bengali Vaiṣṇava doctrine and song is disseminated today.

writers such as the narrative structure of *pāḥalī*<sup>28</sup> and the recited *puṭhi*<sup>29</sup> form. However, the two strata of Bengali Muslim composers and their works, while initially distinctive and oriented toward their respective communities, would eventually become blurred, leading to the formation of a new and more enduring body of work that would have profound influence on the subsequent construction of Bengali Muslim identity, even as it remained unseen or unheard by others.

### **(Ig)noble Mobilities: Class Expansion and Poetic Divergences**

It is my misfortune that I was born a Bengali.  
None of the Bengalis understand Arabic,  
And so not one has understood the discourse of his own religion.  
—Saiyid Sultan (1550–1648)<sup>30</sup>

Research that has attempted to delineate the general shape of an emerging Bengali Muslim poetic tradition in the pre- and early-modern era has typically investigated the rise of a so-called *ashrāf* (Arabic: *’ashrāf*, “noble”) community and a subsequent non-*ashrāf* community, each distinguished by their purported bloodlines, the literary expression of their respective Islamic world views, and the nature of patronage for composers in these communities who produced commissioned works for Muslim audiences (Roy 1983). While the relationship between these two communities and their poetic output became increasingly complicated over

---

<sup>28</sup> It is commonly believed that *pāḥalī* originally contained five distinct elements: song, music, extempore versifying, poetic contests, and dance. Over centuries, the popularity of *pāḥalī* became a vehicle for refashioning both larger Indic epics such as the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, as well as the narratives of more indigenous deities found in Bengali Hindu religious texts known as Mangalkāvya. In the early modern era, *pāḥalī* began to take on more satirical and political undertones, which may have possibly influenced the rise of *jātrā* folk theater and the larger popularity of the dialectical *kōbigān* genre. Both of these genres would come significantly to shape the style of contemporary vernacular Bengali performance.

<sup>29</sup> While *puṭhi* literature was not specific to Bengali Muslim writers, it developed a uniquely Muslim tone, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Known for its macaronic style which infused Bengali, Arabic, Persian, and Hindustani vocabulary, the *puṭhi* consisted of a bound manuscript (often arranged “backwards” in imitation of the Arabic writing system) that was read aloud by a trained reciter. Advancements in print culture had a significant effect on the further evolution of *puṭhi* manuscripts, though it continued to be performed orally and through a few notable prosodic patterns and melodic figures popular in Bengali vernacular singing and recitative.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Ahmad Sharif’s *Saiyid Sultan: Tār Granthāboli O Tār Ĵug* [The Collected Words of Saiyid Sultan and His Milieu] (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1972).

time, the aesthetic dichotomy that initially defined them was a result of the sociopolitical disconnect that severed the lives of indigenous Bengali Muslims and the foreign Muslim sovereigns which controlled the region in which they lived. The *ashrāf* community existed long before the Mughal invasion of Bengal (1572–1576), emerging shortly after various Muslim conquests of the Indian subcontinent absorbed Bengal in 1204. This community continued to burgeon and prosper when the region was later annexed by a conglomeration of dynasties collectively referred to as the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526), and further when the governors of the Delhi Sultanate eventually declared independence from the region, later forming the Sultanate of Bengal during the fourteenth century (van Schendel 2009). Their cultural dominance over various periods and Muslim usurpations of power was supported by the fact that the *ashrāf* community was itself an elite Muslim class of foreign descent that especially consisted of non-Bengali servicemen, administrators, and urban Sufis or educated members of the *‘ulamā’*, an institutionally-trained body of Islamic scholars. Almost always through the medium of Arabic or Persian, the *ashrāf* poets and writers produced commentaries on the classical texts of mysticism, or works that were ultimately extensions of the writings on the traditional Islamic sciences, including *tafsīr* (exegesis, especially of the Qur’ān), *fiqh* (legal theory of divine law) and analyses of Aḥādīth literature (the documented sayings, actions or approvals of the Prophet Muḥammad). As such, the demographic circumstance and artistic endeavors of the *ashrāf* community aligned amiably with the Afghan- and Turkic-based dynasties that presided over Bengal at the time, through a shared affirmation of Islamic high culture and nobility.

In contrast, the so-called non-*ashrāf* community emerged with the successful widescale proselytization of Islam amongst Bengalis in the sixteenth century through a variety of

aforementioned petty land-clearing preachers, and, as such, they instigated a more indigenous but less normative, and emphatically Bengali language-based proliferation of Islamic poetry and texts—on a variety of religious and sometimes non-religious topics that ultimately valued creativity and perviousness over erudition. Furthermore, their creative outpouring was almost always composed in verse, incorporating native prosodic structures and genre forms. As the two communities grew in parallel, the non-*ashrāf* literature demonstrated a liminality that was both emic and etic in disposition, exhibiting an interest in and absorption of broader concepts central to traditional Islamic theology and art, and yet also a continued enjoyment of certain poetic or thematic liberties accorded by their simultaneously independent literary development, which was central to their meaningfulness in a popular Bengali environment. The Muslim Bengali literature of this period contained *risālah*-s (booklets that provided localized perspectives on Muslim ritual duties or the biographies or military exploits of Islamic prophets of the Qur’ān), *yoga kalandar*-s (a form of love poetry which expounded mystical precepts, often through romantic tales or fictional dialogues), and *marsiyyā*-s (narrations dealing with the Shī’i martyr Ḥusayn and the Battle of Karbala) (Cantú 2011).

That these two distinctive communities would slowly form a newer semi-*ashrāf* community (even as the traditional *ashrāf* community remained strong under Mughal dominance) was evidenced by the rise of a distinguishable collective of endogamous semi-urban artisans and professionals, most likely descendants of certain *ashrāf* and non-*ashrāf* communities that co-mingled and eventually intermarried over centuries, whose societal and occupational distinctions mimicked traditional delineations found in the Bengali Hindu caste network of that time. The development of this homegrown social stratification—which ranged from livestock

herders and cake sellers to circumcisers and wandering holy men—suggests that their associated textual traditions were interwoven with particular features of class and caste identity that defined the Bengali Muslim from a uniquely foundational standpoint in the delta (Roy 1983, Ahmed 2001). Ultimately, this would have enormous impact on the dynamics of beneficiaries and performative spaces as this community and their own poetic outpouring would shape the future of Bengali Muslim poetry and song. The tradition that would further emerge demonstrated a deep localization in agrarian-situated piety through the patronage of regional landowners and the legacies of lower-echelon and minimally-endowed Muslim religious figures in the eastern hinterland, and an intermediary exposition of doctrinal and metaphysical discourses that aggregated both abiding and suppositional content with Muslim and non-Muslim epistemologies. The resulting compositional form that burgeoned often relied on fantastical accounts or hyperbolic language to conciliate the superhuman agency of Sufi saints and Islamic dogma in order to legitimate the process of change that was presented as civilization building.

### **Deflections and Reformations**

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are often characterized as a time when revolutionary reform campaigns amongst Bengali Muslims radically reshaped or questioned the autochthonous parameters of Islamic piety that had been burgeoning there for centuries. Especially through print media and public debate, this era witnessed a theological expansion beyond the poetic interactions of East Indian devotionalism and the antiquities of Persian mysticism in South Asia, which had formally characterized its religious flavor. In this newer milieu, Bengali and other South Asian Muslim sensibilities began to forge prominent connections with the greater Islamic world, and especially the traditional Arab Muslim world.

The eighteenth and nineteenth century is more generally discussed as a period of Islamic decline, especially with regard to the failures of the Mughal, Safavid, and Ottoman Empires, the purported last vestiges of Muslim imperium, which simultaneously marked the successful British and Dutch economic penetration of South and Southeast Asia (Alexander 2016). In Bengal, however, this period is also marked by the concurrent development of the Bengal Renaissance within its own borders, and Bengali Hindu and Muslim interactions with the colonial enterprise. Ultimately, the Renaissance was a cultural, social, intellectual and artistic movement in Bengal—from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century, and dominated by Bengali Hindus—which made critical headway for the subsequent campaigns for Indian self rule. For the Hindu intelligentsia, the challenge and influence of alien colonialism thus gave birth to the intellectual awakening of the Renaissance, yet for a growing body of Bengali Muslim scholars and reformers, who already felt at odds with both established British policy towards Muslims and a growing Hindu cultural hegemony, the reaction and response was a more a complex one (Ali 1983, Banu 1992, Ahmed 2001, Alexander, Chatterji, and Jalais 2016).

The fact that the ontological framework that informed a shifting Bengali Muslim worldview at the *fin de siècle* was a precarious one can be readily seen in the early history of the development of Bengali translations of the Qur'ān. The first translation of the Qur'ān is widely attributed to Girish Chandra Sen (ca. 1835–1910), who was not only a Bengali Hindu religious scholar, but a Brahmo Samaj missionary. This itself is quite telling because his work on the Qur'ān, while breaking ground and leading the way for subsequent Bengali translations by Muslim scholars, did not fit into the traditional mold of Islamic exegesis. Ultimately, Sen's attraction to the Qur'ān was based on the ameliorative ideas of the Brahmo Samaj, which itself

began as a monotheistic reformist movement of Hinduism that appeared during the Bengal Renaissance, and thus sought to reexamine Hindu piety in light of Abrahamic traditions, with which Islam was associated. Sen's monumental and audacious undertaking in translating the Qur'ān into Bengali was thus shaped by a very different revivalism within Bengali Hindu scholarship, one that did not define reformism in the colonial era through an outright rejection of Western academic study. Therefore, his largely empirical and dispassionate approach to interpreting the Qur'ān into Bengali was not fraught with the same moral or intellectual dilemmas that Bengali Muslims faced with regard the Qur'ān as a sacred text—mainly, the historical centrality of oral transmission in Islam or the ostensibly non-Islamic nature of the Bengali script and its vocabulary. As such, Sen's rendition of the Qur'ān did not incorporate a parallel-running translation alongside the original liturgical Arabic—an exegetical feature which would become prominent in later editions of the Bengali Qur'ān that were written for a Muslim readership, helping to legitimate the need for native-language exposition without fully displacing the original and authoritative Arabic. Furthermore, Sen's translation was written in a definitively Sanskritic register of Bengali—the accepted medium of the Bengali Hindu intelligentsia at the time—which is interesting to consider in light of the on-going pursuits amongst concurrent Bengali Muslim scholars in Persianizing or Arabicizing the Bengali lexicon in order to even consider its place in oratorical environments or textual projects.

Internally, the loss of Muslim political authority throughout the world was increasingly perceived to be tied to deteriorating and corrupt religious practice and weak faith (Ahmed 2001). Some Bengali Muslim reformers in this era began adamantly to oppose the doctrines of Shī'i belief, which had hitherto enjoyed Sunni patronage in Bengal but was increasingly considered an

excessive and detrimental veneration of the legacy of ‘Alī, and a distraction from fundamental Qur’ānic and prophetic creed. Sufi thought in Bengal, however, did not simply denigrate, but experienced a serious period in flux. For many of the early Muslim reformers in Bengal, Sufism was not as simply denounced, but projected to be in serious need of reform. For them, the task at hand involved promoting the abiding theological rigor of Sufi intellectualism in egalitarian terms by displacing the spiritual authority of one brotherhood over another and, subsequently, to eradicate the regional deference to Sufi leaders and the centrality of shrines. While, outwardly, this premise was supported by adherence to the textual authority of the Qur’ān and more traditional Islamic scholarship, it also promoted the rise of a new class of educated mullahs and the subsequent schools and institutions which would be established through their initiatives, allowing a certain spiritual authority to transfer to their hands (Chatterjee 2011, Bose 2018). Ultimately, the reformative tactics for Sufi practice, while leaving a space for Sufism to exist in the modern devotional landscape of Bengal, would simultaneously leave a dubious mark on middle-class impressions of traditional Sufi piety. Today in Bangladesh, a professionalized class of popular Muslim clerics which descend from this tradition of scholars, known as *hujur-s* (Arabic: *hadhūr*, “lord,” historically an honorific used to address a potentate), are the most visible and consulted type of Muslim authority amongst the educated middle class. Such scholars are typically sought out to address matters of theological instruction and religious dictates, and to preside over social customs relating to birth, marriage and death.

### **Bengali Religious Literature and its Publication in the Colonial Era**

From the beginning of British rule in India, British administrators were concerned with management of the Muslim populace and, by the 1890s, the British plainly viewed Muslims and

Hindus as two separate communities with distinct political interests (Chatterjee 2011). This view was further impressed by scholarly writings, missionary critique, governing policy and various uses of print technology. Missionaries, in particular, directly shaped the development of modern language, vernacular literature, and the reform of Islam in India, as well as the construction of modern Hinduism. For example, one of the most important early Christian missionary figures to come to Bengal was William Carey (1761–1834), who was not only a minister and translator, but also a social reformer and cultural anthropologist. Carey established Serampore College in Calcutta in 1818, a publishing powerhouse in its time that effectively pioneered the first Bengali typeface, and still remains one of the oldest functioning educational institutes of its kind in India. Notably, the textbooks written under Carey’s guidance set a model for formal Bengali prose, helping to standardize it at time when the evolution of this influential writing style was still in its infancy (Riaz 2004, Uddin 2006).

Carey, and others who followed in his footsteps, eagerly learned Indian languages and wrote theological tracts in native scripts to promote their religious viewpoints. His written works inevitably opened the door to response, and the printing press became a dominant medium for communicating views on proper Muslim ritual practice and behavior. Local printers used the lithographic press to publish low-cost books and magazines written and edited by Muslim reformers and intellectuals as a complement to other means of responding to these critiques. As such, missionary efforts inadvertently elicited a backlash from Muslims and Hindus through pen and policy. Through a highly proliferated medium and a newly stylized form of Bengali on paper, British classification of its Indian subjects through religious orientation inevitably encouraged responses based on such identities rather than over common bonds, and resulting

tensions, debates, and policies thus led to greater divisions between these religious communities. Although Bengali Islamic reform movements were inspired by a perceived loss of Muslim authority, they were thus also very much a product of the colonial experience through scholarly enterprise, Christian evangelism, and bureaucratic policy (Uddin 2006).

Because of British strategies of categorization and enumeration, notions of majority and minority became further equated with dominance and disenfranchisement. Print technology, while not new amongst Muslims, became more than ever a means of communicating religious reform, not only in repose to missionary critiques, but to exert continued dominance by a literary religious body over an increasingly quantifiable Muslim community in their reach.<sup>31</sup> The nature of this medium, however, quickly complicated matters. While an educated class of Bengali Hindus also worked tirelessly to create a new literary form that expressed their religious and sociopolitical proclivities, they also readily acknowledged the authority of English, and the educational and epistemological advantages that the English medium offered. Bengali Muslims leaders, on the other hand, were more reticent of English instruction, and were further bogged down by a concurrent array of divergent reformist agendas that took hold in their own community (Robinson 2000).<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> The effect of print technology on an “imagined community” identity has been noted in other areas of the world, especially in the work of Benedict Anderson (2006), who has examined the transformative impact of print technology on national consciousness in Western Europe. Peter van der Veer (1994) has further elucidated that, in the South Asian environment, rather than a resistance to the language of the church hierarchy in favor of vernaculars, a national consciousness through print media seems to have largely centered around religious affiliation.

<sup>32</sup> Francis Robinson further states that initial Muslim reservations about the use of print for the publication of religious scholarship was based in the challenge print posed to traditional forms of transmission of knowledge, as the educated scholars of Islam historically memorized their knowledge and transmitted it orally through a process viewed more reliable than written transmission. Robinson further mentions that nineteenth-century Muslim reformers, however, dramatically changed their attitudes about the appropriate use of print technology because of the urgent need to respond to critiques of their religious beliefs, further asserted through a perceived loss of power in the colonial era.

## Islamic Revival and Bengali Muslim Readerships

Where had you been  
    When Haji Shariatullah<sup>33</sup> came to Bengal?  
Who did abolish the custom of *Fatiha*<sup>34</sup>  
    And the worship of shrines, and stopped the corrupt Mullah?  
When he set his foot in Bengal,  
    All *shirk* and *bid'at*<sup>35</sup> were  
        trampled down.  
All these things were then abolished  
And the sun of Islam rose high in the sky.  
                                    —anonymous bard  
                                    in *History of the Fara'id Movement in Bengal (1818-1906)*

Amongst Bengali Muslims in this era, literary activity burgeoned—from apologetic pamphlets to the introduction of high genres in Bengali such as *tafsīr* scholarship on Qur'ānic exegesis—in a form increasingly written for popular audiences rather than traditional scholars. Notably, the broadening performance of *hajj* by Bengali Muslim leaders also introduced the region, by way of the social transaction of pilgrimage, to the influential but conservative Salafī movement that had begun formulating in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>36</sup> This movement typically espoused literalist interpretations of the Qur'ān and ritual-based explorations of faith that were in many ways a reaction to the spread of European ideas, and sought to expose the roots of modernity within Muslim civilization. Ultimately, reformers, the elite, and the British authority

---

<sup>33</sup> Haji Shariatullah (1781–1840) was the leader of an Islamic revivalist campaign in Bengal known as the Faraizi movement, founded in 1818.

<sup>34</sup> This refers to the practice of inscribing the first book of the Qur'ān, *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah*, to use in amulets worn to protect against evil, danger or disease.

<sup>35</sup> Arabic, “polytheism” and “sinful innovation.”

<sup>36</sup> The Salafī movement is itself a reformative branch within Sunni Islam that developed in Egypt in the late nineteenth century as a response to Western European imperialism—with roots in the eighteenth-century preacher and activist Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792), who hailed from the Najd region of modern-day Saudi Arabia. The Salafī movement has advocated a return to the traditions of the *salaf*, the first three generations of Muslims, which include the generations of the Prophet Muḥammad and his companions (the *Ṣaḥābah*), their successors (the *Tābi'un*), and the successors of those successors (the *Tābi' al-Tābi'in*).

encouraged religious reformation through distinctive political interests. In this era, the parallel traditions of *ashrāf* and non-*ashrāf* literature and thought, which had concurrently co-existed, began increasingly to see each other as diametrically opposed. This opposition, however, while palpable, was not particularly well defined. Major Bengali Muslim reformers, in fact, while sharing a general belief in reexamining local Bengali Muslim customs in order to conform to the broader theological guidelines of Islam, were influenced by a wide variety of reform movements amongst North Indians Muslims and in the Arabian Gulf, which translated differently with regard to their individual political and economic concerns.

Several larger religious operations in the early nineteenth century characterized the general shape and diverse approaches to Islamic reformism in Bengal. After spending nearly twenty years of study in the Ḥijāz, the campaign of Haji Shariatullah (1781–1840) and the Faraizi movement (Arabic: *farā'id*, “obligatory duties”) emphasized the socioreligious amelioration of the rural poor, rapidly gaining support against regional Hindu landlords and British sovereignty. While his writings indicate that he considered India to be a part of *dar al-Ḥarb* (the “house of war,” that is, historically those territories which did not have a treaty of nonaggression towards Muslims), Shariatullah did not go so far as to promote assault against British dominance. His son, Dudu Miyan (1819–1862), who took leadership of the movement after Shariatullah’s death, formulated a more politico-economic character by establishing a system of rural village arbitrators, known as *khôlifā-s* (Arabic: *khalīfah*, “successor” or “steward”), through whom members of the reform movement were expected to seek conciliation in all matters, rather than relying on the British judicial system (van Schendel 2009). Today, the legacy of the *khôlifā* system lives on in another form of agrarian-based legal councils—known as

*pourôsôbhā*, which are run by a village-elected chairman—that remain central to arbitrating regional disputes, or *sālif*, in rural Bangladesh, and continue to operate independently of state-run regulative bodies. Furthermore, constituencies and council members of these *pourôsôbhā* panels are often chosen to be *bicārôk*, or “judges,” in a variety of other appraisal-based environments, including vernacular performance venues.

A second major revivalist movement—the Ṭarīqah-i Muḥammadiyah (“the way of Muḥammad”), founded by Shah Sayyid Ahmad (1780–1831) and further propagated by Shah Ismail (1782–1831)—was a larger campaign that began in North India but later spread to many regions of Muslim South Asia, including Bengal. While this movement shared similar reformist goals of purging local Muslim customs of *bidā* (Arabic: *bid‘ah*, heretical “innovations”) and rekindling the pristine spirit of Islamic heritage, Ahmad was not only a Muslim scholar but also inducted into three major Sufi orders of South Asia: the Naqshbandīyya, Qādirīyya and Chishtīyya (Zaman 2001, Riaz 2004). Furthermore, the broadly-defined boundaries of the Ṭarīqah-i Muḥammadiyah did not adhere to any one particular *madhhab* (“school of legal thought”) or embody a certain *‘aqīdah* (“religious creed”). While Ahmad and many of his followers died in battle while engaging in armed resistance against both British and Sikh forces in the northwest frontier, his religious views opted to reform and integrate Sufi traditions of worship and erudition into contemporary Muslim piety, and he was a vocal critic of the Salafi-based revivalism of Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (1703–1792) in the Arabian peninsula, which had begun to spread throughout the Muslim world in his lifetime (Schimmel 1980).

Other revivalist campaigns included the Taiyuni movement (Arabic: *ta‘ayyūn*, “determined” or “established”) founded by Karamat Ali of Jaunpur (d. 1873). Originally from

Uttar Pradesh in North India, Ali traveled extensively throughout Bengal and gained a wide following amongst Bengali Muslims. While Ali did not engage in political or armed struggle in the northwest frontier against British imperialism, his tactics of reformation seemed to be aimed more directly at eradicating Hindu customs from Muslim piety, including vegetarianism, the social disapproval of widow remarriage, and consultation with astrologers. The other major target of his criticisms were aimed at Muslims of other sects—even Sunni-based schisms such as the Ahmadiyya movement founded by the self-proclaimed messianic figure Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908) of the Punjab, who attracted a large and enduring following in other parts of South Asia, and later abroad, but gained little foothold in Bengal (Dey 2005). Another less influential movement, the Ahl-i Ḥadīth (“the people of ḥadīth”), co-founded by Siddiq Hasan Khan (1832–1890) and Saiyid Nazir Husain (1805–1902), relied nearly exclusively on Qur’ānic edicts and Aḥadīth commentary to pursue their aims, and was inspired by an early movement of traditionalists with similar beliefs that emerged in the first centuries of Islam’s history. Amongst its calls for reform, the Ahl-i Ḥadīth sought to ban celebrations of Muḥammad’s birthday, known as *mīlād al-nabī*, a ritualized act that remains contentious in contemporary Bangladesh. Khan’s ultimately controversial nature, however, has led to contrasting assessments of his personality in history, having been described as either a radical fundamentalist, an underhanded and scheming politician, and one of the first heroes of the Indian Independence movement (Dey 2015). Husain, in contrast, while sharing Khan’s insistence on authoritative textual reference, simultaneously advocated political quietism and was among a number of Muslim ‘*ulamā*’, from both the Sunni and Shī‘a sects, who supported British rule and rejected calls for armed *jihād* against it (Ghosh 2006).

## Lingering Sentimentalities

Various manifestations of these movements, and other auxiliary or derivative Muslim revivalist campaigns in Bengal in the nineteenth century, endured, dissipated or were subsumed in the ensuing decades. In many ways, several larger traditions that are indebted to this collection of movements remain influential in Muslim Bengal today. For example, the Barelwi movement—espoused by jurist and poet Ahmed Raza Khan (1856–1921)—continues to emphasize personal devotion and a synthesis of the canonical law of *sharī‘ah* with Sufi practice and veneration (Bose and Ayesha, 1997). The Deobandi movement, a scholastic tradition of Islamic reformation, has used the establishment of special seminaries to revive classical study. The Deobandi tradition originally supported composite nationalism and maintained a somewhat ambiguous stance on Sufi practice, but became an increasingly conservative organization in the latter half of the twentieth century. One of the major madrasa systems that exists in Bangladesh today, known as the Qawmi school, uses a theological curriculum based on the Deobandi model, and is a private charitable organization. Their administrative operations fall outside the purview of the Bangladesh Madrasah Educational Board, which runs a less-popular madrasa system based on the accredited and state-run Alia University in Kolkata (Uddin 2006). The non-political, and increasingly global Sunni Islamic missionary movement known as Tablighi Jamaat initially began as an offshoot project of the Deobandi tradition, and was founded by Muḥammad Ilyās Kāndhlawī in 1925. The Tablighi Jamaat maintains a highly popular spiritual retreat system in Bangladesh, which focuses on prayer, sermons and Muslim fellowship through *da‘wah*, or proselytism, within the community. Lastly, the philosophies of Abu al-‘Alā Maudūdī (1903–1979), a widely-acclaimed *mujaddid* or “religious renewer,” posited that Islamic relevance in the

modern world was inseparable from a political agenda, and founded the Jamaat-e Islami, a socially conservative movement and political organization founded in 1941 in British India. Along with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Jamaat-e Islami became one of the most influential Islamist organizations in the twentieth century, and remains the most powerful and systematized Islamic party in both contemporary Pakistan and Bangladesh (Alexander 2016).

### **Polemical Banter as Stylized Performance**

While these various reform movements endeavored to revive Islam in the context of modern Bengali Muslim piety, their aims were clearly different from one another, or at the least demonstrated enough incompatibility to provoke a series of increasingly public and formalized ad hominem attacks and counteraccusations between revivalist groups. Combining a range of publications with stylized evangelical orations known as *wāz mahfil*, these condemnations were increasingly shaped by matters of *taqlīd*—an Islamic notion which seeks to examine the level of conformity of one religious outlook over another—especially through certain terminology such as *fatwā* (non-binding but authoritative decrees) and *kufir* (used to describe the denial of truth) (Uddin 2006). In an attempt to exert influence and introduce reform measures, widespread publications and proclamations of *fatwā* were a common strategy for blacklisting certain Muslim organizations, and targeting someone as a *kāfir* (“disbeliever”) was a basic tactic used to highlight views and practices the denouncer wanted to call into question. Ultimately, the tone and type of questions raised in *fatwā* arguments was shaped by the reform climate and became one of the most effective ways of envisioning and reshaping group identity around religious topics. They additionally aided in defining the Muslim community by its denouncements of actions or views considered un-Islamic (Ahmed 2001).

Initially, the success of such debate competitions amongst reformist organizations, as they battled for recruitment and support, was carried out through the medium of the Urdu language. After the British officially abolished Persian as a court language in 1837, Urdu became the prominent vernacular for government administration in the northern provinces—due to both its broad compatibility with the vast language systems of the Hindi-Urdu continuum spoken across that region—and that, like Persian, it was written in a modified form of the Arabic script, and thus also served an effective transitional purpose. Even though non-Muslims as well as Muslims spoke Urdu, the language increasingly became identified with Muslim culture through its dramatically increased use in writings on Islamic religious reform and poetry. For instance, Barbara Metcalf notes that, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Bohra Muslims of western India began to use Urdu over Gujarati, and Tamil Muslims in the South followed suit quickly thereafter (Metcalf 1982). Subsequently, through advancements across both Hindu and Muslim communities through low-cost printing production, Hindi gradually became a prominent medium through which Hindu religious materials were propagated, while Urdu became a preeminent symbol of Muslim identity.

Historically in Bengal, Urdu was a medium with which descendants of *ashrāf* scholars increasingly associated while, in contrast to these reformative forces, the more traditional mullahs of non- or lesser-*ashrāf* descent were not as educated as their urban counterparts, and did not attend prominent institutions of learning where comprehension of, and literacy in, Urdu would be cultivated amongst non-native speakers. Furthermore, the village-based clerics not only provided their own form of religious guidance to the agrarian Muslim populace, but also had commanded their own spiritual influence over centuries, which did not align well with the

objectives of Muslim reformers. As Rafiuddin Ahmed mentions, “their clientele [also] went to them . . . for talismans, charms and amulets, incantations, divination, astrology and various other occult aids” (2001: 30). Thus, traditional preachers and lay clerics in the rural areas also saw reformist ideology as a threat to their existence.

### **Conflations of Revivalist Media**

In contrast, the reformist religious base recognized a need to implement their own version of reform on non-*ashrāf* supporters and devotees through print literature, one that introduced mainstream Islamic ideas in a manner that updated pietistic impressions without blatantly questioning the status quo. On the other hand, both the *ashrāf* communities—while concurrently vying for power amongst themselves—and non-*ashrāf* communities—who enjoyed a more insular and decentralized form of religious power in the countryside—increasingly felt the need to engage in their own form of debate, but in a mutually accessible arena where Urdu was not central to stylistic deliberation.

In addition to an array of novel newspapers and journals, one particularly prominent literary form that came to be central to the reformist writers was their reexamination of the genre of *nasīhat nāmā* (Uddin 2006). In fact, this particular form of prose writing had existed for centuries amongst non-*ashrāf* poets and, regarding the older variety, Ahmed continues that “there was a vast corpus of Muslim religious literature in medieval Bengal, dealing with the faith of the ordinary believer [and] their aim too was to transmit to the Bengali-speaking Muslim a basic knowledge of the laws and principles of Islam” (2001: 45). But unlike the later writings, most pre-reformist works in the *nasīhat nāmā* genre intentionally blended Hindu and Muslim terminology through a literary process of production, which Tony Stewart asserts “searched for

the closest terms of equivalence for Islamic concepts and ideas in indigenous speech” (2004: 67). Thus, the premodern *nasīhat nāmā* conveyed Islamic ideas, which were relatively new to Bengali language and culture, using terms already known in the local language. The reformed *nasīhat nāmā*, however, made use of the so-called *Mussalmani* style (“Muslim Bengali”), otherwise known as *do-bhāṣī baṅglā* (“two-idiom Bengali”). A literary style that has its roots in the mid-eighteenth century, the *Mussalmani* style represented an attempt by writers to Islamize the Bengali language by significantly incorporating Arabic and Persian terms in a newer and more intentional manner, yet in order to produce uncomplicated religious tracts for a broader, non-Urdu reading audience (2004). Thus, critical to the modernized style of the *nasīhat nāmā* was its extensive use of foreign vocabulary—from Perso-Arabic root words to quintessential Urdu ones—into the Bengali script and language structure, but with a simultaneous lack of ostensibly Hindu or Vaiṣṇava religious terms. Ultimately, Muslim reformers used an existent literary genre in an attempt to convincingly condemn un-Islamic praxis and introduce reformist ideas through a familiar poetic style and simple syntactic form that hearkened back to medieval Bengali literature and thought.<sup>37</sup>

### **Linguistic and Doctrinal Debates**

Overall, a stylized tête-à-tête emerged between both communities, which, while dealing with internal schisms, were at variance with one another through attachments to distinct realms of spiritual authority conditioned by their respective social backgrounds, religious indoctrinations and worldview. On one end, a growing body of seminary-trained reformers

---

<sup>37</sup> The contemporary Muslim Bengali language exhibits a distinctive diglossia, a situation in which two dialects are used by a single language community. In addition to the community’s standardized or vernacular language varieties, which exhibit a modest amount of Perso-Arabic loan words, a second and highly codified variety is used in certain situations (such as literary, religious or educational settings) which is separate from ordinary conversation and often deeply indebted to Perso-Arabic vocabulary.

offered a spectrum of choices that aimed, in varying degrees, at delineating political, communal or transcendental parameters for a homogenized religious identity that could represent the whole of the contemporary Bengali Muslim population. On the other, an agrarian-based collective of holy men and poets desired to perpetuate their appointments as the sacred torchbearers of Islam in the eastern delta, based on a livelihood supported by regionalized and votary-based devotionalism. Through a variety of novel and compelling approaches for continued preservation, both groups left an ineradicable effect on how Islamic piety would further shape Bengali Muslims in the modern era which, despite the distinctions between *ashrāf* and non-*ashrāf* communities, did not clearly play out along the intrinsic lines of an urban-rural dichotomy. For example, campaigns with unique social and interpretive agendas organized by urban reformers penetrated deeply and enduringly into the agrarian landscape—from autonomous rural judiciaries to the widespread platform of *wāz mahfil* sermons—while, in the subsequent and waning decades of colonial rule, both the Muslim intelligentsia and the educated middle class began to question the credulousness of a religion-focused denotation of Bengali-ness, especially as the emerging Language Movement would emphasize secular governance and ethnolinguistic nationalism as the hallmarks of patriotic sentiment.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nonetheless, to add to this bewildering display of exceedingly irreconcilable religious fronts and their creative polemical armaments, increasingly animosities resulted in a curious form of public debate that was not only an intense display of hurling theological invectives, but also a widely-enjoyed form of entertainment amongst the masses. Scholars have referred to *munāzarāt* as a tradition that has existed in various parts of the non-Arab Muslim world as a form of oral theological disputation

which was held before an audience, arbitrated by a *wazīr* (a high-ranking advisor or minister), and typically in the question-and-answer format (Sanyal 1981, Bandyopadhyay 2004). In Bengal, such debates were typically known as *bāhāc* or *bāhās* (Arabic: *baḥath*, “to scrutinize,” or “to inquire”). In these largely rural-situated venues, leaders from both communities battled one another through a series of question and rebuttal sessions, and over a large range of topics ranging from ritualistic details to societal matters, such as the particularities of formal prayer, the distinction between believers and nonbelievers, and the future of a Muslim-based educational initiative (Roy 1983, Uddin 2006). The *bāhāc* was not only a multi-day festival which brought together leading minds in the Muslim community for debate, but also a forum where participants could ask questions without fear of reprimand. It seems quite probable that the majority of observers did not fully comprehend the details of the legalistic arguments or find relevance in the hairsplitting that ensued on the rostrum, but were nonetheless encouraged by the prospects of a Bengali-language engagement that not only attempted to provide much-needed religious coherence but, at the least, delighted and reassured through its combined indigenous and reformist aesthetics. Because the *bāhāc* tended to focus on the concerns of everyday Muslims, they were consistently well-attended, and thus were an extremely mobilizing phenomenon amongst Bengali Muslims in their heyday.<sup>38</sup>

### **Anthologizing East Bengali Song Traditions: The Maimansingh Gitika**

By briefly examining a few notable works over the past century, one can readily notice how the nature of *bōyāti* performance is encyclopedic and all-encompassing, their repertoire

---

<sup>38</sup> The term *bāhāc* is still used today by *bōyāti* musicians—a community that is introduced in the following section—who engage in a form of performance battle that is ultimately an aesthetic continuation of this critical dialectical phenomenon.

having a distinctively expandable and dissectible quality which has allowed them to shift poetic and musical focus at different moments in their evolution. The bôyāti artist, as a result, is an outstanding living repository of Muslim Bengali history, whose renown has been both encouraged and curtailed by the metamorphic qualities of their performance style.

The *Maimansingh Gitika* is a well-known collection of narrative ballads published by the University of Calcutta over four volumes between 1923 and 1932. This pioneering anthology was collected from the greater region of Mymensingh (in contemporary Bangladesh) by Chandra Kumar De (1889–1946) and Dinesh Chandra Sen (1866–1939), both notable writers and folklorists of their time with ancestral roots in East Bengal. The immense popularity of this compilation allowed for both an English translation known as *Eastern Bengal Ballads Mymensing* (1923) and a subsequent collection of similar ballads collected across a wider region of East Bengal, the *Purbabanga Gitika* (1926).

Both the *Maimansingh Gitika* and its English translation feature a ballad entitled *Dewana Madina*, composed by Mansur Boyati, largely believed to have been an eighteenth-century poet and singer from the adjacent region of Habiganj. Mansur Boyati, along with the other composers featured in this text, are essentially oral interpreters of epic ballads in Bengali, drawing from both indigenous folk narratives and other Persian romances or Arabic parables from the Qur'ān which made their way into Bengali folk performance over the centuries. From this type of anthology, we might surmise that the bôyāti artist in this era was a general type of composer-performer, amongst others, with a notable penchant for incorporating a type of Sufi commentary into traditional Bengali ballad singing, and represented a musical extension of the works and pursuits of the indigenous non-*ashrāf* community of Bengal.

This type of long performance in Bengali folk dramaturgy, which chronicles historical events or figures, still exists today and is found across a number of different performance styles, notably *pālāgān*. While contemporary *bōyāti* performance is quite distinct from traditional *pālāgān*, it nonetheless continues to be conflated with the history and stylistic features of this genre. For example, while passive Bangladeshi listeners of folk music may not be able to articulate in detail what a *bōyāti* artist does on stage, they will almost certainly know the name of a particular contemporary singer, Kuddus Boyati, whose performances are routinely broadcast on Bangladeshi television. In fact, searching the term “boyati” on YouTube immediately renders multiple hits from Kuddus Boyati’s repertoire. When observing his performances, however, it becomes clear that Kuddus Boyati is not a *bōyāti* in the modern sense but rather a *pālākār*, a performer of *pālāgān*, which he himself has clarified over the course of his career. While a traditional *pālāgān* renders a single mythological account through one performer enacting multiple characters, modern *bōyāti* performance enlists two performers representing polar viewpoints in a dialectical debate based on a preselected theological topic. Both genres, however, do combine song with narrative storytelling and recitative over a period of separate acts (*pālā*, or “episode”). To add further confusion, modern *bōyāti* performance, which is known by various regional names, continues to also be referred to by the moniker *pālāgān*, even by legitimate *bōyāti* artists themselves, who recognize their palpable, if not bewildering, relationship to this genre.

The *Maimansingh Gitika*, while receiving criticism in later decades with regard to its compilation strategies (Zbavitel 1963), is also notable for at least one other reason: its contents

represent a modern curation of Bengali songs which instigated a long-standing romanticization of provincial East Bengal that began formulating in the nineteenth century.

At the fin de siècle, two regions of Bengal were increasingly politicized as the domains of Hindu and Muslims respectively, culminating in the infamous 1905 partition of Bengal. The decision to effect the Partition of Bengali, known as *bhângôbhângô*, was announced on July 19, 1905 by Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India. The partition took place on October 16, 1905 and separated the largely Muslim eastern areas from the largely Hindu western areas (Bhattacharya 2018). The Hindus of West Bengal, who dominated Bengal's business and rural life, complained that the division would make them a minority in a province that would incorporate the province of Bihar and Orissa. Hindus were outraged at what they recognized as a divide-and-rule policy, even though British authorities stressed it would increase administrative efficiency. Inversely, the partition animated the Muslims population to form their own national organization on communal lines. In order to appease Bengali sentiment, the entire province was reunited by Lord Hardinge in 1911, in response to the Swadeshi movement's riots, and the growing belief among Hindus that East Bengal would have its own courts and policies.

As evidenced by their accompanying literary achievements, it became increasingly apparent that both communities had different opinions regarding the future condition of their homeland: the Muslim community was largely in favor of partition and believed it would provide stronger administrative support to their neglected area; the Hindu community was vehemently opposed to partition, and this act further situated Bengal as a hotbed for the nascent Indian



**Figure 1.3. A performance of *pālāgān* by pālākār Razzak Raja (standing), with troupe, in Maksoodpur, Faridpur.**

nationalist movement against British sovereignty. Rather than being seen as neglected or underprivileged, East Bengal was increasingly described in more poetic terms as idyllic, nonconformist, and insularly pristine. In the introduction to *Eastern Bengal Ballads Mymensing*, Sen discusses at length the geographical and thematic advantages of East Bengali balladry, stating both its uniquely vernacular isolation from adjacent kingdoms of antiquity, and its indubitably non-Brahmanic approach to discussions of romance, femininity and various social norms in song. Sen writes, “we find in these poems [that there are] customs and conventions contrary to those which we have been accustomed in our present society, based on the canons introduced by the [Bengal] Renaissance” (1932: 3). In his linguistic analysis, he further continues, “the Bengali of these songs is the pure country dialect. Sanskrit has no sway over it.

Those who still labour under the misapprehension that the origin of Bengali is to be traced to Sanskrit . . . should read these ballads in order to be fully disillusioned” (ibid: 4).

While this notion of a “rustic East Bengal” grew from the Hindu intelligentsia’s utopian deference toward the preservation of an undivided Bengal, the concept was actually taken on later by Bengali Muslim writers and film makers themselves in the decades leading up to and following independence. Rather than presenting rurality as a paradigmatic inversion however, it developed into a celebrated imaginary of its own which was at once agrarian in depiction and yet deeply attached to the progressive ethnolinguistic cultural movement of the 1950s and 60s. This was supported by the fact that, unlike in previous generations in which an elite and educated *ashrāf* class largely descended from foreign aristocracy, or enjoyed social advancement by developing an allegiance with them, a largely rural-born and expanding middle class of Bengali Muslims in this era increasingly did away with classifying themselves with regard to either *ashrāf* or non-*ashrāf* designations. Furthermore, they sought to establish a vernacular Bengali Muslim modernity as an alternative to both Bengali Hindu modernity and pan-Islamic modernity, both of which seemed at odds with their own developing world view. Regarding the breadth of this modernity and how Bengali Muslims viewed the nation through landscape, Willem van Schendel writes:

From the 1950s to the 1970s, the delta’s vernacular elite had imagined Bangladesh as the homeland of Bengalis who had been denied justice under Pakistan. To them, the Bengali nation stood for much more than a linguistic community. The nation’s spirit expressed itself in particular cultural sensibilities, devotional traditions and humanist aspirations that suffused the delta’s folksongs and baul mysticism as deeply as the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazul Islam . . . [they held] the vision of the nation as a rural idyll—an “embroidered quilt” (2009: 53).

The quilt to which van Schendel alludes in the above quote, in fact, refers to the cherished 1929 poem *Nôkṛī Kāthār Māṭ* (“The Field of the Embroidered Quilt”) by Bangladesh’s

*pôlli kôbi* (“Pastoral Poet”) Jasimuddin (1903–1976). A versatile writer, Jasimuddin composed poems, ballads, songs, dramas, novels, memoirs, and travelogues, and was an ardent song collector, composer and talent scout. Jasimuddin’s stature as premier folk poet can be readily contrasted with Bangladesh’s national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899–1976) who, while also delving into agrarian imagery through song himself, remained more closely attached to new literary style of the Bengali Renaissance. Jasimuddin, however, embodied the voice of the rurally-raised educated class from East Bengal, composing songs in regional dialects but also producing scholarly works on folk genres. A biennial award in his name is given for lifetime contributions to Bengali folk literature by the Bangla Academy, a bastion of Bangladeshi literary preservation.

### **Genre Studies, Jasimuddin, and a Modern Muslim Literati**

You are Raḥmān, you are Raḥīm,<sup>39</sup> all is easy for you  
 Have mercy on this wretched soul,  
 Release the sickness from the heart, the *sārindā*<sup>40</sup> cries out to you  
 —a *murfidā gān* composed by Fazluddin Fakir (1960)  
 in Jasimuddin’s *Murshida Gan* (1977)

Jasimuddin’s 1977 work *Murshida Gan* is a particularly striking example of his writing style, and examines a specific Muslim genre of folk-devotional music found in Bengal. Functioning as both a compendium of songs as well as an analysis of folk performance, the book postulates that *murfidā gān* (or *murfidī gān*, as it is commonly known today) is both deeply Sufi in its panegyric tone (Arabic: *murshid*, meaning “guide” or “teacher”) and wholeheartedly Bengali in musical style. The central theme in such songs is to provide a poignant description of separation from the beloved, which at once encapsulates the intimate relationship between

---

<sup>39</sup> Arabic, “Most Merciful” and “Most Gracious.”

<sup>40</sup> A three-stringed fiddle.

master and disciple in Sufi pedagogy, yet also draws correlations with a broader theme in Indic mythology known as *birôhō* (Sanskrit: *viraha*, meaning “separation”), which is commonly addressed in Bengali Vaishnavism through the longing of the estranged Radha for Lord Krishna. Yet, as Jasimuddin further elucidates, in contrast to *qawwālī*, the sound of *murfīdi gān* is typically characterized by a leisurely tempo and plaintive singing style, a style closely resembling the general sound of Bengali devotional hymns through the ages.

Jasimuddin’s work on this genre is particularly noteworthy because, while *murfīdi gān* seems to have been composed for centuries and performed by various specialized musicians, he argues that they are the central song corpus of *bôyāti* musicians in Bangladesh. The author draws correlations with the sacred sound of *murfīdi gān* and *samā*’, the ritualized act of listening in Sufi terms, and suggests that this genre was developed in ceremonial music séances (Bengali: *ojhā*). The spiritual efficacy of such songs, carried by both the words and by melody as well as the exuberant sound of the *sārindā* fiddle, according to Jasimuddin, is believed by its practitioners not only to intensify mystical arousal but also to function as a sonic ailment to sickness, madness, or depression.

This depiction of *murfīdi gān* suggests an alternative image of the *bôyāti* community, which links them to an entirely different genre of song as well as a particular musical venue. In contrast to the image of the *bôyāti* as *pālākār*—the aforementioned bardic profession of storytelling performed in open-air spaces—here the *bôyāti* functions as a distinctively Sufi artist-practitioner and healer, in the intimate and sacred space of ritualized performance. While contemporary *bôyāti* artists would not claim *murfīdi gān* to be the central genre of the repertoire, they still consider these songs to be important items in their set lists. Tellingly, the *sārindā* fiddle

itself, which seems so critical to the Jasimuddin's examination of *murṣīdī gān*, is still of particular importance to staged *bôyāti* performance. While Jasimuddin's work draws correlations between the *sārindā* and Sufi cosmology (for instance, the instrument's three strings are purportedly symbolic of the figures Adam, Muḥammad and Allah), the *sārindā* today has been slowly replaced by the violin, though more senior *bôyāti* artists, especially the disciples of the celebrated Abdul Halim Boyati (1929–2007) of Faridpur, still utilize the *sārindā* in performance. Regardless of *sārindā* or violin, a bowed instrument is traditionally always in the hands of the modern *bôyāti*, even if he or she plays very little of it on stage. As a visual prop, this lingering custom seems to bridge contemporary notions of the *bôyāti* as oral interlocutors with their past associations as specialized mediators of sacred sound.

It is notable here to mention that Jasimuddin, as a folk song composer, wrote a large variety of songs that became firmly ingrained in Bangladeshi culture in the twentieth century. Importantly, many of his famed compositions were first rendered by the singers Abbasuddin (1901–1959) and Abdul Alim (1931–1974). Both of these singers, the first large-scale recording artists from the Bengali Muslim community, developed their careers as specialists of Bengali folk songs, a distinctive departure from Bengali Hindu playback singers at the time, who focused mostly on modern songs in the classical idiom or devotional hymns. Indeed, Jasimuddin's sonic influence, as both a modernist composer of folk music and, later, as a broadcaster on East Pakistani radio and the Voice of America, put him in a unique position to delineate the shape and relevance of Bengali folk music in the rising nationalist movement for an independent Bangladesh.

Regarding Jasimuddin’s own artistic ideals, the image of the bôyāti was crucial. In his work on *murfīdi gān*, he states that “such [an artist] is informed by centuries of unique storytelling and spiritual discourse, which could only have been produced in the culturally autonomous spaces of East Bengali music-making” (1977: 10). While over the course of his career, Jasimuddin intimately examined many specialist communities of traditional Bengali song, in his own codification of folk-ness, he saw the bôyāti as an ideal pastiche, distinctively Muslim in style and yet egalitarian in Bengali spirit. While the multiple images of the bôyāti would become further complicated in the decades after independence, Jasimuddin’s work on *murfīdi gān* not only provides another snapshot of bôyāti musicality, but also further hints at their enduring, if not befuddled, relevance.

### **Bricolage Lamentation: Shī‘a Patronage and Sunni Musicality in Bengal**

Shiraj cries. Begum cries. The children cry.  
 Mother cries. Father cries. What can I say now?  
 What other words of grief can I say?  
 The pen does not seem to move. Listen, audience . . .

—a *jārigān* composed by Hatimuddin Sarkar<sup>41</sup>  
 on the death of Nazrul Islam Sarkar, a Member of Parliament

Mary Frances Dunham’s *Jarigan: Muslim Epic Songs of Bangladesh* (1997) represents one final genre-based study of bôyāti musicality. Blending influences from sacred and secular Perso-Arabic literature with compositional roots in the epic poetry of South Asia, traditional Bengali *jārigān* (Persian: *zārī*, “lament”) compositions are mostly based on the events solemnly ceremonialized during the Islamic month of Muḥarram. Focusing on the martyrdom of Ḥusayn ibn ‘Ali and his family, the many events leading to and in the aftermath of this major political

---

<sup>41</sup> As appears in Mary Francis Dunham’s *Jarigan: Muslim Epic Songs of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1997).

upheaval in early Islam are central to Shī‘a identity throughout the Muslim world, as evidenced by their elaborate mourning rituals and literary traditions which highlight this historic moment.

As Richard Wolf has mentioned, however, Muḥarram is not an exclusively Shī‘a phenomenon in South Asia,<sup>42</sup> but has “existed for hundreds of years as a complex public and private congeries of observances, whose meanings have varied for peoples of different backgrounds and belief systems” (2009: 45). This point is readily observed with regard to the evolution and popularity of jārigān in Bengal, where the ethnic Bengali Muslim population—unlike in critical cities of North India, such as Lucknow—are wholeheartedly Sunni in theological and legalistic terms. Sufism, however, with its traditionally favored view of pedigreed sainthood, has always legitimated its own spiritual dominion through a *silsilah* (Arabic, “chain” or “link”), a religious genealogy that traces a brotherhood’s roots through sainthood and bloodline back to the Prophet.

For this reason, the Chishtī and Qādirī brotherhoods—two important Sufi institutions in South Asia, and the fundamental brotherhoods associated with bōyāti spirituality—are simultaneously traditions of Islamic mysticism which developed in the Sunni world while also being organizations which demonstrate a notable reverence for the progeny of ‘Ali, including the Ḥusayn family, as important links in the sacred *silsilah*. A cursory examination of Bangladesh’s traditional Islamic architecture easily demonstrates this phenomenon, as many urban and semi-rural locations are the sites of *imām bāri* (Bengali, “houses of the Imams”), centers for Shī‘a worship and the commemoration of Muḥarram. These buildings—such as those located in

---

<sup>42</sup> Hosay (from Ḥusayn) was originally a Muslim Indo-Caribbean commemoration that is popularly observed in Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Suriname and Jamaica. While its origins are based on traditional Muḥarram processions, it later blended with the larger Carnival festival and Caribbean nationalist celebrations.

Dhaka, Thakurgaon or Rajbari—were largely established by local Sunni Muslim rulers of the area who, in nearly every instance, had strong spiritual and political allegiances with Sufism through the Chishtī or Qādirī brotherhoods.

Dunham’s work on *jārigān* examines how its highly developed poetic and musical form have historically appealed to mass audiences, through extempore renditions that combine text and tune to “express the lyrical and expository material of the lengthy narratives” (1997: 45). Focusing again on an entirely different genre, we re-situate the *bōyāti*, the primarily conveyors of the *jārigān* genre, whose adept skills combine a deep and lively ability to recount Islamic lore with prosodic and melodic conventions long cherished in Bengali vernacular performance and recitation. Perhaps most significant to Dunham’s work, however, is her notable discussion of



**Figure 1.4. Sunni Bengali girls in a stylized *michil*, or procession, in the vicinity of the Shī‘a house of worship in the district of Jessore, established by prominent philanthropist Haji Muḥammad Muḥsin (1732–1812).**

how *jārigān* remains critically relevant in the modern world, as *bôyāti* artists have helped to develop of number of related genres of performance which are based on this shared historic material, including *jārināch* (Bengali: *nāch*, “dance”). In *bôyāti* performance, *jārigān* mutates from a particular style of sung epic eulogies based on Islamic war chronicles into a range of performance styles which express tragic biographical accounts in the broadest terms. Tapping into the genre’s potent exploration of sorrow through histrionics, *jārigān* in *bôyāti* performance burgeons into a dynamic style of its own, expanding the traditional subject matter to include the biographies of assassinated politicians or non-Islamic tragic mythologies, while contracting performance style through a series of relatable but separate sub-genres. This flexibility, made possible by the *bôyāti* artist’s acute sense of musical compartmentalization, arms them with a seemingly unlimited number of permutations of musical and poetic structure, at once archival and conjectural, a feature that would later provide the *bôyāti* artist with a certain advantage on the crowded stage of shrine performances in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the particularly transmutative nature of chronicled Muḥarram narratives in South Asia—historically eulogized and embroidered by various communities within and beyond Islamic communities—and the aggrandizing houses of the Imams that complemented them and were patronized by Sunni rulers of Bengal, perhaps also sheds light on the *bôyāti* art form. Contemporary *bôyāti* performance, while broadening its lyrical and stylistic parameters well beyond the likes of *jārigān*, still displays a deep fondness for content which astutely embodies the weighty dimensions of Islamic cosmology and discourse while challenging and subsuming that material through performance at the very institutions or edifices that have traditionally endorsed their preservation.

If, in the case of the *Maimansingh Gitika*, we can imagine the bôyāti as specialist of long narrative performance, the genre of murjīdi gān accentuates the bôyāti artist's spiritual side as transmitters of Sufi sound, and in the case of jārigān, as masters of bricolage. In each phase of style, the bôyāti artist's art form is critically aware of its own transience, willing to explore a musical moment with great exhibition and yet change trajectory in the next, with little regard for convention or posterity through association of genre. Yet, the bôyāti artist's scope has also been selectively accumulative, which has not only articulated the shifting parameters of shrine-centered performance but the caprices of audiences and their musical tastes, which are continually shaped by the contours of regional flair. Through a modern performance style shaped by musical debate, the bôyāti continues to find relevance by testing boundaries cushioned by the charm of their showmanship, by navigating the fluid but delicate routes between Bangladesh's devotionalities and contemporary impressions of regionality through their own malleable associations with musical style and mystical practice.

## **Conclusion**

The formulation of a Bengali Muslim identity has involved a spectrum of convictions and disassociations over centuries, as a nascent but exponentially large demographic sought to define themselves through poetry and song against indigenous East Indian traditions of mysticism, the growing proclivities of a Hindu Bengali literati, an influential but non-Bengali expanse of Muslims in colonial North India, and striking interactions with the larger Islamic world as Bengali Muslim society developed distinctive middle class features in the decades prior to independence. Unlike Bengali Hindus, the Bengali Muslim community could not rely on centuries of native literature or ideology reflective of their history, nor could they easily develop

an impartial or advantageous relationship with music making comfortably situated within the provisions of modern Islamic theology. Despite this fact, a tradition of Bengali Muslim devotionalism developed unique and abiding qualities of its own, even as different eras of time challenged the existence of various pieties, and this tradition was neither obliterated by the acts of zealots nor trivialized by a crippling implementation of secular initiatives. Instead, it particularly survives and is maintained in contemporary times through the *bōyāti* community.

Despite a significant premodern Bengali Muslim literary heritage that begins in the sixteenth century, the *bōyāti* community does not seem to be mentioned in the works of writers, historians, or other intellectuals until the nineteenth century. The reasons for this are uncertain, but it seems fairly plausible to believe that musicians using the moniker “*bōyāti*” may not have developed before the modern era, but instead a body of related artists existed through the indirect influence of a variety of other musical communities, traditions of performance, and stylistic conventions (see Chapter Two). It is only in the early twentieth century that the *bōyāti* community, firmly rooted in East Bengal, undergoes a significant consolidation through a debate genre known as *bicār gān*, a staged dialectical performance that amalgamates a vast range of sonic devotional ideas (see Chapter Three), further consolidated through a tradition of gestured movements and a sportive configuration of alternate “attacks” (Chapter Four). In addition, over the twentieth century, *bicār gān* increasingly became fortified in the *bōyāti* community through formalized discipleship and a burgeoning association with shrine-based patrons (see Chapter Five). While this consolidation has not completely brought the *bōyāti* community to the musical foreground, it has, in the process, produced the rise of *fakirāni* artists, female *bōyāti* professionals emerging from regional Muslim domains within Bangladesh (Chapter Six).

## Chapter Two

### Modalities of Bôyāti Musicianship

While bôyāti musicianship is an accumulation of many musical, theological, or aesthetic choices over centuries, a distinctively modern form of bôyāti performance did not evolve until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In order to make sense of contemporary bôyāti song, is it thus useful to first examine the foundational qualities of contemporary bôyāti performance, represented by an engaging amalgam of various performance traditions, poetic conventions, musical renderings, and devotional impressions, uniquely and deftly manipulated by bôyāti artists on stage. While the individual compositional elements are intentionally conflated in contemporary performance to provoke muddled musings on histories and ontologies of Bengali-ness, it is nevertheless useful to examine separately the salient features of bôyāti musicianship.

Before considering these various modalities, it is important to mention and avoid the various pitfalls of these types of broad musical comparisons. On his examination of the evolution of the Hindustani tabla solo, Miles Shrewsbury III has advised against the impulse to over-codify, as the individual compositional structures of the tabla solo are not discretely different from one another, but have transformed into a flowing range of approaches to rhythmic exploration which have been beautified in their own way by the gradual performance-based maturation of *tāla* and its decentralized traditions of interpretation in North India (1997). He furthermore cites Amartya Sen’s critique of the “curatorial” side of colonial scholarship in India, mainly its impulse to classify and define aspects of South Asian society in order to display them in a book, museum or archive. This historical sort of rigid classification, with its objective to

survey authorial source material, seemingly glosses over the larger performative aspects governed by aesthetic choice and audience reception, through its emphatic vivisection.

The rich heritage of Sanskrit theoretical treatises on the arts in early India, however, especially by virtue of its erudite associations with philosophy, theory, and aesthetics, painstakingly classified music according to a variety of behavioral, functional, historical, literary and technical divisions (Powers 1980, Schofield 2010, Rowell 2015). Ironically, this inherently Indic approach to scholarship, while arguably developing from a different set of intellectual ambitions, is wholeheartedly anatomical in its initiatives. Thibaut d’Hubert’s analysis of a medieval Bengali narrative poem known as *pācāli*— especially through his discussions of Alaol (1607–1673), a prolific premodern author of this genre—perhaps offers us an intermediary route for analysis. d’Hubert suggests that Alaol’s deep knowledge of the classical literary cultures of Sanskrit and Persian combined with his traditional Bengali literary style allowed for unprecedented informal gatherings with the Muslim elite of the Mrauk-U dynasty in the Arakan. He states, “resettled in the context of the Indo-Persian assembly or *majlis*, the Bengali poetic speech . . . became a subject of speculation and discussion,” and that the literary self-awareness that Alaol was subsequently able to compose in this environment “provided his readers/auditors with analytical tools that allowed them to think of the compositional pattern of the existing regional literary tradition that lacked proper theoretical literature” (2015: 425).

To further this line of inquiry, I argue that the compositional form of traditional Bengali song can be examined as contextual realities best understood through performance, one that traverses many possible points between classical or vernacular modalities or the oral-literary divide that has historically informed studies of popular music traditions. Ultimately, this process

highlights and enlivens the many potential interconnections between source material embedded in performance that may otherwise be overlooked. Like Alaol’s macaronic capacities, bôyāti musicianship is acutely invigorated by both their imbibition of a heterogeneous range of musical, poetic and metaphysical tropes, as well as the dynamic peculiarities of the spaces that patronize them. In this manner, independently examining key elements of their overall style can allow us to both sonically to map and contextually to complicate the many negotiations of song text, tune, and thematic disposition—extracted from a range of seemingly unassociated sources—that the bôyāti art form articulates in its convoluted relationship with other performers, diversified audiences and politically-aligned venues.

The shape of bôyāti musicianship might be seen as a web of many distinctive modalities, notably informed by: (1) Islamic constructs of erudition and exegesis, (2) the legacy of Hindu Bengali devotional song, (3) bāul aesthetics, (4) the compositional style of Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1841), (5) Bengali folk motifs and instrumentation, (6) vernacular dramaturgy, and (7) Urdu-language lyricism and the semi-classical form. Overall, these modalities might be understood as belonging to a continuum, with the first modalities having a more direct consequence on the artistic processes that govern modern bôyāti performance, and the latter half increasingly affecting the form and sound of bôyāti music.

### **Erudition and Exegesis in Islamic Theology**

In the opening line of a song by Abdul Halim (1929–2007), the bôyāti composer states: *tumi bôlô re fôkir, kon āyāte kon surāte bikri dilā fir?* (“tell me, fakir, with what verse and with what chapter of the Qur’ān have you ‘sold’ your head?”). This first modality examines the attention to erudition and exegesis in bôyāti performance—their approach to research and

citation as a criterion of musicianship—and the manner in which this stylistic methodology identifies with classical Islamic discourse, namely its traditional analysis of divine agency and the authority of the word.

Most *bôyāti* artists take a number of conventionalized surnames on stage, including the title *Boyati*, but more frequently *Sarkar* or *Dewan*, as in *Mukta Sarkar* or *Rajjab Dewan*. In East India and Bangladesh, the surname *Sarkar* is relatively commonplace, and this Persian-derived word historically represented an administrative rank in Mughal bureaucracy, where *sarkār* was an honorific given to a chief, superintendent, or lord (Anwar 2001, Mukhia 2004). In the tradition of *kôbigān* today, the main singer, or *kôbiyāl*, is also conventionally addressed as *sôrkār* and this term seems to have carried over to the *bôyāti* world, as many *kôbigān*-trained artists in Bangladesh have left one dialectical performance tradition for another. The term *Dewan*, too, seems to have originated as a surname derived from Muslim ruling hierarchies, and the Perso-Arabic based *dīwān* was a regional governmental body in a number of historic Islamic states, especially with reference to a fiscal registrar, chamberlain, chief treasury official or finance minister (Streusand 2011, Collier 2016). In literary terms, however, *dīwān* is usually a definitive anthology of poems by one author, often composed or collected in imperial courts. Thus, in both instances, the *bôyāti* surnames *Sarkar* and *Dewan* have their origins in official titles connected to ideas of regality, textual definitiveness and record keeping.

Classical Islamic scholarship developed two principal theses on the subject of the origin of language (Arabic: *aṣl al-luġha*). The first of these theses, commonly referred to as *tawqīf*, accentuated the preeminent role that divine agency played in the imposition of language; axiomatic within this perspective is the view that words (*lafz*, pl. *alfāz*) have been assigned their

meanings (*ma' nā*, pl. *ma' ānī*) primordially by God (Abrahamov 1998, Netton 2007). Presented as something of an antithesis to this position, the second doctrine, labeled *iṣṭilāh*, predicates that language was established and evolved via a process of common convention and agreement: words together with their meanings were assigned by human beings and through largely arbitrary means (Fakhry 1997, Winter 2008). While it seems as though later Islamic scholarship accepted that both theses were plausible, there was a decisive schism, and it became necessary for orthodox theologians to create a connective structure, as articulated through reference to remembrance, continuation, and identity, which enabled them to anchor the construct of *tawqīf* in a formalized way to the scriptural exegesis and emblems of orthodoxy associated with pious ancestors. That this was successfully accomplished through references to the past would seem to confirm the role which cultural memory played in the defense of what was deemed an orthodox belief.

The pioneering poets of the *bōyāti* song canon are memorialized as saintly lyricist-scribes, their literary outpouring as much speculative as it is bibliographical, intensely drawing on Indic, Islamic and East Indian/Bengali traditions of mysticism as they have been intellectually or popularly interpreted or received. Yet ultimately, the various genres and musical stylings *bōyāti* artists offer is retrospective, they intrinsically derive from other performance traditions, milieus or devotional spaces. The *bōyāti* artist's underlying forte thus becomes his or her ability to juxtapose this miscellaneousness in a musical interlocution. As such, the *bōyāti* is critically aware of associations of legacy, disposition and charm that connect one song tradition or poet to another. This musical "stamping" requires an articulation of authorship and sonic categorization in performance, which the *bōyāti* approaches in a number of ways on stage, but is intensely

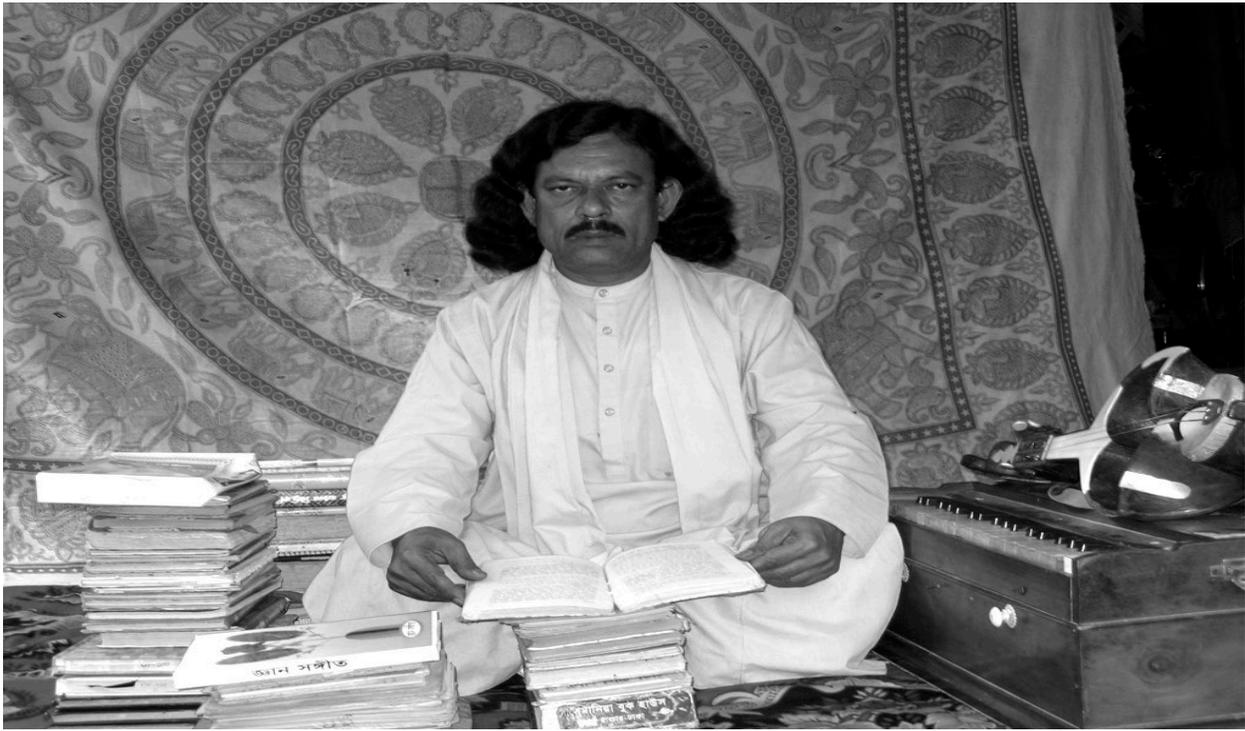
predicated upon a performative scholarship that demarcates the utility of bôyāti musicality.

This abiding attachment to citation—this referential nod to text, composer or melody as a form of authentication—is perhaps a reflection of the historical concept of “the science of discourse” (Arabic: *‘ilm al-kalām*) in classical Islam, which emphasizes rational thought and reason through argument. Born out of the need to establish and defend the tenets of the Islamic faith against detractors, the apologetic preposition which informs *‘ilm al-kalām* has a longstanding place in the history of Islamic thought and erudition, and seems to be a distinctive quality of the bôyāti persona, as he or she is not simply a bardic receptacle nor an instrument of diatribe, but one who ruminates (Bengali: *bicār*) on song (*gān*). Strikingly, bôyāti artists are often avid book collectors, and even resort to writing down polemical points with pen and paper whilst engaged in staged musical debates with their bôyāti contenders. Furthermore, in moments of rebuttal on stage, bôyāti artists frequently demand that their antagonist properly and substantially quote original material or biographical details to validate their position, and this tactic can also have a performative function beyond scholarly legitimacy, employed in order to overwhelm their competitor. In some cases, a particularly bookish or learned bôyāti is referred to as *gôjāli fôkir*, a fakir who follows in the tradition of al-Ghazālī (ca. 1058-1111), a prominent theologian, jurist and mystic of the Islamic Golden Age<sup>1</sup> who is widely celebrated for bridging

---

<sup>1</sup> The Islamic Golden Age is the era in the history of Islam, traditionally dated from the eighth century to the fourteenth century, during which much of the historically Islamic world was ruled by various caliphates, and science, economic development and cultural works flourished. This period is traditionally understood to have begun during the reign of the Abbasid caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (786–809) with the inauguration of the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, where scholars from various parts of the world with different cultural backgrounds were mandated to gather and translate all of the world's classical knowledge into the Arabic language (Siddiqui 2012). This period is traditionally said to have ended with the collapse of the Abbasid caliphate due to Mongol invasions and the Siege of Baghdad in 1258 AD. A few contemporary scholars place the end of the Islamic Golden Age as late as the end of 15th to 16th centuries (Winter 2008).

the gap between the traditions of mystical and intellectual Sufism.



**Figure 2.1. The bôyāti artist Parimal Sarkar on the front porch of his home, amongst instruments and books, in the Shobha Rampur neighborhood of Faridpur.**

Parimal Boyati represents a particularly striking case of a bôyāti artist's many positionalities within the aforementioned modalities connected to bôyāti performance. Born into a Hindu family and initially trained as a kôbigān singer, Parimal was later initiated into the Chishtī order and studied under numerous bôyāti-s, including the esteemed Abdul Halim and the pioneering female artist Hajira Bibi (1913–2006). In the above image, Parimal is seated amongst his instruments, the harmonium and sārindā, and a range of books on various theological topics or mythological commentaries, especially from Islamic sources. After working with him for some time, I learned of Parimal's semi-literacy and that, with the help of his brother, he would listen to sections of text from his book collection read out to him, which would inspire some of the polemical points of his original compositions. In this way, Parimal's approach to scholarship

moves between the discourses of scholarly and public knowledge, the manner in which ideas have been conventionally elucidated and how they are generally understood today, but inexorably accentuates the pedantic nature in which vernacular bôyāti artists insist on source inquiry and attestation as the wellspring of their musicality.

### **Hindu Devotional Canons**

Over centuries, Bengali Hindu devotional song has produced a profound and enduring impact on the shape of musical style in Muslim Bengal, especially through its tradition of hymns. The larger sociocultural ramifications of Hindu modernism in Bengal and its equally pioneering efforts in the recording and commodification of Bengali music left an inedible mark on how music was composed and heard in conventional spaces.<sup>2</sup> Bengali Muslim devotional song and its musical rendering—while having deep literary connections with premodern Bengali and thematic connections with vernacular performance—did not initially produce a distinctive studio style in the nascent era of the Bengali recording industry, and was further impeded by an aforementioned range of disparate revivalist movements amongst Bengali Muslims in the early twentieth century (see Chapter One), which compromised the legitimacy of music making or listening in public discourse. This reformist phase—abrupt and countercultural in relation to the gradual and contextualized Islamization of Bengal that occurred in the centuries before—was marked by a pan-Islamic zeal that reflected, in various ways, opposition to both the dominion of Bengali Hindu modernism and British imperialism. Furthermore, the incorporation of reformist rhetoric was made increasingly possible through the completion and return from *hajj* pilgrimage

---

<sup>2</sup> Regarding the Gramophone Company's first Indian recordings at the turn of the century to produce "native sounds," Michael S. Kinnear suggests that Kolkata, with its "indigenous theatre forms like jatra and pala, was ripe for such an initiative" (1994: 112).

by middle-class Bengali Muslims. While Muslim recording artists did eventually emerge—and focused mostly on a broadly-defined folk repertoire—and vernacular artists of Sufi performance remained plentiful in traditional spaces, their efforts were largely curtailed by the modernist literary approach dominated by the Hindu gentry, which had already aided in the construction of a hegemonic devotional sound that was formalized through the medium of the gramophone, and later radio (Chatterji 1972).

The Bengal Renaissance, while decisively humanistic in its intellectual and artistic endeavors, ultimately remained poetically aloof from distinctively Muslim approaches to devotional style in literature and music. Two of its most celebrated song composers, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899–1976)—emerging from the Bengali Hindu and Muslim communities, respectively—shared comparable philosophical views regarding humanity’s interface with spirituality, nature, and cosmology, marked by a stark disapproval of communal discord and colonial domination. Yet the melodic contours and rhythmic accompaniment typical of many of Tagore’s songs—which he emphatically prescribed in his compositional style—is clearly influenced by *kīrtōn*, the responsorial devotional genre that, in Bengal, is poetically formulated on the structures of Vaiṣṇava mythology.

In Bengal, kirtan is a broad collection of genres dealing with religious, mythological or social subject matter popular throughout South Asia which typically features a call-and-response style, and sometimes various forms of narration, storytelling, shared recitation and dramatic interpretation. More generally in South Asia, it is a major musical form in Hindu devotional practice, including Vaiṣṇava devotionalism, but also in the traditions of Sikhism, the Sant traditions, and some forms of Buddhism. According to Christian Lee Novetzke, while the word

kirtan has Vedic roots, and its music practice is often likened to conceptual aspects of Sanskrit aesthetics, it is ultimately a heterogeneous style that varies regionally (2016). Bengali kirtan was first introduced in the west by Parahansa Yogananda (1893–1952), which eventually led to a globally-recognized form, and continues to be disseminated today through the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON).

Dozens of Tagore’s *kīrtōn* compositions can be found in the *Gītābitan*, the authoritative edition of his song collection of *rabindra sangeet*, the production of which Tagore himself initiated. Nazrul, in contrast, while producing pioneering works in song and translation that attempted to reflect the spiritual proclivities of his urbane Bengali Muslim readership/listenership, was equally indebted to Bengali Hindu devotionalism, and wrote many more memorable hymns in praise of Kali or Shyam than Allah or the Prophet. Additionally, Nazrul’s own wife was from a Hindu family associated with the Brahma Samaj, itself a highly influential movement acutely tied to the implementation of Hindu modernity in Bengal (Langley 2007, Mitra 2007, Abbasi 2013).

Bengali Hindu devotion has particularly strong connections with Vaishnavism—both through the worship of Lord Kṛṣṇa and the popular reverence for Caitanya Mahāprabhu (1486–1534), an ascetic saint-reformer of East Indian Vaishnavism who is widely regarded as the embodiment of Kṛṣṇa. To a somewhat lesser extent, Bengali Hindu devotion is also musically shaped by regional Shaivism, especially its connections with Shaktism and its various sub-traditions of Tantra in Bengal, through the mother goddess Kali (Dimock 1989). The Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī movement in medieval Bengali literature (ca. sixteenth–seventeenth centuries), marked an efflorescence of poetry that often focused on expressive accounts of the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa legend,

and produced major poets such as Govinda Dās (1535–1613), Caṇḍī Dās (b. 1408), and many others (Goswami 1994, Prime 2012). While numerous performance genres in Bengal have profound roots in Bengali Vaiṣṇava devotionism and mythology, *kīrtōn* is perhaps the most ubiquitous and enduring example, especially though the classic style known as *ṛḍābōlī kīrtōn* (Bengali: *ṛḍā*, “short verse” and *bōlī*, “collection”). The earliest historical record of *ṛḍābōlī kīrtōn* dates to a late sixteenth-century religious function by the Vaiṣṇava saint-composer-promulgator Narottam Dās (born ca. 1466), in present-day Bangladesh (Goswami 1994). While a range of styles later emerged over the centuries, the core instrumentation for *ṛḍābōlī kīrtōn* has largely remained unchanged: a lead vocalist, an accompanying singer, two drummers on the *khol* (a double-headed terra cotta drum, unique to the genre), and a hand cymbalist. Variations of this musical setup are common in many Bengali vernacular performance traditions today.

The lyrics associated with *ṛḍābōlī kīrtōn* are derived from a repertoire of Vaiṣṇava poetry that focus on the erotic *līlā*-s, or episodes, of the Hindu deities Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa which, critically, are performed over a leisurely-advancing series of slow tempos in distinctive long-cycle *tāla*-s, with interjections of additional lines of song text in performance. One of the most critical aspects of *kīrtōn* with regard to its memorable style is that, in conjunction with a slew of other predominantly Hindu-based vernacular performance traditions, it was considerably promulgated and gentrified through bourgeois performance in urban prosceniums beginning in the late nineteenth century (Ramsaran 1973, Varadpande 1987). The particular form of *ṛḍābōlī*

kīrtōn, especially as it has been institutionalized and promulgated at Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata,<sup>3</sup> has thus left an abiding influence on the general shape of Bengali devotional music.

Musically, the longer tāla-s with unusual *mātrā* lengths (or, the number of beats in a rhythmic cycle) in this genre are notably difficult to execute, and mastery of these *tāla*-s ultimately display the kīrtōn singer’s professionalism and training on stage.<sup>4</sup> According to Eben Graves, the actual performance of the tāla-s of kīrtōn, implemented in tandem with a series of interpolation strategies, enable the singer to expand or truncate various lines of Vaiṣṇava poetry in an extended performance (2017). Graves’s work examines how a kīrtōn singer moves between various couplets of poetry from the traditional Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī anthologies by attaching specified lines to different cyclical structures, each with its own musical criterion for prosodic or rhythmic interplay. For example, after a couplet from a main poem in a long-cycle tāla is rendered in performance, a section called *kāṭān* may be introduced, which features a new line of poetry (related in theme but not necessarily from the same poem or author). While the *kāṭān* typically maintains the previously delineated long-cycle tāla, it is marked by a gradual increase in tempo, potentially +40 bpm from the original tempo, and accompanied by intense drumming patterns, often in double or quadruple time, on the *khol* drum. This exciting musical compaction is often used to highlight a particularly rousing verse, using textual repetition alongside swelling tempos and rhythmic density to elicit ecstatic responses from audience members. After a

---

<sup>3</sup> Founded in 1962 to mark the birth centenary of Rabindranath Tagore, Rabindra Bharati University is located at the Tagore family home at Jarasanko Thakur Bari in Kolkata. According to Basavi Mukerji, Tagore was completely enamored with “the classical beauty and the lovelorn lyrics of kirtan,” which “did not adhere to an established classical form, yet was . . . essentially based upon classical ragas and talas, some totally indigenous to it” (2011: 49).

<sup>4</sup> Certain *tāla*-s, such as Shom Tāla (a 28-beat cycle), Mādhyama Daśkoṣī (a 14-beat cycle), or Jhānti Tāla (a 7-beat cycle) are almost completely specific to the genre, though Rabindranath Tagore was fond of composing songs in some of these rhythms. Notably, the rhythm Lophā Tāla (a 12-beat cycle) seems to have been thoroughly integrated into the larger dimensions of Bengali devotional song, including bāul and bōyāti repertoire, and is perhaps partially responsible for Bengali music’s general penchant for triple meter.

retardation of tempo, another section known as *jamāṭ* may be introduced, which provides an opportunity to introduce yet another unrelated line of poetry (but one which allows, thematically, for the subsequent return to the main poem), which is not marked by tempo fluctuations or drumming density, but the introduction of a different long-cycle *tāla* new to the performance moment. Finally, the original long-cycle *tāla* may then be returned to later, which finally marks the appearance of the second couplet of poetry from the original composition. In this manner, the *kīrtōn* singer would move on to different couplets of the main poem, frequently juxtaposing them with stylized repetitions of other lines of poetry through stark deviations in time and meter.

Mastering the spatial dexterity needed to render such poetry over long-cycle *tāla*-s, while conspicuously complex, is also a musical performance style that allows a fairly limited amount of poetry, often quite rarefied, to be extracted and developed through metric embellishment.<sup>5</sup> Utilizing only a few stock melodies to accompany this poetry, but over a larger selection of specialized *tāla*-s, the dimensions of *ṣḍābōlī kīrtōn* as an art form are thus critically based on sophisticated notions of temporal expansion. Additionally, this enables the stylistic repetitions of *ṣḍābōlī kīrtōn* to be viewed as an integral aspect of its aestheticized devotion, where listeners can hear intricate reiterations of the text in a manner that invites a deep rumination of the performance and its metaphysical message.

Interestingly, *bōyāti* artists also move between a range of *tāla*-s which, in their case, typically mark a transition from sung song text to narrative exegesis or expositional recitative on

---

<sup>5</sup> According to Karunamaya Goswami, the style of *ṣḍābōlī kīrtōn* has five limbs: *kathā* (exegesis of the poem through stylized speech), *doha* (the supplementation of additional lyrics not part of the central poem), *tuka* (a demonstration of stylistic melismas associated with individual kīrtan melodies), *chhuta* (any section of the main poem that is of musical focus), and *ankhara* (a larger section which combines extemporaneous extractions of text with semi-classical approaches to melodic improvisation based on *rāga*-esque development techniques) (1994). Presumably, it is in this last section where the specific techniques for poetic reduction or elongation are particularly utilized.

stage. The Bengali *ḍhol*, the central percussion instrument of *bôyāti* music, also incorporates a variety of prearranged patterns or motifs to accentuate and punctuate moments of performance. However, the *tāla*-s used in contemporary *bôyāti* music do not favor the slow-tempo, large-cycle rhythms critical to *ṣḍābôlī kīrtōn*, but rather a subtle variety of duple and triple meter *tāla*-s mostly performed in medium and fast tempo. Further, *tāla* fluctuation within the rendering of a particular song text is not common in *bôyāti* performance, though a slow acceleration of tempo is fairly common, and perhaps unconsciously applied in extemporaneous rendering. Rather than incorporating a number of complex *tāla*-s in their style, the *bôyāti* conversely employs a vast number of stock melodies. These standard melodies are quite transferrable, which in turns allows the *bôyāti* to render staple compositions in the repertoire, or rearrange them, as well as compose new ones in the same vein. Instead of showcasing a highly evolved sense of rhythmic development, the *bôyāti* focuses on the correlations of song text, author and melody, creatively drawing on both the collective admiration for a particular poet’s devotional sensibilities and the associative allure of a conventional melodic structure, and also from both inside and outside canonic parameters.

Ultimately, Hindu religious hymns and performance genres in Bengal have exhibited a perennial influence on the shape of both Hindu and Muslim devotionalism. Musically, this has demonstrated remarkable effect through the style of *ṣḍābôlī kīrtōn*, especially through its clever approach to applying short sections of lyrical text into a larger aesthetic unfolding—one that showcases musical dexterity in order to produce a certain mystical emotionalism. From the standpoint of the rich heritage and thematic material found in Hindu devotional song—and its related dissemination and reception history—its continued relevance amongst a Bengali Muslim

listenership also lies in its alternative pietism, one largely perceived of as temporal entertainment. While Hindu and Muslim devotional streams have long interacted on page and dais, Hindu devotional song in contemporary Bangladesh is generally regarded as having a less vexed relationship to both piety and performance. Especially in the era leading up to and following Bangladesh's secularly-inspired statehood, Bengali Hindu devotionalism continues to enjoy an areligious presence through its celebration of the heritage of Bengal which, despite being informed by the agency of Hindu creativity, is abiding yet peripheral to a more contentious Muslim devotionalism.

### **Bāul Aesthetics**

The third modality underlying contemporary bōyāti performance concerns their approach to bāul aesthetics. The pervasiveness of bāul music and thought in Bengal over the last century cannot be overstated. This community of poets and esoteric practitioners is especially known for their haunting but abstruse songs, their indoctrination of both Hindu and Muslim disciples, and their juggling of the social parameters associated with the traditional positions of householder and renouncer in South Asia. From the standpoint of popular devotional songs forms, the rise in popularity of bāul music, poetry and philosophy across a larger mainstream Bengali demographic in many ways marked a transitional moment, whereby more ostensibly Hindu religious hymns were increasingly juxtaposed alongside the universalist mysticism of bāul culture.

Rising from relative obscurity, the image of the bāul was transformed into an “iconic bearer of venerable indigenous heritage” (Openshaw, 2002: 23) in the late eighteenth and early twentieth century, and particularly through the figure of Lālōn (d. 1890). Thus emerged the discipline of bāul studies, which eventually examined the broader bāul community through a

variety of theological or devotional streams, from Vedic Hinduism (Sen 1993) to Vaiṣṇava, Tantric Buddhism<sup>6</sup> or Sahajiyā<sup>7</sup> rhetoric (Dasgupta 1974), from Sufism (Haq 1975) to the ancient school of Indian materialism<sup>8</sup> (Jha 1999). A further consequence of this disciplinary trajectory is that bāul communities have traditionally been conceived of as a vernacular community of India, which eventually overlooked or impassively ignored the vast networks of bāul-s who reside in today's Bangladesh. This can be readily observed in the range of many seminal bāul manuscripts or articles in the past decades, even as the theoretical scope of these works delved deeper into the broader, more interconnected issues of nation-state borders, New Age spirituality, or Hindu-Muslim relations (Datta 1978, Dimock 1989, Crovetto 2006, Capwell 1986, Mukhopadhyay 2014).

The field of bāul studies, however, has also developed in various other spaces, influencing the shape of critical theory elsewhere, particularly postcolonial analysis and the interest of the Subaltern Studies Group. Thus, the images which bāul song and poetry have famously endorsed—corporeal sacredness, aversion to dogma, quirky descriptions of divinity and sexuality—have been commonly aligned with discussions of bāul philosophy as a statement of otherness, a poetic inversion of supremacy, and a jubilation that champions madness and the disenfranchised (Salomon 1991, Spivak in Morris 2010). Over decades, the poetic genius of

---

<sup>6</sup> The Vajrayāna tradition, founded by medieval Indian ascetics known as *mahāsiddha*-s, includes the use of sacred utterances and the visualization of deities as routes to enlightenment, and also emphasizes distinctive forms of esoteric transmission, the union of male and female form in yogic practice, and the maintenance of special tantric vows through guru dissemination (Mishra 2009).

<sup>7</sup> The Sahajiyā emerged in eighth-century Bengal and developed in a number of separate traditions. The well-known Vaiṣṇava-Sahajiyā tradition sought religious experience through the five senses and the physical reenactment of the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa romance (Dimock 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Cārvāka, originally known as Lokāyata and Bṛhaspatya, holds direct perception, empiricism, and conditional influence as proper sources of knowledge, embraces philosophical skepticism and rejects the authority of the Vedas, Vedic ritualism, and supernaturalism (Gokkhale 2015).

Lālôn easily made him the subject of other song traditions or creative works as well, including the writings of authors Rabindranath Tagore (1931), Sudhir Chakraborty (1997, ed. Debdas), Shaktinath Jha (2009), Sunil Gangopadhyay (2010) and Abul Ahsan Chowdhury (2011); a one-man stage play by Sudipito Chatterjee called *Man of the Heart*; a number of feature films including Tanvir Mokammel's *Lalon* (2004) and Goutam Ghosh's *Maner Manush* (2010); and the musical style of contemporary researchers-cum-activists and their bands, including Kalikaprasad Bhattacharya (Dohar), Anusheh Anadil (Bangla), Nigar Sultana Sumi (Lalon), and Maqsoodul Haque (Maqsood o Dhaka).

Perhaps what has made the figure of Lālôn so enduring is that his heritage combines, on the one hand, a compelling song-poem tradition deeply tied to archaic metaphysical discourses of life, love and existence, as well as one replete with whimsical pastoral allegory. On the other hand, Lālôn represents a living oral tradition authenticated and preserved with few discrepancies by generations of meticulous acolytes. Thus, his poetic corpus seems to evoke Bengali heritage through both intellectual and bucolic registers to his contemporary readership/listenership, and through layers of meaning. Yet, this heritage is simultaneously perceived as a modern repository, a treasure trove of potential research filled with ample disciples in the present who insist without compromise on its guardianship and can thoughtfully articulate biographical and thematic details of Lālôn's life and work. In this manner, Lālôn's notably cerebral yet succinct lines of poetry have long been cherished and perused as an exemplar of Bengali thought; his sharp polemical tone, surprisingly suggestive imagery, profound candidness and fervently inward devotion has resonated with them and substantiated their own convictions with regard to the colonial enterprise, Hindu-Muslim dissent, and the social reform campaigns which have shaped their

milieu. The obituary of Lālôn below elaborates on several aspects of his life: that he had a domestic partner but was a dedicated mystic, that his religious background is indiscernible, that despite his apparent illiteracy was a learned and contemplative poet, and that he lived modestly at his heritage until the end of his days. This obituary appeared in the *Hitakari*, edited by the

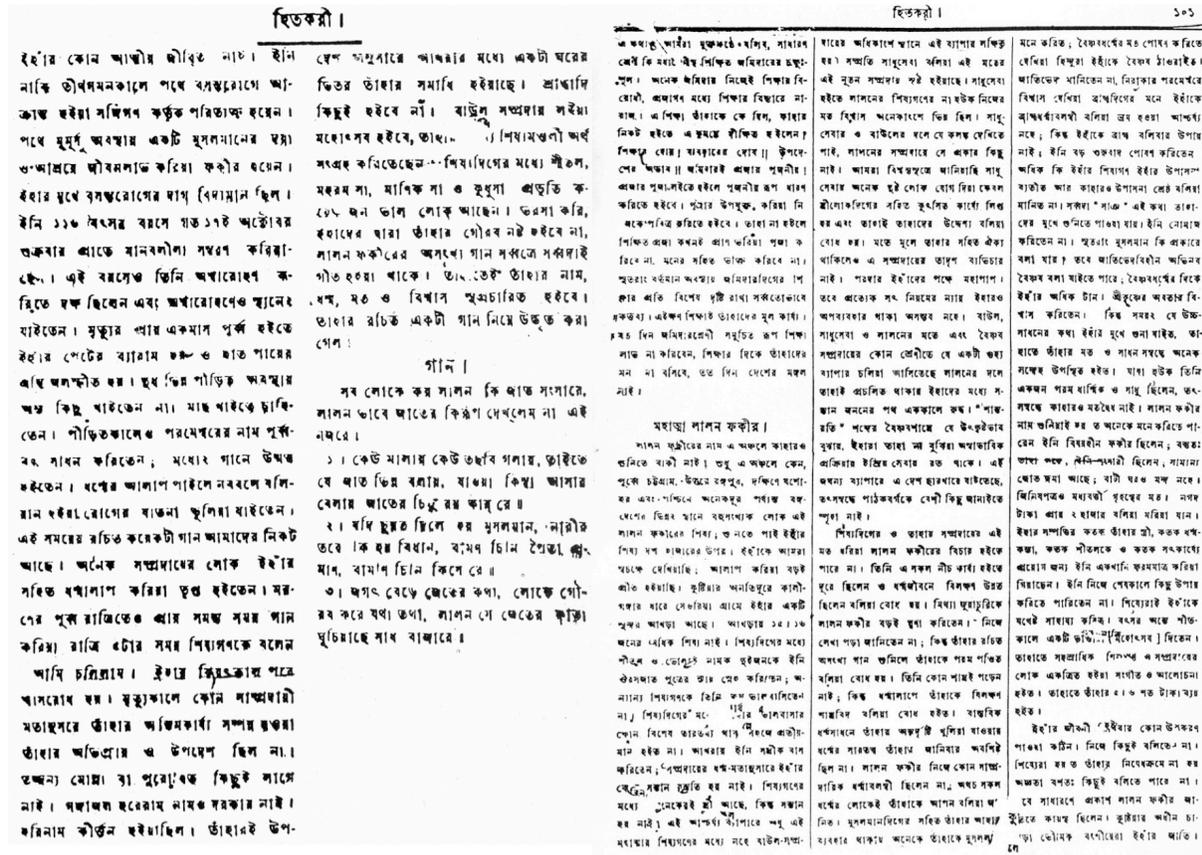


Figure 2.2. A lengthy obituary of Lālôn in a local biweekly publication *Hitakari*, dated 31 October 1920.

famed writer Mir Mosharraf Hossain (1847–1911), a journal which attempted to diminish tensions between religious communities by addressing the issue of Hindu-Muslim relations.

Inwardly and outwardly, the traditions surrounding Lālôn’s life and work have flourished in parallel. The very words of Lālôn’s devotionism enamored the hearts of Bengalis at the most opportune moments, in pivotal junctions of modern revival and renaissance, yet its esoteric was painstakingly preserved in traditional spaces. This is significant, for the profoundly hidden

meanings in Lālôn’s compositions have allowed broader conventional musings on social injustice or humanism to circulate, while concealed—and usually contentious—ontological meanings are maintained for the scholarly or initiated.<sup>9</sup> In other words, bāul imagery can be seen as a celebration of Bengali-ness through its incredibly accessible and sweeping humanism, yet legitimated by its practitioners and connoisseurs as a recondite and tendentious tradition.

Despite being part of a mystical tradition largely mediated by a orally-preserved song repertoire, those inside and outside traditional bāul communities have long studied bāul lyrics entirely as texts to be scrutinized, words on paper which somehow reflect what it is to be bāul. While the stirring musicianship of bāul artists is peripherally recognized, it is never the focus of studies on the bāul community, including a plethora of new and otherwise invigorating works (Capwell 1986, Openshaw 2002, Knight 2011, Krakauer 2015, Salomon, Cantú and Zakaria 2017). Musicians themselves who have worked intimately with bāul artists, who have studied and reproduced their repertoire, seem equally attached to this form of inspection and have used this approach as a spring board for prevailing discussions on erotic ritual practice and its theological repercussions within the bāul community or consequential aspects of their status as quintessential folk artists of India.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, the hegemonic presence of the bāul in Bengali culture—through various appropriations in art, dramaturgy and song—are primarily taken from

---

<sup>9</sup> The poetic manifestation of Lālôn’s cloistered rumination is expounded through an unusual degree of whimsical metaphors and capricious lyricism: knowledge is the fish, or *mīn*, which must be caught in dark waters, *ādhilā pukur*; love is a bandit, or *cor*, looting the “wind-cage body, *hāowā khācā*; the intellect is the key that unlocks the latch of thought, *bhāber tālār cābi*, or is the void, *lā-mōkām*, or weightless mass, *funnō bhōr*, in the City of Mirrors, *ārḥi nṅōr*. On the one hand, many of these allegorical devices are perceived by their outward meaning (*zāhirī*, derived from Arabic) to reflect the rigorous nature of *sādhanā*, or spiritual exercise and, by extension, deliberations on the corporeal microcosm. On the other hand, their inward meaning (*baḥinī*, derived from Arabic) typically refer to concealed ritual practice in bāul communities, otherwise disputed appropriations of quotidian and sometimes sacred imagery used to describe the intricate details of sexo-yogic customs.

<sup>10</sup> Noteworthy musicians include Sudipto Chatterjee (b. 1964), Anusheh Anadil (n.d.), Sharmin Sultana Sumi (n.d.), and Maqsoodul Haque (n.d.).

this abiding focus on syntax and imagery. The result has produced albums such a highly popular compilation called *Lalon Fakirer Gaan* [Songs of Lalon Fakir] (1983), celebrating the then-upcoming centennial anniversary of Lālôn’s death, which featured a variety of non-bāul and Kolkata-based singers, such as Nirmalendu Chowdhury, Arati Mukherjee, Anup Ghosal, Amar Pal and Swapan Basu. The album offers new recordings of a wide variety of popular and lesser-known compositions of Lālôn, accompanied by traditional folk instrumentation and more superfluous classical timbres, yet composed in melodies conceived of by the project’s arrangers, unused by Lālônī bāul-s themselves.

While the history of bāul-s and the Bengali imaginary is extensive, I turn here to an overview of the image of Lālôn in historical East Bengal and contemporary Bangladesh, by way of two vignettes. We may then consider “bāul-ness” as a mystical sound or idiom which recapitulates a devotionism that has also allowed the bôyāti to claim unusual territory in the bāul spectrum of composition and performance, encapsulating the thematic selectiveness of the bāul song tradition in Bangladeshi culture to fit the parameters of his or her own musicality within the realm of bôyāti musicianship.

The national anthem of Bangladesh, Tagore’s composition *Amar Shonar Bangla* (“My Golden Bengal”), is an ode to Bengal through a series of endearing descriptions of her pastoral landscape. Written during the first partition of Bengal, it was originally composed to rekindle hope in the unified spirit of Bengal, to raise public consciousness against the communal-political divide. The lyrics first appeared in an issue of *Bangadarshan*, a literary magazine resurrected under the editorship of Tagore, in 1905, and later appeared with *swaralipi* musical notation in *Sangeet Biggan Prokeshika*, a musical periodical, in the same year (Gupta 2007). Tagore

mentions this song in his article “An Indian Folk Religion,” which later appeared in a collection of essays and lectures known as *Creative Unity* (1922). In it, Tagore states that he tuned the song to a melody he heard by the bāul singer Gagan Harkara<sup>11</sup> (1845–1910) entitled “Ami Kothay Pabo Tare” (“Where Can I Find Him?”), when staying at the family cottage in Shelaidaha (in present-day Kushtia, Bangladesh, not far from the ancestral home/shrine of Lālôn). Thus, Bangladesh’s national anthem, while decisively bāul in sound and historically composed within her borders, was ironically never intended to reflect her modern sovereignty when it was posthumously adapted as the national anthem.

Bob Dylan’s 1967 album *John Westley Harding*—a misspelling of the eponymous Texas outlaw, gunfighter and controversial folk icon (1853–1895)—was exceptionally well-received by critics, despite minimal promotion or publicity (Negus 2010). In many ways, the album was a subtle modification of Dylan’s musical style at the time—evocative imagery and extravagant surreality progressing in a stream-of-consciousness fashion—but perhaps with even more sparse instrumentation and pared-down lyrics. Strikingly, the album cover is a photograph of a squinting Dylan flanked by brothers Luxman and Purna Das, two bāul-s who were brought to Woodstock by Dylan’s manager, Albert Grossman. That the bāul musicians, or their music, have nothing to do with the arrangement or conception of the album is again telling, in some ways inaugurating a casual flirtation with bāul-ness in the American counterculture of the 60s. In subsequent decades, recordings of bāul music became increasingly prevalent markers of quintessential Indian folk song. For example, *Songs of the Bauls* (1987), in the JVC World

---

<sup>11</sup> Tagore would later write a short story entitled “The Postman,” roughly based on his interactions with Gagan Harkara, which would in turn become a part of a notable film anthology by acclaimed director Satyajit Ray (1921–1992), called *Teen Kanya* (1961).

Sounds catalogue, together with the seminal *Inde: chants d'initiation des Bauls du Bengale* (1992) were both concert field recordings released in the height of Global Pop market of that era, important and rare additions to a burgeoning South Asian album compilation, which were mostly dedicated to producing Indian classical music recordings. Initiated by Dylan's casual curiosity, bāul musicians were later championed through their raw singing style and uncanny musicianship, through the lens of 60s bohemianism, and later commercial strategies for world music recordings in the 80s.

Instances of this have continued in more recent decades, where bāul music and performance have found other entryways into studio-polished multiculturalism or the expectations of a global concert stage. For example, the well-circulated album *Real Sugar* (1997), an electronically based collaboration between Paban Das Baul and Sam Mills through Real World Records—the Peter Gabriel-founded label dedicated to world music—or the many solo recordings of internationally recognized singer-storyteller Parvathi Baul. In the case of Sam Mills, the album *Real Sugar* was a definitive recording in the pioneering style of the Real World production series: a performer from within an authenticated tradition collaborating with a skilled, non-initiated musician in the studio, in this case combining traditional bāul songs and vocals with expressive but inessential harmonic progressions, contemporary riffs on guitar and electronic organ, and judicious programming and editing. The album, in some ways, was also a musical complement to Mills's separate and scholarly work as an anthropologist on contemporary Bangladeshi Sufism. Parvathi Baul, however, is an educated Bengali Brahmin convert to bāul practice, who is also acutely aware of the reception history of the bāul community inside and outside of Bengal. Exemplified by exuberant and often soloistic shows,

Parvathi self-accompanies herself with stark bāul minimalism while clothed as the impassioned mystic with a loosely-adorned sari and long, dreadlocked hair, and easily moves between obscure Bengali lyricism and lucid English commentary on stage. In these newer projects, however, the intellectual pursuit of bāul discourse and music remains strongly present, as it was with the Bengali Hindu gentry at the turn of the century, simultaneously targeting a broader international audience who are increasingly stimulated by these prospects.

Recently, the Dhaka-based rock musician and bāul aficionado Maqsoodul Haque has written on his blog:

To understand the Baul is to understand the state of nothingness associated with his rejection, which is not to be construed [as] . . . a reckless abandonment of responsibility or . . . becoming inordinately fatalistic, but to go back to the beginning. (Haque 2010)

Haque alludes here to a post-independence bāul-ness in Bangladesh which, rather than exploring scholarly fascinations with the enigmatic or popular appropriations of the egalitarian, emphasizes the abiding, indigenous character of the bāul, one which is situated in a pre-Hindu and pre-Buddhist epoch, celebrating a rhetorical return to the pristine. For many young artists in the contemporary rock scene or larger populist movement in Dhaka, this understanding of bāul-ness is perhaps a reflection of decades of unresolved demarcations in the sociopolitical and religious sphere of Bangladeshi life, further sullied by the Muslim-on-Muslim machinations of the Pakistan-Bangladesh conflict and its prolonged malaise in popular sentiment. Eschewing representations of these current predicaments, Haque's bāul thus suggests a more primeval connection.

In this manner, the development of a bāul sentimentality in Bangladesh is an unsurprisingly thorny but intriguing one. With regard to a modern Bengali Hindu devotional

sound, the traditions of bāul music and ideology articulated a humanist turn in sonic piety, ostensibly untied to any one particular religious stream, which profoundly corroborated Hindu nationalist and intellectual pursuits, including the reappraisal of Hindu spiritualism. In contemporary Bangladesh, the imposition of bāul sentimentality aligned in its own ways with the objectives of Bengali Muslim modernism, but one which was preceded by a capricious and fraught campaign that called into question the sonic space for Islamic devotionism in contemporary Bangladesh. As a result, and particularly through the heritage of the bāul saint-lyricist Lālōn, bāul humanism effectively became understood as deeply agnostic, even trivial or antagonistic to Islam.

Lālōn poetic style has famously incorporated a divergent number of disparate theological or mythological tropes to articulate his idiosyncratic cosmological perspectives. In his compositions, he moves effortlessly and knowledgeably between Rādhā's pining for Kṛṣṇa, biographical details of the spiritual quest of Caitanya, and the primordial light of Muḥammad. Again, Hindu-based imagery in devotional song amongst cultured Bengali Muslims today is typically considered less contentious, either because they somehow represent a distinctively non-Muslim approach to devotion that is secularly appreciated, or because they fit more comfortably within the perceived paradigm of Bengali language heritage, which is deeply indebted to Hindu and pre-Muslim thought. The Sufi stream of deliberation in Lālōn's compositions—which are numerous and well known by traditional apostles and performers—remains entirely a point of contention and is virtually nonexistent in the musical contours of contemporary Lālōnī revivalism. For the bōyāti community, whom in most circumstances have been further “othered” by a pervasive bāul-ness, Lālōn's distinctively Sufi tone is fully embraced. While Lālōn has been

validated through an untouched essence in his contemporary revivalism, the bôyāti community continues to articulate their own art and authoritativeness by embracing—socially and musically—the experiences of the peripheral and the obscure, including the injection of Sufi-inspired songs of Lālôn that have otherwise been rejected by bourgeois sentiment. The underlying notion in this argument is that the bôyāti’s understanding of such songs is positioned against the general disposition regarding bāul-ness in Bangladesh, one not of obscurity but of timelessness, which has increasingly severed Lālôn’s personal and intellectual times with Sufism.

Ultimately, the bôyāti art form can be characterized as developing in a relentlessly modified climate of musical styles, which has allowed for a more fragmentary evolution, one delineated by the shifting parameters of sound and poetry. While bāul legacy and its persuasive rhetoric have been consistently empowered by the textual command of Lālôn, the bôyāti artist’s sonic camouflage is robustly equipped to negotiate space in this seemingly definitive musical realm. In this way, the bôyāti is not fully obscured by the bāul, but presents alternative musings through Lālôn’s compositions in bôyāti performance, and the larger play of poetry, legacy and melody that substantiate it. While ingenious in its strategy, the bôyāti’s incorporation of a structured Lālônī tradition is not entirely surprising, given that many historical accounts suggest that Lālôn himself was a master of evasion and delighted in composing song texts with profoundly hidden meanings.<sup>12</sup> Yet it retains a highly imaginative place in contemporary bôyāti

---

<sup>12</sup> Lālôn’s song *porge nāmāj jene jene* is a particularly interesting example of his intrinsically bôyāti-compatible compositional style. A translation of the refrain might read: *say your prayers having learned the facts and bind your intentions in Mecca’s direction / consummate the human desire amongst us, seize the moment / the frolicking Krishna plays a game within this body-universe*. Lālôn’s macaronic language is quite apparent here, drawing from multiple angles of devotion. While the song’s lyrics combine Muslim and Vaiṣṇava imagery, the traditional melody associated with this song is in the style of a *rāmprôṣādi* hymn—a song composed by Ramprasad Sen (1720–1781), a Shakta poet dedicated to the mother goddess as Kali. Further, the accompanying rhythm of this Lālôn song is unique to the style of *ṛōḍābôlī kīrtôn*.

musicality, which, as will be elucidated in subsequent chapters, takes pride in displacing and revising the cultural reception of song poets and their musical styles. Liminal subject matters, performed in the sacred space of shrines and the sportive atmosphere of eclectic spectators, thus thrive in the mutable exchange of the staged performance.



**Figure 2.3. The performer Asim Baul.**

The above image of Asim Baul demonstrates how the incorporation of *bāul*-ness in *bōyāti* musicality is so distinctive and engaging enough that, in some instances, artists originally from the *bāul* world have entered the spaces of *bōyāti* musicality. Earlier in his career, when the *bāul*-indoctrinated Asim Baul initially gained admission into *bōyāti* performance venues, he adorned the standard vestments of a *bāul* of Vaiṣṇava persuasion: a saffron-colored (Bengali: *geruwā*) robe, and the ubiquitous one-string instrument, the *æk tārā*, associated with *bāul* musicianship. Later, as seen here, he embraced the garb of a modern *bōyāti*: a loose tunic with flaring tails

(Bengali: *kurtā*, but commonly *pānjābi*), a long scarf (Bengali: *dupāṭṭā*, but more commonly *oṛnā*), a waist-draped sarong (Bengali: *luṅgi*), and the quintessential violin (or *sārindā*) in hand.

### **Tagorian Composition**

The fourth modality, that of the compositional style of Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), with regard to *bōyāti* musicality, is perhaps largely overlooked. While Tagore’s aforementioned affinity toward regional styles of devotional music—such as *pōdābōlī kīrtōn* and *bāul* songs<sup>13</sup>—is largely known, his pervasive use of the imagery and sound of these vernacular genres, alongside his experimental incorporation of the structures of *rāga* and *tāla*, was unprecedented, especially considering the pervasiveness of his song arrangements in the Bengali psyche today.

The legendary *kōbigān* composer and singer Bijoy Sarkar (1903–1985)<sup>14</sup>—whose songs are cherished by *bāul* and *bōyāti* communities alike—wrote a number of songs in honor of Rabindranath Tagore, upon his death in 1941. In fact, early in life, Sarkar seems to have been in awe of Tagore’s popularization of vernacular song forms and devotional themes, and the manner in which they were embedded into his musical style (Hossain 1994, Intazuddin 2002). While Sarkar himself remained an acclaimed regional poet and performer throughout his entire career—developing his skills within the traditional realm of *kōbigān*—his deep admiration for Tagore sheds light on the abiding sound of Tagore’s legacy, which extends beyond the confines of the *literati* or a bourgeois listenership, and into the hearts of the regional artists who themselves

---

<sup>13</sup> It is typically said that Tagore’s fascination with *bāul* music was initialized through his visits to his ancestral roots in East Bengal, and especially to oversee land that his family owned in Kushtia, greater Nadia, the epicenter of *Lālōnī bāul-s* (Sen and Roy 2006, Bhattacharya 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Like Bhaba Pagla (1902–1984), Bijoy Sarkar represents a class of specialized musicians of vernacular performance who were originally from Bangladesh (East Bengal) and of lower-caste Hindu background, later migrating to West Bengal in the years surrounding the turmoil of the liberation era, due to their minority position. As a result, he is memorialized by numerous artists on both sides of the border, yet the manner of this memorialization was certainly impacted by the predicament of his status in either Bengal, which in turn has affected the shape of the remembering and rendering of his music.

profoundly shaped Tagore's compositional approach. Tagore's musical eclecticism is noteworthy, not only for the sheer range of genres which informed his approach to writing songs, but his largely untrained capacity for internalizing them, which was ultimately critical to his nonpareil style.

Tagore's fascination with bāul symbolism and musicality is widely celebrated, something he mentioned at length while delivering his Hibbert Lecture, an annual series of non-sectarian lectures of theological issues organized by the Hibbert Trust, at Oxford University in 1930 (Dasgupta 2004, Sen and Roy 2006, Bhattacharya 2011). This lecture, later published in his book *The Religion of Man* (1931), demonstrates the poetic indebtedness Tagore felt towards the bāul community, which seems to resonate so clearly with his romantic views on nonconformism, human-centered devotion, and patriotic sentiment. Yet Tagore's deeply personal love of Hindustani music is just as apparent to the most casual listener of his music. The style of *dhrupad*, in particular, with its leisurely pace and comparatively more verbose texts, seems to have naturally imposed on Tagore's musical sensibilities. Born into a highly cultured family where house concerts were common and intimate dialogue with classical artists habitual, Tagore was particularly impacted by singers such as Jadunath "Jadu Bhatta" Bhattacharya (1840–1880) and others associated with the Bishnupur gharana, an influential dhrupad-oriented tradition of classical music with roots in Bengal. Notably, Tagore was encouraged by his father Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905) to compose in the same style, substituting Hindustani lyrics for Bengali ones, thus producing his early *bhôngô gān*, dirge-like Brahmo devotional hymns (Dutta 1996).

While the young Tagore displayed an observable disinterest in formal or systematic training, this did not prevent him from becoming completely fascinated by the emotive force and range of Hindustani ragas. Regarding this, Basavi Mukerji writes, “he felt that his continuous exposure to high-quality Hindustani classical music, despite his lack of any formal training, had not only prepared his ear but built a certain standard of reference as well” (2011: 45). Regarding Tagore’s fondness for the vehicle of dhrupad-style composition, she continues, “he believed it was primarily western India where pure Hindustani [music] in all its . . . glory truly held sway,” and that “the soil of Bengal [was] naturally predisposed towards literary expression as a result of which pure music had to amalgamate with suitably meaningful words to gain wider acceptance” (43). As a result of his experimental rejuvenation of Bengali song, Tagore largely adopted the historical four-stanza format of the dhrupad composition for the majority of his songs, yet sometimes set each section in a complementary rāga or a hybrid rāga of his own construction.

Perhaps indirectly reflecting another genre, the “light classical music” of *thumrī*, many of Tagore’s rāga-based songs are ostensibly based in a perceivable rāga in terms of its collection of pitches, but they do not necessarily adhere to the subtle melodic contours or intonational specifications which would otherwise determine its musical ambiance. In some cases, these songs distinctively display one *vivādi*, or accidental note, which is foreign to the musical nomenclature of the rāga in question. However, regarding this particular approach to classical melody, Mukerji also states, “since Tagore had little formal training in the complexities of rāga music, it seems unlikely that he set out to make these melodic experiments with a conscious effort.” She adds that, “instead, he appears to have used only such passages from the melodic

gamut of the rāga-s that he had heard earlier and [had] familiarized himself with, [that he] intuitively felt would add the desired dimension to his poetic creations, [especially] his songs” (ibid: 47).

This somewhat lengthy aside highlights a similar and long-standing approach to rāga-like melodies with which bāul and bōyāti musicians alike have long been familiar. Despite the impulse to separate genres of style such as “folk” or “classical,” Tagore’s songwriting skill—due to his profoundly contextual approach to composition through the osmosis-like absorption of musical processes in his youth—perhaps unintentionally suggests the inverse. His casual yet striking assemblage of such contrasting musical language and allegory, in its own way, verified the process by which bāul and bōyāti musicians have long approached songwriting. Vernacular artists’ familiarity with the sphere of classical music in Bengal is typically regarded as uninformed, but their exposure to and incorporation of it is undeniable, if we are to decipher the subtle nuances of tone, emphasis and affect that their performances bring. This can be clearly discerned when a bāul musician sings a song in the standardized melody known as *jhihiṭ*, which strikingly but not entirely resembles the highly popular Hindustani rāga *Jhinjhoṭi*, or when a bōyāti artist musically evokes the contours of rāga *Bhairav* in a transitional moment of solemnity on stage, as this rāga is conventionally associated with pensiveness and somber devotion.

Rather than simply glossing over this phenomenon as a byproduct of the conflation of musical styles and practices made accessible through consumer media or some further aspect of transglobalism, I argue that the sonic and somatic expressions of this musical application in bōyāti performance suggest a more delicate process at work. Just as Tagore’s ostensibly oblique

or subliminal incorporation of rāga and tāla in his song writing managed to avoid sounding forced or contrived by his aficionados—indeed, they profoundly shaped the zeitgeist of Bengali modernism in song form—the intuitive performance style and songwriting skills of the bōyāti reflect his or her positionality as what Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler Schofield have described as “multilingual and intermedial” (2015), but also what Velcheru Narayana Rao has coined as “oral-literate,” describing the space where specialized performers operate within a culture that is both orally transmitted and lettered at the same time (2017).

Furthermore, scholars who have examined the evolution of conventional rāga-s in medieval Indian music (Jairazbhoy 1971, Randel 1986, Slawek 1987, Miner 1993, Widdess 1995, Rowell 1992, Clayton 2000) have increasingly articulated the regionality with which many classical melodic structures are indebted, which consequently questions the exclusive emphasis on treatise writing and courtly patronage that are typically viewed as the aristocratic pursuits behind rāga development.<sup>15</sup> The longstanding connections between devotional poetry and musical classicism in South Asia—across vernacular or religious spaces not traditionally associated with rāga formation and preservation—additionally suggests that the implementation of, or familiarization with Hindustani musicality, has historically been more a democratized or quotidian process than previously believed (Deva 2000, Martinez 2001, Raja 2005, Bharali 2008, Saxena 2009). If one were to examine the great devotional canons of South Asian song in broad terms, one would easily recognize an adaptation of classical music language and its associated aesthetics by a motley crew of saint-composers whose own social conditions or poetic ambitions

---

<sup>15</sup> In fact, rāga-s have been named after peoples and regions ever since the earliest recorded stages in the evolution of modal theory and practice in South Asia. Consider the contemporary rāga-s Jaunpuri, Multani or Bangal Bhairav, which all insinuate a locational origin through their moniker.

might have otherwise suggested an ill-informed understanding of *śāstriya saṅgīt*, the “music of the treatises.”<sup>16</sup> From the delineated rāga-s of the Guru Granth Sahib—the sung hymns of the Sikh religious scripture—or the *sur-s*, or melodies, associated with the Sufi poetry of the Shah Jo Risalo—the compendium of Sindhi poems by Shah Abdul Latif (1689–1752)—devotional song composition in the Indian Subcontinent is replete with such examples.<sup>17</sup> In Bengal, Tagore’s own approach to composition re-appropriated this tradition through popular song form, in an era which otherwise subscribed to modernist dismemberments of the highbrow and the rustic,<sup>18</sup> that, in a seemingly unintended act of recognition, accentuated the complementary processes of bôyāti musicianship that remains relevant today.

As subsequent chapters will elucidate, contemporary bôyāti musicianship is entirely predicated upon an artist’s ability to extract sentiment—poetic, musical, saintly, or otherwise—in order to validate a particular theological argument, which is otherwise elucidated through prose and recitative in stylized performance. Like *ṇḍābôlī kīrtōn*, this critical and complementary tactic is thus, in its own way, enlivened by a meticulous act of dismemberment and

---

<sup>16</sup> B. Chaitanya Deva has suggested that temple-based and other religious music traditions constitute one among many channels between classical and non-classical musics, and recognized that musical styles, structures and instruments have flowed in both directions through such channels. He further states that, “the interdependence between musical traditions at different social levels is often ignored by the musical establishment” (2000: 65).

<sup>17</sup> In east India, the paratexts of the *caryāpada*—a collection of mystical poems that are supposedly the earliest specimens of the Bengali literature—are similarly associated with prevalent medieval rāga-s of Hindustani music, as are the lyrical songs known as *barḡīt*, the compositions of Assamese polymath Srimanta Sankardev (1449–1568). However—unlike *shabad gurbani kīrtan* in the Sikh tradition of temple singing or the living performance of *wāy* at the shrine of Shah Abdul Latif (1689–1752)—the manner in which these poems were originally sung is largely lost in antiquity.

<sup>18</sup> Tellingly, this bifurcation is not entirely a modernist impulse, but has profound ramifications through the lengthy history of musical scholarship in ancient India. The *Saṅgīta Ratnākara* by Śārṅgadeva (1175–1247), often called “the first modern book on Indian classical music,” attempted to comprehensively synthesize ancient and medieval musical knowledge in India through its monumental scope, and remains a definitive reference text amongst contemporary scholars and music schools in both the Hindustani and Carnatic domains. In it, a distinction is made between *mārga* (“eternal” or “divine” technique, the classical arts) and *deḡi* (“regional” or “mundane” technique) (Rowell 1992).

recomposition, and within a significantly extemporaneous framework. In this instance, while a bôyāti artist may carefully chose particular pieces in a poet’s oeuvre to strengthen rhetorical points—as in the case of Lālôn, with regard to bāul sentimentality—he or she may just as easily utilize or rearrange stock melodic themes—memorable devotional, folk and ostensibly classical ones—to sonically enrich the performance in process. Melodic constructions which evoke a particular folk genre or devotional saint-poet, or the comparable *rasa*<sup>19</sup> aesthetics associated with popular rāga structures, are collaboratively seen as the musical munitions of a highly polemical style that dominates the shape of bôyāti musicianship today.

### **Bengali Folk Contours and Instrumentation**

The regional flair of the bôyāti style is perhaps best articulated in arrangement through its wholehearted incorporation of Bengali folk music and its instrumentation. In recent years, the many initiatives of Saymon Zakaria—an eminent folklorist, playwright, author, song collector, and activist associated with Bangla Academy, Bangladesh’s authoritative institution on literary preservation—sheds light on the nature and future of vernacular research within the country. Zakaria’s manuscripts and productions are voluminous and notable, including adaption into drama serials and documentaries, and his work on the safeguarding of bāul songs through a project undertaken by UNESCO and the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy of Fine Arts is particularly commendable (2008, 2010, 2011, 2014). Through the initiatives of his Bhavnagar Foundation—dedicated to the research and preservation of folk theater, dance and song in Bangladesh—the musical stylings of Bengali folk music have increasingly become the vessel

---

<sup>19</sup> “Juice,” “essence” or perhaps “taste,” *rasa* connotes a vast concept in the traditional Indian arts regarding the aesthetic flavor of any visual, literary or musical work, particularly one that evokes an emotion or feeling in the reader or audience which cannot otherwise be altogether described. Furthermore, it may refer to the emotional flavor or essence crafted into a work by its composer, meant to be relished by a “sensitive spectator” (Sanskrit: *sahṛdaya*), or one with a seasoned ability to perceive it (Schwartz 2004).

through which Bangladeshi heritage is meaningfully articulated. Recently, Zakaria has spearheaded a grassroots musical rejuvenation of the *caryāpada* hymns, some of the earliest specimens of song-poetry known to the Bengali language. At his behest, and with great appreciation for his immense contributions and research in the field, *bāul* and especially *bôyāti* artists throughout the country have deferentially begun to retune these hymns, largely disregarding the original compositions' setting in irredeemable *rāga* structures and archaic tantric ritual, and instead reimagining them as Bengali folk songs. The crux of this musical undertaking, it is hoped, will sonically instigate the reappropriation of *caryāpada* hymns into the vernacular repertoire of modern-day specialists of regional song in Bangladesh.

The musical style of *bôyāti* artists—while indebted to the song arrangement, exploratory imagery, discursive themes, compositional approaches, rhetorical devices, or general showmanship of other modalities—is deeply immersed in the musical language of Bengali folk music. Ultimately, this quality is most visible in its fondness for an uncomplicated strophic form, moderately-paced tempos, occasionally duple but especially triple meter frameworks, melodic contours favoring minor third and minor seventh intervals, descending and gently wavering melismatic phrases characteristic to the timbre of Bengali vernacular song, the staccato-like accompaniment of the *dotārā* lute, and the wistful heterophonic echo of the bamboo flute. In an overarching manner, one might consider the plentiful range of Bangladeshi folk melodies used in contemporary *bôyāti* performance as primarily inspired by three distinctive contours, what I refer to as *bhāṭiyāli*, *bicchēd*, and *bāul*, respectively. Notably, these contours should not be conceived of as belonging to a diatonic collection of scales and intervals—that is, without chromatic alternations or variations in overall melodic contour—as such discrepancies are often

incorporated to accommodate prosodic or rhythmic changes, or reflect a distinctive regional deviation. Further, while vernacular musicians themselves may not conceive of such contours in the same way, with regard *bôyāti* performance, this classification is mainly useful in illuminating salient characteristics of the traditional “folk” sound and its associative extramusical features, which in turn sheds light on compositional affect in contemporary *bôyāti* musicality. In actuality, the range of melodic material that is incorporated into contemporary *bôyāti* performance is much more diverse, but is clearly indebted to the stock melodic motifs of Bangladeshi folk music, around which these contours revolve. Lastly, the terms *bhāṭiyāli*, *bicched*, and *bāul* all refer to specific genres or communities of musicians that have left an indelible mark on the sound and shape of Bengali music, which articulates the special relationship between regional song structures and a general folk modality.

The *bhāṭiyāli*<sup>20</sup> contour, popular throughout Bengal, is essentially the melody that accompanies a type of river song, or rather a song in which the poetic voice—typically a boatman (*mājhi*, in Bengali) or his anonymous passenger—reflects on themes of life’s impermanence and love lost through metaphorical musings on the river and its tide or bank. Researchers of Bengali folk music typically claim that the *bhāṭiyāli* form and melody has its origins in the Mymensingh district, currently in north-central Bangladesh, along the lower regions of the Brahmaputra River (Chaudhuri 1973, Friedlander 1975, Capwell 1986, Sinha 2014). Combined with the Teesta, the Brahmaputra constitutes one of the largest tributaries in Bangladesh and further branches out downstream to connect to the three main river systems in the country today: the Yamuna, Padma and Meghna. Given that the waterways of Bengal have

---

<sup>20</sup> Tradition suggests that the word *bhāṭiyāli* is derived from the word *bhāṭ*, referring to the ebb of a stream (Jasimuddin 1951, Kuckertz 1975).

been the lifeblood of agrarian existence for many centuries, combined with its equally volatile nature through the destruction brought on by floodwater, droughts and cyclones prone to the delta region, the bhāṭiyāli composition intimately represents Bengali vernacularism in song through quotidian themes of struggle and livelihood.

To be sure, bhāṭiyāli and its connection with the movement of tide out to sea insinuates a solemn and introspective tone, a potential washing away of hope and expectation, which articulates a musical poignancy. Conversely, another more regionally-based river song form with Bangladeshi origins, known as *sārigān*, is allegorically attached to the upstream current of water (Bengali: *ujān*), and is consequently more joyous in mood and collectively performed with a chorus—typically incorporating lively call-and-response patterns. The bhāṭiyāli, however, remains solitary and brooding in tone.

The aforementioned and widely-read *Maimansingh Gitika* collection of folk ballads compiled in the early twentieth century—which focused on the region of East Bengal that encompasses the birthplace of the bhāṭiyāli song tradition—may have critically influenced its larger appeal in Bengal, by scholars and musicians alike. Bangladesh’s national folk poet, Jasimuddin, was also a prominent figure in promoting bhāṭiyāli as an essential folk tradition, especially through his own bhāṭiyāli songs which were later popularized by Abbasuddin and Abdul Alim, the first great Muslim recording artists of Bengal. While many noteworthy Bangladeshi composers of bhāṭiyāli hail from the greater Mymensingh region, including the Netrokona lyricist Wakil Munshi (d. 1978), regional specialists of song in Bengal have been concurrently drawn to the charm and evocativeness of the bhāṭiyāli melody and its song imagery, which led to a number of variations as it was appropriated into distinctive vernacular genres. For

example, the Sylheti folk poet Radharaman Dutta (1833–1915) incorporated the genre of bhāṭiyāli into his *dhāmāil* compositions, a song and dance form based on the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa theme and deeply shaped by the indigenous musical contours of traditional Sylheti song, in western Bangladesh. Musically, Radharaman’s bhāṭiyāli melody deviates more significantly from the standard motif, and its lyrics are structured to accompany the ubiquitous rhythm of dhāmāil, a leisurely and lilting triple-meter tāla.

The saint-poet Manmohan Dutta (1877–1909) of Brahmanbaria was also fond of composing devotional pieces in the bhāṭiyāli form, which was further elaborated on by one of his students and supporting melodists, Fakir Aftabuddin Khan (1862–1933), the brother of sarodist and Hindustani music doyen Alauddin Khan (1862–1972).<sup>21</sup> This relationship later fostered an interest in the bhāṭiyāli motif as a theme for improvisation in the semi-classical form known as *dhun*, which was widely performed by Alauddin Khan’s son Ali Akbar Khan (1922–2009) and later developed by others in the Khan lineage of disciples, including the sitarist Nikhil Banerjee (1931–1986), bamboo flautist Pannalal Ghosh (1911–1960), and santoor player Tarun Bhattacharya (b. 1957).

The traditional bhāṭiyāli contour, as articulated by bōyāti artists, is distinguishable by its melodic movement around the natural seventh scale degree (in ascending melodic movement) and often the flattened seventh scale degree (in descending melodic movement). Phrases typically feature the natural seventh held for an extended time, over several “bars” of the

---

<sup>21</sup> The Khan family hailed from the Comilla-Brahmanbaria region of today’s Bangladesh.

rhythmic cycle, which creates a charming dissonance with the tonic drone before typically falling to the consonant fifth degree, using the flattened seventh as a passing note.<sup>22</sup>



Figure 2.4. The *bhāṭiyāli* contour.

The *kôbigān* performer and esteemed folk song composer Bijoy Sarkar (1903–1985), hailing from Narail in the greater district of Jessore in southwestern Bangladesh, is largely credited for embracing and refining contemporary *bicched*, whose melodic structure represents a second important contour in Bangladeshi folk music. Bijoy’s compositions are widely cherished and performed by *kôbiyāl*,<sup>23</sup> *bāul* and *bôyāti* artists alike. The contour known as *bicched* (“separation” or “detachment” in Bengali) belongs to a particularly influential approach to singing devotional texts which developed in historic East Bengal and is characterized not only by a particular melodic contour, but also a melismatic phrasing style and unhurried tempo, which are intended to expose its agonizing or heartbreaking themes of disunion. The lyrics of a *bicched* composition are not conspicuously situated in the Hindu or Muslim devotional idiom, but rather addresses the scorn of the beloved<sup>24</sup> in more general terms, emphasizing the sense of dread and abandonment that is felt by the beloved’s absence. However, the terms of address differ depending on the particular genre or specialized performer: amongst *bāul* singers of *bicched*, who refer to such compositions as *guru tōttô* (songs which describe “the essence of the guru”),

<sup>22</sup> This can be generally contrasted with the use of the natural seventh degree (*śuddha niṣād*) and flattened seventh degree (*komal niṣād*) in the North Indian classical *Malhār* family of *rāga*-s, in which a characteristic phrase will include both pitches serially in ascending melodic movement.

<sup>23</sup> A professionalized singer of *kôbigān*.

<sup>24</sup> In the *bicched* tradition, the beloved is typically addressed by the all-embracing Bengali term *ḍorôdi*, meaning the “compassionate” or “sympathetic” one.

the beloved's disappearance draws stronger correlations between the departure of the mentor and the disciple's incomplete *sādhanā*; an ostensibly Sufi style also exists, the aforementioned *murfīdi gān*, with which *bōyāti* artists have long been acquainted.

Regardless of its variations, the rendering of, or act of listening to *bicched*, is often deeply responsive. Even in the staged *bōyāti* performance, which would have larger thematic concerns, a *bōyāti* artist may suddenly pause to arouse in his listeners the emotional inundation that *bicched* elicits, lingering on particularly moving descriptions of wretchedness or anguish in the song text that may ultimately bring audience members to tears, or even inspire them to approach the *bōyāti* on stage to embrace him in consolation. In these moments, the singer is idolized as a conduit for *bicched*, and its delicate articulation of the intimate relationship with divinity or the spiritual guide, signifying the ultimate source of profane or mystical love.

In some ways, the common *bicched* contour (see Figure 2.5) might be seen as an important variation of the *bhāṭiyāli* contour, especially because of its melodic lingering around variations of the seventh scale degree. However, *bicched* melodies contain several important incidental pitches, the flattened third and flattened sixth scale degrees, in addition to their natural variations. These flattened notes are typically only incorporated in occasional and descending motifs, and this somewhat sudden and haunting inclusion is typically found in the final line of a verse, musically emphasizing a particularly melancholy or dejected tone before the return to the song's refrain.



Figure 2.5. The *bicched* contour.

While *bāul* songs themselves incorporate a wide variety of melodic strains, from *kīrtōn* to *jhumur*<sup>25</sup> and *bhāṇḍāri*,<sup>26</sup> in the *bōyāti* world the *bāul* sound is most commonly articulated by a specific and third melodic contour (see Figure 2.6). The melodic structure of this contour is easily recognizable, and is similar in pitch collection to the popular *rāga* *Sindhu Bhairavi*, known for its associations with sorrow, compassion and devotion, as well as the modern Phrygian mode: a minor second and minor third interval in the lower “tetrachord,” mirroring a minor sixth and minor seventh in the upper “tetrachord.” In most cases, song texts with particularly cerebral metaphysical imagery, or ones that broadly subscribe to *bāul* philosophical views regarding body-sacredness and epistemological inquiry are frequently tuned to the *bāul* contour



that longing is desolate and introspective, floating aimlessly downstream, and keenly associated with the stillness of a quiet river and the solitude of a boatman’s livelihood. With *bicched*, longing is accentuated by the insufferableness of the journey itself, the emotional inundation that underlies the never-ending quest to be reconnected with the beloved. Though the *bāul* variety, longing turns inward, and is the mental anguish of irreconcilable states of being which hinder a more conceptual alliance with the venerated master or friend. Through their simultaneous potency and equivocation, these contours are thus grafted onto a larger body of poetry and musical genres, with seemingly unlimited variation.

With regard to instrumentation, the *dotārā* is an indispensable plucked lute—found in Bengal,<sup>27</sup> and related parts of northeast India<sup>28</sup>—with a roughly three-octave range. The name of the instrument, contrary to popular belief, does not seem to evolve from the words *do* (“two”) and *tār* (“string”), but more likely from a variety of plucked lutes, known as *dutār* or its variants, found throughout the Near East and Central Asia. The relationship between these two instrument types beyond name, however, is meager.<sup>29</sup> While some uncommon versions feature sympathetic strings, the *dotārā* is usually a four-stringed instrument—with the two internal strings played together as a single course—in a sense, functioning as a three-stringed lute. The body of the *dotārā* is typically made from the wood of the *nīm* or mango tree, and features a short and slender fingerboard, which is fretless, and a soundboard whose top section is covered with lizard skin.

---

<sup>27</sup> Scholars typically state that the Bengali form of the *dotārā* originated in the Raṅg region, and has a bright tone produced by metal strings (Capwell 1986, Sinha 2014). A lesser-known version, from northern Bengal, is associated with the folk genre of *bhāowāiyā*, and typically uses cotton, silk or catgut string to produce a more dampened and bass-rich tone.

<sup>28</sup>The Assamese *tokāri* lute resembles the *dotārā*, but has a different string arrangement and timbre.

<sup>29</sup> Thibaut d’Hubert mentions a lute known as *kavilāsa* or *kapināsa*, a stringed and probably plucked instrument mentioned “very often in Bengali and Assamese premodern literature as well as Sanskrit treatises” (d’Hubert 2018).

This latter feature, like the banjo or Persian *tār*, helps to give the instrument its distinctive timbre and staccato-like attack. The soundboard of the *dotārā* is usually teardrop-shaped, though a common version in Bangladesh features a tapered waist which, curiously, suggests the antiquated facilitation of an upright bowing technique.<sup>30</sup> Regional variations can further contribute to each *dotārā* and its unique sound, including overall size, fingerboard plating (steel, thermoplastic, linoleum, etc.), and other aspects which, at the instrument maker's discretion, include the bridge's particular shape and placement, as well as the option of creating sound holes in the membrane covering to increase dynamics. The rustic construction of the *dotārā*, however, is not



**Figure 2.7.** A *dotārā* player, Shamsuddin Haque Liton, using a standard four-string variety of the instrument.

---

<sup>30</sup> The Santali *dhodro banam*, a lute belonging to the *sārindā* family of fiddles, resembles the shape of the *dotārā* despite the fact that it is a bowed instrument (Prasad 1985).

overly concerned with perfected instrument making, but is rather informed by the availability of materials and their means to promote efficient and melodious playing.

The *dotārā* is held horizontally and plucked with a small arrowhead-shaped plectrum made of wood or animal bone, while the strings themselves are stopped with the tips of the nails of the fingering hand, in the manner of the Hindustani *sarod*. Strumming patterns on the *dotārā* are particularly complex and noteworthy, giving the instrument its percussive sound, and the rhythmic aspects of its playing style are just as crucial as its melodic function. Like the Persian *tār*, major strings on the *dotārā* are tuned to the dominant scale degree and the lower octave, allowing it to produce a drone-like effect. While typically not a solo instrument with a repertoire of its own, the *dotārā* is primarily used to accompany the singing voice, providing a heterophonic texture which shadows the melodic line and occasional instrumental interludes<sup>31</sup>.

The *bhāowāiyā* folk song “*nīmer dotārā tui more*” (“*dotārā* of the *nīm* tree, you are mine”), famously rendered by singer Firdausi Rahman (b. 1941), or the celebratory “*bhālô koirā bājāo go dotārā*” (“strum the *dotārā* well”), originally sung by the legendary folk singer and composer Abbasuddin Ahmed, are popular songs or dance numbers performed at festivals throughout Bengal, which highlight its salient place in vernacular imagery. In Bengali folk music, the function of the *dotārā* seems critical to the progression of a song, its lively and pronounced strumming patterns energizing the often grave and despondent melodic contours of the voice which are sounded above it (see Figure 2.8).

---

<sup>31</sup> As an intriguing aside, the famous *dotārā* player and folk song composer Kanailal Sheel (1865–1974) of Faridpur, East Bengal, is said to have studied under the renowned sitar player Ustad Inayat Khan (1894–1938), who encouraged Sheel to translate classical music technique onto the *dotārā* (Intazuddin 2002).



**Figure 2.8. A common strumming pattern on the dotārā, played on open strings to support rhythmic contours. Numerous variations exist to conform to duple and triple meters. Melodic passages are also played on the dotārā, an instrument which moves between rhythmic and melodic roles.**

The *bāṅglā ḍhol*, as it is typically referred to, is an equally indispensable instrument in *bōyāti* performance. The *ḍhol* belongs to a larger family of double-headed barrel drums found throughout South Asia, and are typically known for their loudness and suitability for open-air performances, the muscular and acrobatic stylings of *ḍhol* drummers (who often play while standing or dancing), and its sonic associations with celebratory occasions or auspiciousness. While the shape, timbre and playing technique of the *ḍhol* varies from region to region in the Indian Subcontinent, the *bāṅglā ḍhol* is a medium-sized instrument played with the bare hand on the treble side (often with bamboo strips taped to the fingers, to increase dynamics), and a drum stick on the bass end.<sup>32</sup> The drum shell is typically made of mango wood, while the heads—stretched over specially-designed wooden rims—are of treated goat skin, the bass end having a thicker membrane and, occasionally, a mixture of oil, clay, rice, and limestone powder applied in the center, to facilitate pitch modulation with the wrist. Both playing ends are tensioned by traditional interwoven rawhide straps, protected by a decorative drum cover.

The over approach to *ḍhol* drumming in *bōyāti* performance reflects an amalgamation of different drumming styles from within Bengal and beyond, and include rhythmic ideas connected to a range of classical, vernacular-devotional and ritualized drumming traditions. For example,

---

<sup>32</sup> The style of using one stick instead of two, and on the bass end only, is common to most varieties of *ḍhol* found in eastern India and Bangladesh; for instance, the *bihu ḍhol* of Assam is essentially performed in a similar manner, but with vastly different approaches to rhythmic accompaniment.



**Figure 2.9. The bānglā dhol drum, played by a specialized drummer known as a *dhuli*.**

variations of the common Hindustani cycle *tintāl* are commonly performed on the dhol, as is an older *dhrupad* rhythm known as *teorā*<sup>33</sup> (a 7-beat cycle), popularized in Bengal through the compositions of Rabindranath Tagore. The rhythm *surphôk*<sup>34</sup> (a 10-beat cycle) is also used in both *dhrupad* and *qawwālī*, and largely attributed to the notable North Indian architect of *qawwālī* music, Amir Khusrau (1253–1325). Further, *lophā*<sup>35</sup> (a 12-beat cycle) is indebted to *kôbigān*, a vernacular-devotional genre of Bengal which also uses the bānglā dhol as its primarily

<sup>33</sup> The Bengali *teorā* rhythm is commonly referred to as *tivrā* in contemporary *dhrupad*. However contemporary renditions of the Bengali *teorā* seem to be influenced by both the rhythmic structure of *tivrā* as well as *rupak*, a more common 7-beat cycle used in Hindustani music today.

<sup>34</sup> Outside of Bengal, this rhythm is usually known as *sultāl*, although it is still referred to as *surfak* when performed as a tabla solo, or *surfaqtā* when used as an accompanying rhythm in *qawwālī*. As with *tivrā* and *rupak*, contemporary renditions of the Bengali *surphôk* are also conflated with the rhythmic structure of *jhāptāl*, a more prevalent 10-beat cycle used today in Hindustani music.

<sup>35</sup> As with the case of *teorā* and *surphôk*, the Bengali *lophā* is increasingly conflated with *ektāl*, a contemporary Hindustani 12-beat cycle, due to its widespread use.

percussion instrument, while *ḥalqah-i zikr* (or *hālkā-e jikir* in Bengali, a 6-beat cycle) and *bhāṭiyāli thekā* (an 8-beat cycle) are drawn from accompaniment styles of regional Bangladeshi folk or devotional forms<sup>36</sup>. Lastly, the *āgomônī* rhythm (another 8-beat cycle) has strong associations with the ritualized drumming of Durga Puja as performed on the *ḍhāk*, a large drum associated with Bengali puja, and characteristically fluctuates in tempo.<sup>37</sup>

Typically, ḍhol cycles are conceived of as basic templates or rudiments for rhythmic accompaniment, distinguished not as much by their number of beats but the particular spatial relationships between drum strokes in their patterns, as well as traditional associations with individual genres. In some cases, ḍhol rhythms have a unique relationship with tempo, the classical rhythm *teorā* is always performed at a leisurely pace, as is the *lophā* rhythm associated with *kōbigān*, while the exuberant *ḥalqah-i zikr* is undeniably performed at much faster tempo.

In the case of the ritualized *āgomônī* rhythm, its adaptation on the *bānglā ḍhol* is primarily used to perform loud and intermittent patterns between phrases or verses of sung poetry, or at the beginning of a performance. It is not entirely correct to conceive of *āgomônī* (“advent,” in Bengali) as one particular rhythm, and certainly not a *tāla* exclusively, but rather a collection of particular patterns and their variations as originally played on the *ḍhāk*, a large ceremonial double-headed drum, with a snare on one end, used by a specialized community of drummers, *ḍhāki-s*. The sound of the *ḍhāk* is strongly associated with puja and weddings in Bengal. The performance of *āgomônī* is notably punctuated by increasing changes in tempo, a

---

<sup>36</sup>Specifically, *ḥalqah-i zikr* is the predominant rhythm associated with the shrine-based music at Māijbhāṇḍār in southeast Bangladesh, while *bhāṭiyāli thekā* is associated with the aforementioned song form known as *bhāṭiyāli*, with its origins in north-central Bangladesh.

<sup>37</sup> Other rhythmic systems performed on the *ḍhāk* including *pūjā*, *ārōtī* and *bisṛjôn*. Most of these systems are not distinguished by a certain time cycle length, but are rather distinctive variations of triple meter rhythms.

number of transitional cadential patterns (which help the lead *ḍhāki* to rhythmically communicate with a larger ensemble of *ḍhāk* players), and accompanying hits on a brass plate, known as *kāfi*, to accentuate and consolidate tempi. Also worth mentioning is that *āgomônī* is one of several rhythmic systems played on the *ḍhāk* that incorporates both composed and improvised techniques in a performance that may last hours, and which is associated with various ritualized moments in the elaborate multi-day festival known as Durga Puja. As Bengal's largest puja, the spectacle of Durga Puja includes elaborate temple and stage decorations (or pandals), scriptural recitation, performance arts, revelry, and processions. The *ḍhol* drummer accompanying staged debates by *bôyāti* artists are known to extract key rhythmic phrases of *āgomônī* at the beginning of sessions or at intermittent moments within longer dialogical sections found in extended performance. These brief solo passages of drumming add an element of auspiciousness as well as musical variety.

Choosing an appropriate rhythm by the *ḍhuli*—or *ḍhol* drummer—in *bôyāti* performance is thus largely determined by the tempo and prosody of a song as introduced by the *bôyāti* artist, or else by a song's musical associations with a related genre of drumming. In some instances, an abrupt change from duple-rhythm to triple, or vice versa, is employed in the last stanza of poetry, known as *tāl phertā*, which adds further excitement to a performance.

In addition to the *dotārā* and *ḍhol*, the harmonium and bamboo flute—or *bāsi*—as well as the violin—which increasingly replaces the more traditional *sārindā* fiddle—add to the heterophonic accompaniment of the staged debate. Together, these instruments form the most common ensemble used in Bengali folk music. In addition, *bôyāti* performances typically include several accompanying singers—referred to as *dohār*, and usually disciples of the *bôyāti* artist—

who sit on stage with the other musicians and accompanying them on a range of percussion instruments, including the brass *mônjirā* finger cymbals, wooden *kôrtāl* clappers, the *ḍubki* tambourine, or one-string *bāul* instruments such as the *æk tārā* and *khomôk*.<sup>38</sup> These singers add a responsory flavor to the performance, looping refrain lines or else allowing the *bôyāti* a brief respite from the lengthy debate program.

### **Vernacular Dramaturgy**

The sixth modality, that of Bengali vernacular dramaturgy, has already been mentioned broadly, but is examined briefly here with regard to *bôyāti* musicianship. Muslim folk theater in Bengal is a vast topic with broad dimensions, combining poetry, song and drama with a number of narrative, dialogic or recitation-based performance styles. The arrangement of such dramatic performances can take place on a stationary dais, general open-air spaces, or in processional formation, and can further combine monological, troupe-oriented or contestual delivery styles. In some cases, the inclusion of what Syed Jamil Ahmed refers to as “supra-personae” is critical, in which the dramatic unfolding is enhanced by accessories such as puppets, scrolls and tapestries or ceremonial whisks, staffs and make-shift temple mounds (2001: 67).

However, another manner in which we might broadly perceive of an array of genres and performance tactics that are featured in localized Bengali theater is to distinguish them by the larger social proclivities that have historically or contemporaneously informed them. In some cases, certain folk performances have been consequentially impacted by the advent of a

---

<sup>38</sup> In recent times, a second drummer occasionally appears on stage, especially at more elaborate venues, playing synthesized patterns on MIDI electronic drum equipment—such as the Roland Octapad or HandSonic models—which are programmed with “Bengali” percussion hits. Typically, this drummer is secondary to the *ḍhol* player, supplementing the rhythmic pattern and adding an ostensibly, if not superfluous, modishness to the music.

particular print culture, as in *puthi pāṭh*,<sup>39</sup> or have burgeoned in parallel with a fashionable literary form, as in *pācāli*,<sup>40</sup> demonstrating a distinctive interaction between oral and written domains. In other cases, vernacular performances can be understood reverentially through their mythological accounts of folk deities—often elusive figures who have been inter-communally worshipped (such as Manasā, Caṇḍi or Dharma Ṭhākur, and especially Satya Pīr and Ghāzi Pīr<sup>41</sup>)—and whose quasi-spiritual exploits are typically a dramatic vehicle for satirical commentary. In yet other instances, we might understand certain types of folk theater styles receptively, especially by their eventual popularization through bourgeois sentiment in the twentieth century (such as *jātrā* or *kôbigān*<sup>42</sup>), and therefore by their wider alignments with prevailing nationalist or reformist sentimentalities.

Modern bôyāti musicality seems indebted to a number of features of Bengali folk performance. Two prosodic meters (Bengali: *chôndô*) are frequently used in vernacular

---

<sup>39</sup>The term *puthi*, defined as a “book” or “manuscript,” can contain a diversity of genres and forms when it is used in conjunction with *pāṭh*, meaning “reading.” As texts, these manuscripts were originally handwritten on bark, leaves or other materials and, according to Asim Roy, “with the advent of printing, the meaning of the word was extended to include all Bengali printed works in verse” (1983: 45). Writers of Muslim-style *puthi*-s were called *munṣi*-s (“establisher,” in Arabic) and, in the eras of both the Mughal Empire and British India, this word has usually had a more secretarial implication, as in “contractor” or “writer” (Ahmed 2001). Muslim-style *puthi*-s have historically taken on a variety of topics, from biographies of the Prophet, to Islamic war chronicles, to instruction manuals on ritual behavior. The vast majority of *puthi*-s are written in one of two established prosodic patterns, which enable readers/singers to assign conventional melodies to them when performing them as stylized recitation. While a *puthi* reader/singer may have large sections committed to memory, he or she typically reads from the *puthi* as a bound text as it is performed and, according to Anindita Ghosh, such individuals are usually literate (2002). Notably, a traditional *puthi* written in Bengali is typically bound backwards, to reflect the directionality of the Arabic writing system, and therefore the sacredness of the Qur’ān.

<sup>40</sup> A type of narrative Bengali poem, traditionally thought of as a kind of public performance that may include song, music, extempore versifying, poetic contest and dance. The subject of *pācāli*-s have historically been broad, and not only included folktales and mythological accounts from vernacular Bengali but were a vessel for translations and interpretations of classic Indic and Islamic texts. A noted medieval poet who wrote almost exclusively in the *pācāli* style was Alaol (1607–1673), whose work was critical to the shape of Middle Bengali poetics (d’Hubert 2018).

<sup>41</sup> In Bengali, Caṇḍi, Manasā and Dharma Ṭhākur are important regional deities in the sub-genre of *môṅglkābbô*, “poems of benediction,” a literary style typically viewed as an archetype of the synthesis between Vedic and popular folk culture in the region. The figures of Satya Pīr and Ghāzi Pīr, on the other hand, seem to be a conglomeration of various conceptions of holy men in South Asia and fanciful accounts of the generic Muslim *ghāzi*, a type of revered warrior-explorer (Ahmed 2002).

<sup>42</sup> See subsequent descriptions of both genres in the present chapter, especially *jātrā*.

dramaturgy, *pôyār* and *tripôdi*. The meters of Bengali poetry and song can be traced back to Sanskrit prosody,<sup>43</sup> though later poets, beginning with those of the *caryāpada* anthology,<sup>44</sup> modified and developed them further to conform more to the metrical exigencies of the Bengali language.<sup>45</sup> The *pôyār* meter, which is the principle prosody of medieval Bengali literature, appears to be a variation of Sanskrit syllabic verse. The basic rhythmic unit is the trochaic foot, a long syllable followed by a short one. According to Mary Frances Dunham, who notes extensive use of *pôyār* in the genre of *jārigān*, “this pattern of syllabic stress conforms most consistently to colloquial Bengali stress patterns. She continues, “the participial phrases [attached to the meter] conform euphoniously with the caesura line division, and [this] pattern establishes an underlying ‘beat’ to the couplet, which is characteristic of [vernacular] poetry” (1997: 23). The typical structure of a basic *pôyār* meter, as used by *bôyāti* artists is a couplet of fourteen syllable lines, divided by the following sequence of feet: 8 + 6, 8 + 6, as follows:

— — — — — — — —      — — — — — —      — — — — — — — —      — — — — — —  
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 / 1 2 3 4 5 6\*      1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 / 1 2 3 4 5 6\*

<sup>43</sup> Sanskrit meters can be classified in a number of ways. One classification divides meters into three types: (1) *akṣaravṛtta* or syllabic verse, where meters depend on the number of syllables in a verse, with relative freedom in the distribution of light and heavy syllables; this style is purportedly derived from older Vedic forms, (2) *varṇavṛtta* or “syllabo-quantitative” verse, where meters depend on syllable count, but the light-heavy patterns are fixed, and (3) *mātrāvṛtta* or quantitative verse, where meters depend on duration; each verse-line has a fixed number of morae, usually grouped into sets of four (Deo 2007).

<sup>44</sup> Literally “poems of experience,” a collection of mystical poems in the Vajrayāna school of Buddhism from the tantric tradition during the Pala Empire of the Late Classical period, especially in ancient Assam, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. It was written in an Abahatṭha script, a stage in the evolution of the eastern group of Indo-Aryan languages that is believed to be the ancestor of modern Assamese, Bengali, Sylheti, Oriya, Maithili, and perhaps other related tongues, between the eighth and twelfth centuries. The *caryāpada* is said to be the oldest known collection of verses written in these languages (Ratul 2018).

<sup>45</sup> Notable modern writers of Bengali who altered and expanded prosodic patterns include Rabindranath Tagore, who freed poetry from the influences of Sanskrit syllabic verse by counting closed syllables as a macron. Michael Madhusudan Dutta (1824–1873) also contributed significantly to Bengali prosody by introducing the *amitrākṣara* meter, with run-on lines and varied caesuras, in imitation of English blank verse (Nag 2007).

The second prosody, that of *tripôdi*, is used less often by *bôyāti* artists, but features a three-footed meter due to its tripartite division of each line. In *tripôdi*, each line of verse contains twenty syllables and there are two caesuras, one following the sixth syllable and another following the twelfth syllable, which also share a rhyming scheme. The end of each line finishes with the remaining eight syllables, which constitute a separate rhyme scheme, as follows:

- ˘ - ˘ - ˘                      - ˘ - ˘ - ˘                      - ˘ - ˘ - ˘ - ˘ - ˘  
 1 2 3 4 5 6\*    /    1 2 3 4 5 6\*    /    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8\*\*  
  
 - ˘ - ˘ - ˘                      - ˘ - ˘ - ˘                      - ˘ - ˘ - ˘ - ˘ - ˘  
 1 2 3 4 5 6\*    /    1 2 3 4 5 6\*    /    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8\*\*

According to Dunham and d’Hubert, the alternating *pôyār* meter is ideal for narrative performances, and *tripôdi* meter for descriptive or lyrical sections (1997 and 2018). Regarding *bôyāti* musicality, *pôyār* sections do in fact appear most often in narrative sections of performance, typically after a song has been rendered. The more straightforward and strophic quality of the *pôyār* meter easily allows *bôyāti* artists to extemporaneously compose rhyming expositions on song texts or metaphysical ideas, to audience members who delight in hearing the readily identified scheme. Notably, the *pôyār* meter is evident in Jasimuddin’s beloved ballad-novel *Sojan Badiar Ghat* (first edition, 1933), later translated into an UNESCO-commissioned English edition by Barbara Painter and Yann Lovelock as *Gypsy Wharf* (1969), which is a classic specimen of modern Bangladeshi folk poetry. Naturally, in terms of musical accompaniment,

pôyār prosody conforms to the rhythmic structures of duple meters in bôyāti music, while tripôdi prosody fits with its triple meter accompaniment styles.<sup>46</sup>

The seemingly sensationalized panache of much vernacular performance in Bengal accentuates another key aspect found in bôyāti performance, one that consequently allows for a speculative tête-à-tête through extravagance. In her work on the traditional Bengali folk theater style known as *ĵātrā* as it became a conduit for articulating anti-Partition agitation during the Swadeshi movement,<sup>47</sup> Mimasha Pandit argues that a popular interest in *ĵātrā* emerged as the public sphere became the arena for conducting politics. With their mythological themes and melodramatic flair, *ĵātrā* troupes seemed like an unusual medium for ingraining political ideas in public mentality, yet they would eventually bring together highbrow Sanskritic moral order with the popular tastes of a middle-class theater-going audience. Performed on a liminal stage between ordinary and extraordinary life, Pandit states that the *ĵātrā* world’s “fantastic world of heaven, bravado . . . and sacrifice presented in an immensely unnatural form of performance affected the audience-public sensationally.” She continues, “in its act of un-naturalizing . . . [ĵātrā] opened up a potential space where time and a spatial plane [between] the performance and viewers/listeners was dissolved . . . [bringing] a more powerful plane into existence, one that was

---

<sup>46</sup> Many of the aforementioned tāla-s used by *ḍhol* drummers in bôyāti performances can certainly adhere to *pôyār* and *tripôdi* prosodies, but in many cases a standard duple-meter rhythm, known as *khemṭā*, and a standard triple-meter rhythm, known as *ḷhumur*, are often employed. The latter should not be confused with the aforementioned regional song genre of *ḷhumur*. In a sense, *khemṭā* and *ḷhumur* are common Bengali folk and devotional rhythms which are regional interpretations of *dādrā* and *kaharwā*, the names assigned to standard 6 and 8-beat cycles, respectively, in contemporary Hindustani music.

<sup>47</sup> A milestone in the larger Indian independence movement and a proto-campaign for Indian nationalism, the Swadeshi movement sought to fortify an economic strategy aimed at removing the British Empire from power and improving economic conditions through the boycotting of British products and the revival of domestic ones and its associated production processes.

free of the prying surveillance of the Raj and the ever-assertive hold of the ideas of the nationalist leaders” (2015: 28).

In short, the histrionics and parody so critical to *jātrā* and other forms of Bengali vernacular theater frequently offer a dramatic middle ground between the presentation of historical accounts or theological arguments and staged musical entertainment. Lying just at the edge of possibility through its coalescence of time frames, the performance can further enmesh performative meaning with contemporary meaning, in a moment of interaction between the performer, idea and the audience where represented notions can be reinterpreted and modulated.

Traditional accounts of the figure of Ghāzi Pīr—also known as *zindā pīr*, or “the immortal saint”—who appears in a number of different genres of Bengali folk theater, suggests that his legacy was probably built around the persona of a twelfth- or thirteenth-century saint figure during the premodern spread of Islam in Bengal. An examination of Ghāzi Pīr in vernacular performance highlights another salient feature of *bôyāti* performance: the incorporation of dialectical themes as an articulation of otherness. Known for both his military prowess in conquering the unexplored regions of the Sundarbans forest of southern Bengal, as well as his supernatural abilities to pacify dangerous animals or the natural elements, the story of Ghāzi Pīr articulates the profound impact that Muslim mystic-explorers had in the Ganges delta, inaugurating saint veneration through localized Sufi practice as it transformed rural civilization with an already-existent tradition of hallowed indigenous deity models found in song and poetry that bridged broader Indic theosophical traditions with localized ones. Traditionally, Ghāzi Pīr is worshipped alongside the figures of Banbibi, the guardian spirit of the forest, and Dakshin Rai,

the guardian ruler of the Sundarbans. Tellingly, the extended narrative account of Ghāzi Pīr includes critical philosophical exchanges between him and Kālu, his companion and adopted



**Figure 2.10. Entranceway to the mausoleum of Shāh Ghāzi-Kālu-Campābatī, enshrining all three personalities in one religious space, in the Jhenaidah district of southwestern Bangladesh.**

brother, and later Campābatī, his wife. In performance, the often-extensive segues between Ghāzi Pīr and Kālu strikingly mirror the duality found in the common musical debate template known as *fōriyôt-mārphôt* (Arabic: *sharī‘ah*, or religious law, versus *ma‘rifah*, mystical or intuitive knowledge) in contemporary *bōyāti* performance.

These pivotal confabulations of orthodoxy versus orthopraxy are plentiful in Bengali vernacular performance and reveal a certain agency accorded by regional theater to articulate otherness. While the figure of Ghāzi is of aristocratic lineage—his mother was of Hindu royalty while his father was the ruler Sultān Shāh Sikandar ‘Alī—Kālu was of more humble background.

In the narrative exchanges, their closeness as siblings allows for illuminating moments of candor, which are yet impeded by the contrasting teleologies of their respective social upbringings. In a traditional performance of the story of Ghāzi Pīr—which may be found in a variety of folk genres from narrative storytelling and dance to scroll painting and recitation—the interspersed colloquies between Ghāzi and Kālu are usually based on a variety of theological arguments related to epistemology, cosmology or divine intervention, within the larger mythological backdrop of the chronicle. Thus, as Ghāzi and Kālu fend off the invasions of demons or traverse through the hinterland, they occasionally strike up conversations that expose their contrary Muslim identities, historically situating Sufi saint-exploration in modern religious estrangement.

The *bôyāti* performance tradition seems deeply indebted to unresolved and polarizing themes in Bengali vernacular performance, itself rooted in socioreligious ambivalence, aimed at articulating various polemical points through rhetorical means. Mediating systematized doctrines and creeds with an amorphous mix of mythological accounts and symbolic practices, *bôyāti* musicianship aims to contextualize both the message and the means of communicating it<sup>48</sup> in the performance moment, the dialectical exchange historically tied to its very territorial encroachment on the agrarian expanse, between the legacies of *pīr* veneration and newfangled

---

<sup>48</sup> Roy's work (1983) describes an eventual "syncretistic great tradition" amongst Bengali Muslim authors—who were cultural mediators of various historical-mythical, cosmological or mystical-esoteric works—and a "syncretistic little tradition"—a corpus of texts which differ on the basis of authorship, literary sophistication, and content—that he builds from Robert Redfield's (in Wilcox 2008) and McKim Marriott's (1955) famous bifurcations. On the one hand, this terminology seems somewhat ahistorical in its lack of acknowledgement of the participatory and compositional nature of Indic theological traditions that have willingly conflated temporal, regional and societal aspects of authors and performers. Its labeling of this process in Bengal as syncretistic is, in hindsight, also not entirely acute, since it essentializes an attempted amalgamation of different religious identities, even though Roy provides a rather nuanced understanding of the way in which individual literary and doctrinal elements within the complex world of Bengali Muslim modalities interacted to produce new material and a complementary discourse with entirely different objectives.

reformist mullahs, and later on, by many other dynamics critical to the shape of Bangladeshi identity which has further complicated the pietistic spaces of urban and rural domains.

### **Urdu-Based Lyricism and the Semi-Classical Form**

A seventh modality combines the absorption of Urdu-based genres of music and poetry—namely the *ghazal*<sup>49</sup> and *qawwālī*<sup>50</sup>—within the Muslim Bengali musical imaginary, and a refined musical style that it concurrently introduced—what is largely referred to as a “light” or “semi-classical” sensibility<sup>51</sup>. The contours of *bōyāti* musicianship complexly reflect, on the one hand, Muslim Bengal’s nebulous historical reactions to Urdu as an embodiment of South Asian Muslim-ness or elegance and, on the other hand, a rather favorable approach to its semi-classical flair because of a perceived detachment from “fully classical” music practice, traditionally viewed by Bengali Muslims as a modern proclivity of the Bengali Hindu *haut monde*.

Urdu-based song forms have long existed in Muslim Bengal and, as in many other regions of Muslim-dominated South Asia, the Urdu language was widely promoted as a prestige link language amongst the Bengali Muslim intelligentsia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As such, they looked at Urdu—a distinctively Persianized inflection of the Hindustani

---

<sup>49</sup> A poetic form, especially known for its development in Persian and Urdu, which is typically centered around many nuanced themes of love and separation. A *ghazal* commonly consists of a number of couplets, which are independent but linked abstractly by a larger compositional theme, yet more strictly linked in their overall prosody through a certain metrical scheme.

<sup>50</sup> Less a poetic form than a style of Sufi performance, *qawwālī* is historically associated with the Chishtī shrines of North India and Pakistan, and involves a specific blend of group-based and responsory singing with musical accompaniment. The *ghazal* is one of many poetic forms which are commonly used for traditional *qawwālī* performance.

<sup>51</sup> As separate musical forms, the *ghazal* and *qawwālī* are considered distinctive genres—the former is associated with both urbane *mehfil*-based soirees and a *filmi* style that typically favors leisurely-paced solo renditions, the latter is primarily based in a shrine-style environment intended to stimulate mystical arousal (with later adaptations to pop and film) and performed in more an exuberant and vociferous format. As both a poetic form and a song genre, *ghazal* is unequivocally associated with Urdu. While classical *qawwālī* texts are largely in Persian and regional *qawwālī* are popularly performed in Punjabi, modern mainstream *qawwālī* is also predominantly an Urdu-based musical expression.

tongue which is written in a modified version of the Arabic script known as *nasta‘līq*—and the corresponding culture of the North Indian Muslim elite who appropriated the language, as symbols of a Muslim tradition of literature and the arts which was more connected to the larger Islamic world. However, Urdu-ness in Bengal was not simply a Muslim appropriation, the Urdu variant of Hindustani received recognition and patronage under British rule alongside English, and served as a distinctive Indian replacement for Persian, the court language of the supplanted Mughal Empire. Further, The Dhaka Nawab family,<sup>52</sup> the largest Muslim *zamīndār* in British Bengal, was not only a semi-autonomous lordship that played a key role in modernizing their adopted city at the turn of the century, but their extended kin played a vital part in the history, development and conservation of Urdu literature in the region<sup>53</sup>.

The general lineage and proclivities of the Dhaka Nawab family distinctively categorizes them as members of the *ashrāf* class, one of foreign noble rank and privileged aristocracy, but the particularities of their position and service also suggests that they were important architects and adjudicators of Muslim modernity in Bengal, striving to build a constructive relationship with

---

<sup>52</sup> The Dhaka Nawab family acquired considerable wealth from the trade of leather and gold, and eventually purchased floundering *zamīndārī* estates in Bengal, and later purchased a French trading house which would become the family manor, the Ahsan Manzil. The Nawab family’s support of the British Raj during the Sepoy Revolt of 1857 considerably strengthened their loyalty with the colonial regime (Dasgupta 2015, Ludden 2012). In Dhaka, the Nawab family is primarily remembered for their social work and initiatives to modernize the city, organizing it into *maḥalla-s*, or formal neighborhoods, establishing mosques, newspapers, schools, colleges, zoos, hospitals, libraries, parks, museums, as well as implementing municipal gas lighting and an urban water works system in the city, and promoting both women’s education and the arts through campaigns, exhibits and festivals.

<sup>53</sup> Beyond his role in politics, social welfare and infrastructural enterprise, Nawab Khwaja Alimullah (d. 1854) was instrumental in formalizing musical festivals to mark family occasions, and developed enduring relationships with musicians from Benares, Farrukhabad, Rampur and Lucknow. Nawab Khwaja Abdul Ghani (1813–1896) was known to invite theater troupes from Kolkata and Mumbai for dramatic performances at his estate, and was instrumental in facilitating the admission of female artists into the National Theatre of Kolkata, and was a dramatist himself. Nawab Khwaja Ahsanullah (1846–1901) was a renowned Urdu litterateur, composed a number of *na‘at* (a cappella Muslim hymns) and *thumri* compositions, and published Urdu and Persian ghazal-s in his poetic work *Kulliyāt-i Shahīn* (“A Collection of Poetry of Shahīn,” under his pen name). Khwaja Ahsanullah also contributed formidably to the Dhaka Sangeet Vidyalaya music school (Dasgupta 2015).

both the British bureaucracy and the native citizens of Dhaka, for which they served as sociocultural intermediaries.<sup>54</sup>

In the early decades of the twentieth century, especially through the efforts Nawab family descendent Khwaja Nazimuddin (1894–1964), the Dhaka Nawab estate began to develop relations with the All-India Muslim League (AIML), for which Nazimuddin was a presiding leader. While the original political goal of the AIML was to define and advance Indian Muslim civil rights and to provide protection to the Muslim gentry, it later realigned its initiatives to increase its credibility in Muslim communities throughout the British Indian Empire. However, in the decades leading up to the dissolution of the British Raj, its objectives were steadily criticized by Muslims who sided with the Indian independence movement for a unified state, and later by proponents of the Language Movement in East Bengal (Zaman 1998). Yet, as a Muslim political party that at once advocated British education in the sciences and arts, and Muslim-centered political activism that would later inspire the Two-Nation Theory,<sup>55</sup> the AIML would have immense influence on the prospects of Urdu as a binding ideological emblem beyond its

---

<sup>54</sup> However, by the early 1900s, the pervasive influence of the Dhaka Nawab family began to dwindle, largely due to political infighting within the larger household and their mismanagement of funds. While they continued to serve as ceremonial guardians of the city over the subsequent decades, the East Pakistan Estates Acquisition Act formally abolished the estate in 1952, and successive land reform in Pakistan and Bangladesh brought an end to the remaining landholdings of the Nawab family (Dasgupta 2015).

<sup>55</sup> The Two-Nation Theory was the ideological basis for the creation of Pakistan, predicated on the belief that Muslim and Hindu demographics should influence the boundaries of two separate nation states, and that Muslims should therefore enjoy sovereignty in areas of South Asia where Islam is the dominant religion—delineated as the regions of what is now Pakistan and Bangladesh.

native speakers in South Asia<sup>56</sup>. In fact, the AIML can be seen as arising from a literary movement begun at the Aligarh Muslim University<sup>57</sup> (Dasgupta 2015).

For urbane Bengali Muslims in the early twentieth century, one of the most pioneering and ultimately enduring ways in which Urdu lyricism left a profound impact on Bengali musicality was through the compositional endeavors of Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899–1976). Born into a modest Muslim family from West Bengal, Nazrul did not matriculate but instead enlisted in the British Indian Army. Concurrently pursuing literary interests, he was influenced early on by the works of Bengal Renaissance stalwarts Rabindranath Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (1876–1938), as well as the Persian poets Omar Khayyam (1048–1131), Rumi (1207–1273) and Hafiz (1315–1390). Nazrul’s anti-colonialist poetry shot him to fame, but he was also a critic of the Khalifat Movement,<sup>58</sup> condemning it as hollow fundamentalism. While he was significant in being one of the few established Muslim writers or thinkers to be associated

---

<sup>56</sup> Tellingly, the All-India Muslim League was founded in 1906, in the aftermath of the 1905 Partition of Bengal by the Viceroy of India, and on the sidelines of the annual All India Muhammadan Educational Conference in Shahbagh, Dhaka (Zaman 1998). With irony, the historically-relevant neighborhood of Shahbagh has since become a staging ground for student-led protests movements, including a mass civilian-led street campaign in 2013 which fought against lenient rulings for tried war criminals of the Bangladesh Liberation War, who were essentially advocates of an Urdu-supported two-state Pakistan.

<sup>57</sup> The university was established by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) as the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in 1875; Khan himself was as a pragmatist, Islamic reformist and entrepreneur, and maintains a strong legacy in Pakistan and for Urdu-speaking Muslims.

<sup>58</sup> The Khalifat Movement (1915–23) was a pan-Islamist political protest campaign launched by communities in Muslim South Asia to influence the British government not to abolish the Ottoman Caliphate. It was a protest against the sanctions placed on the Caliph and Ottoman Empire after the First World War by the Treaty of Sevres. The movement collapsed by 1922 when Turkey gained a more favorable diplomatic position and moved towards secularism (Niemeijer 1972, Qureshi 1999, Embree 2005).

with the Bengal Renaissance<sup>59</sup>—he shared similar views with the Renaissance writers and thinkers with regard to women’s rights, a humanist-based spirituality and imperialist rule—he also made critical headway in developing a literary space for educated Bengali Muslims which at once articulated their innate Bengali-ness and drew broad, romanticized connections with the traditions of Urdu and Persian poetry and song (Nag 2006, Mitra 2007).

In 1928, Nazrul began working as a lyricist, composer and music director for All India Radio. While the bulk of his early devotional songs and poems were steeped in Hindu spirituality<sup>60</sup> or else were written in the popular Bengali poetic forms of the day, Nazrul also began work on an unfinished poetic translation of the Qur’ān<sup>61</sup> into Bengali,<sup>62</sup> though he was

---

<sup>59</sup> Typically, Bengalis refer to Tagore and Nazrul as the two pioneering composers of Bengali modern song, or *ādhanik gān*, in the early twentieth century. Both figures are also categorized under the larger rubric of *pāncô kôbi*, the “five poets,” which additionally includes Dwijendralal Ray (1863–1913), Atulprasad Sen (1871–1934) and Rajanikanta Sen (1865–1910). These poets were largely responsible for producing a new song form, aided by the advent of the domestic gramophone and radio broadcast—Kolkata and Dhaka were both early stations of the private Indian Broadcasting Company. Further, in lieu of the established prosodic or poetic structures of premodern Bengali, these composers utilized a more straightforward and contemporary Bengali that occasionally dabbled in English and, in Nazrul’s case, Perso-Arabic literary forms. The songs of both Tagore and Nazrul drew upon multiple musical and poetic sources which reflected the modern Bengali reader-listener’s cultural past and present: modified forms of Hindustani and foreign melodic structures (Scottish ballads, Persian hymns, etc.), imagery from influential folk and devotional repertoires of Bengal, the nascent film music style of India (with which Nazrul was particularly involved) a staged dance-drama style (which with Rabindranath was particularly involved), and a musical form of anti-colonial patriotism that suffused militaristic fervor with chorus-based protest lyrics that would articulate important sociopolitical moments in contemporary Bengali history (including the Swadeshi campaign which emerged from the events surrounding the 1905 partition of Bengal, the Naxalite movement in West Bengal—a radical leftist group supportive of Maoist political sentiment and its communist cultural wing, the Indian People’s Theatre Association—and the Language Movement in East Bengal-Bangladesh).

<sup>60</sup> Nazrul was especially fond of, and displayed a poetic brilliance for, composing *śaemā sōngīt*, a particular type of hymn praising (and chiding) the deity Kālī, destroyer and rejuvenator of the world.

<sup>61</sup> Within months of Tagore’s death in 1941, Nazrul himself fell ill and gradually began losing his power of speech. Eventually, he was not able to continue writing and spent the remaining three decades of his life in a near-vegetable state.

<sup>62</sup> The Bengali religious scholar and translator Girish Chandra Sen (ca. 1835–1910), a Brahma Samaj missionary, is widely referenced to have produced the first known translation of the Qur’ān into Bengali in 1886.

only able to finish the thirtieth *juz'* or *pārā*.<sup>63</sup> However, in what his contemporaries regarded as one of his greatest achievements, he composed some of the earliest *ghazal-s* in Bengali,<sup>64</sup> transforming a form of poetry mainly associated with Persian and Urdu. At the behest of some of his Muslim colleagues, he further composed over three hundred pioneering songs on Islamic themes—including prayer, the Ramaḍān fast, the *zakāh* almsgiving, the imminence of death, a love for the Prophet, and the oneness of God (Arabic: *tawhīd*)—hymns that stressed duty and steadfastness in vivid but broad terms, carefully eschewing more localized expressions of Muslim devotion (Goswami 1999). These songs<sup>65</sup>—still very much enjoyed in Bangladesh today and typically rendered in performance during the month of Ramaḍān—are musically situated in the prevalent modern song form of Nazrul's time, mixing a casual and semi-classical experimentation with *rāga* contours with simple yet refined Bengali wording. In so doing, Nazrul thus pioneered the structure and sound of the urbane Muslim devotional song in Bengal.

Strikingly, Nazrul included many Urdu-derived words into such songs, and, unlike in everyday Bengali speech, these words are conventionally pronounced as Urdu words—which is to say, they do not conform to Bengali pronunciation standards for Urdu vocabulary—when sung. This poetic device draws even more attention to a distinctive Urdu-ness, as the parlance of

---

<sup>63</sup> The Qur'ān—as it has been traditionally written, bound and collated, whereby it is known as *muṣḥaf*—is divided into thirty parts of varying length, known as *juz'* (in Arabic) or *pārā* (in Persian). Ritually, this division has aided in the processes of reciting the entire Qur'ān over the thirty-some days of the month of Ramaḍān, which is seen as an act of piety and producing great blessing. Since the *muṣḥaf* is codexed from longest *sūrah-s* (“books” or “chapters”) to shortest, the thirtieth *juz'* contains the smallest sections, and is thus the most often recited or memorized by everyday Muslims.

<sup>64</sup> Notably, Atulprasad Sen (1871–1934) previously experimented with popularizing the *ghazal* in Bengali, but not nearly to the extent of Nazrul's endeavors.

<sup>65</sup> Nazrul's Islamic songs are collectively referred to as *islāmi gōjōl* in Bengali—that is to say, Islamic *ghazal-s*—even if they do not poetically conform to the delineated metrical structures of the traditional *ghazal*. Here, the term *ghazal* broadly evokes the genre's Perso-Arabic literary heritage and all that it implies.

modern standard Bengali, in both Bengals, draws much less from Perso-Arabic vocabulary than the Hindustani language does.<sup>66</sup>

While Tagore and Nazrul both displayed an interest in utilizing the idiomatic framework of Hindustani music to compliment their unique contributions to Bengali song, Nazrul's approach did not so much mirror Tagore's fondness for the poetic scope and melodic contours of *dhrupad*. For Tagore, a stylistic connection with *dhrupad*, particularly its penchant for longer stanzas, enabled a more lyrical connection with the Bengali language's developmental attachment to verse. Furthermore, *dhrupad* emphasized a deep and profound association with Indian music's primordial roots through the majesty and antiquity associated with that genre. Nazrul's style, while acutely indebted to the rich tradition of Bengali literary traditions, was aimed at both producing a composition flavor that was situated in the musical language of his milieu—shaped by the trappings of Hindu modernity in Bengal—and a discreetly yet hitherto unarticulated Muslim tone in contemporary song. He achieved this not only through creative locutionary appropriations of Urdu or Persian into Bengali, but more endearingly by drawing directly from contemporary Hindustani genres, especially *khyāl* and *thumrī*. In Nazrul's time—and through his formative socio-musical interactions with pedigreed Muslim *ustād-s* who had been the legitimated torchbearers of Hindustani music in North India<sup>67</sup>—these genres, despite

---

<sup>66</sup> Perso-Arabic vocabulary in Bangladeshi Bengali is typically much more pronounced in registers outside of the everyday diction of educated speakers, e.g., in formal Islamic sermons or distinctive regional dialects spoken outside urban areas.

<sup>67</sup> Nazrul joined the British Indian Army at the age of eighteen and seems to have had two primary motivations for joining: first, a youthful desire for adventure and, second, an interest in the politics of the time (Goswami 1999). Attached to the 49th Bengal Regiment, he was posted to the Karachi Cantonment, where he wrote his first poetry and came into contact with pedigreed Muslim *ustād-s* of Hindustani music. Although he never saw active fighting, Nazrul rose in rank from corporal to *havildār* (sergeant), and served as quartermaster for his battalion (Langley 2007). Nazrul left the British Indian army in 1920 when the 49th Bengal Regiment was disbanded, and subsequently settled in Kolkata.

their abiding Indic sensibilities, came to be perceived, through the scope of his artistic undertakings, as ostensibly emblematic specimens of discriminating Muslim music-making in the artistic sphere.

Yet, in the wide-spread institutional dissolution of the post-independence era, as the established *gharānā-s* of Hindustani music were democratized by the rise of increasingly non-Muslim specialists, many Marathi and Bengali Brahmin artists approached the mantle of classical music preservation<sup>68</sup>. As Kolkata became an important hub for Hindustani music pedagogy and performance, especially due to its proximity to Dhaka, popular Bengali Muslims sentiment latently construed classical music-making as an intrinsically Hindu predilection.<sup>69</sup> Despite this complexity, the stylings of “light classical” music, especially through the Urdu-

---

<sup>68</sup> *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition* (2005) is a provocative account of the development of modern national culture in India using classical music as a case study. In it, Janaki Bakhle demonstrates how the emergence of an Indian cultural tradition in the early modern era reflected colonial and exclusionary practices—particularly the exclusion of Muslims by the Brahmanic elite, which occurred despite the fact that Muslims were the major practitioners of the Indian music—which were configured as a Hindu national tradition. The study focuses on two remarkable individuals: Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande (1860–1936) and Vishnu Digambar Paluskar (1872–1931), and both were undisputed Marathi modernizers who embarked upon self-conscious projects of retrieving a dispersed and complex musical tradition and singularizing it in the service of a notionalized modern nation. In the same milieu, in Bengal, a growing body of mostly Brahmin musicians—a regional Indian class who had been thoroughly gentrified in the British era—became torchbearers in nearly every domain of modern Hindustani music, including *khyal*, *sitar* and *sarod* and *tabla*, but were also essential in reviving an interest in the study and performance of older or obscure instruments, such as the *surbahar*, *surshringar* and *esraj*. Further, they also seriously embarked on the development of techniques and modification for newer instruments brought into the fold of classical music, including *bansuri*, *santoor*, *slide guitar* and *mandolin*.

<sup>69</sup> A notable exception, however, was a doyen of Hindustani music in his milieu, the Bengali Muslim musician Alauddin Khan (1862–1972) the father of Ustad Ali Akbar Khan (1922–2009) and guru of Pandit Ravi Shankar (1920–2012). However, like his North Indian Muslim colleagues of Hindustani music, Alauddin Khan delicately negotiated Hindu and Muslim sociocultural traditions in his own lifetime, acknowledging the necessity of this mediation in his profession. Notably, his daughter Roshanara Khan (1927–2018), herself an outstanding music who, as a result of her brief marriage to Ravi Shankar, and through Alauddin’s insistence, took the Hindu name Annapurna Devi (Chakravarti 2009). In more recent years, however, this stigma is changing. The Bengal-ITC Classical Music Festival is a major South Asian classical music program held annually in Dhaka since 2012. It is one of the world’s largest musical festivals dedicated to Indian classical music and draws leading musicians from throughout the Subcontinent. Though beyond the scope of this dissertation, such festivals seem to attract a certain charm by the novelty of their locational setting, outside the purview of the hallowed halls of the Hindustani concert stage, and therefore associated with a perceived impartiality toward musicianship in general, and innovation in particular. Further, these “new” spaces for classical concerts also present a logistical advantage in that they are often hosted in cities that have less-regulated procedures with regard to noise pollution and spectator capacity limitations that larger and modern urban centers increasingly face.

indebted genres of ghazal and qawwālī, remained pertinent in the Bangladeshi musical imaginary, though in often surprising and subliminal ways. Specifically, rāga-s which remain in vogue or are seemingly alluded to in contemporary Bangladeshi song—whether in film music, pop music or traditional genres of folk or devotional song—are ones that have strong associations with the general tradition of “light classical,” including the rāga-s *Khamāj*, *Kāfi* and *Pilu*, or related rāga-s associated with their respective *thāt*-s,<sup>70</sup> which are often conflated with one another in a single song.

Needless to say, the revolutionary Language Movement in Dhaka, and the following decades of campaigns against Pakistani governance and regulation through Urdu-medium stratagems, produced a particularly powerful and evocative sense of ethnolinguistic self-worth amongst Bangladeshi citizens. This language-centered campaign became so much the ideological fabric of the nation that, in some regards, basic familiarity with Persian and Arabic, and to some extent English-medium instruction, quickly declined, and non-Bengali scripts were nearly removed from public signage, print media, and standard school curriculum in the formative years

---

<sup>70</sup> The modern *thāt* system was popularized by Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande (1860–1936), an influential Indian musicologist in the early twentieth century. Modeled after the Carnatic *mēlakarta* classification, it posits that the gamut of contemporary Hindustani rāga-s can be largely classified by a series of ten heptatonic and diatonic scales. Bhatkhande may have been influenced by modern European church modes as well, as a number of *thāt*-s correspond to such modes: *Bilāwal* with the Ionian scale, *Kāfi* with the Dorian scale, *Bhairavi* with the Phrygian scale, *Kalyān* with the Lydian scale, etc. However, many criticisms have been brought up over the decades, despite the largely successful integration of *thāt* terminology into the casual, middle-class pursuit of Hindustani music in the post-independence era. Mainly, criticisms of the *thāt* system draw attention to its somewhat haphazard classification of significant rāga-s that do not fit convincingly in one of the proposed ten scales. This argument decisively alludes to another and much larger problem, that the Carnatic-derived *thāt* system is ultimately predicated upon a musical ideology contrary to the historical evolution of Hindustani music: that the development of rāga in North India is not fundamentally based on paradigmatic models and theoretical discourse, but was rather born out of the social interactions that North Indian music had with others, as musical conventions and ideas entered the region through increasing periods of conquest and exposure with the outside world, particularly the Near East and Central Asia. Inversely, Hindustani music evolved through conventions of practice that emerged from cross-cultural playing and musical invention, which ultimately make Hindustani rāga-s difficult to summarize through codified scalar associations. Furthermore, even Carnatic rāga theory, despite its more loyal allegiance to fundamental scales, defies its own conventions, as evidenced by an abundance of *janya* (“derived”) rāga-s in that musical tradition, which fall outside of the purview of the seventy-two prototype scales of the *mēlakarta* system, or by theoretical complications related to its long historical interaction with Western Art Music.

of Bangladeshi nationhood (van Schendel 2009). Contemporary music variety programs on Bengali television are still revealing on this account: the repertoire of Kolkata-based television programs easily move between Bengali songs and Hindi-Urdu ones—demonstrating the pervasiveness of Hindustani in West Bengal through Bollywood and Indian pop—while televised Bangladeshi music programs only, and unapologetically, consist of Bengali songs.

Yet, while a tangible and state-led eradication of Urdu on various fronts symbolically asserted the spirit of Bangladeshi nationalism in the post-independence years, Urdu did not completely disappear. Madrasas in Bangladesh today still utilize Urdu-medium texts on the exegesis of the Qur'ān (Arabic: *tafsīr*) and collections of prophetic biographies on Muhammad (*sīrah*), literary traditions for which a voluminous amount has been produced in Urdu over the past centuries. In addition, the largely ostracized Bihari communities of Bangladesh, who settled in East Pakistan decades ago and were largely abandoned after the war, are native speakers of the Hindustani language.

The resiliency of Urdu in Bangladesh is perhaps most evident in devotional song, and can be readily heard in the canonic Sufi poetry of the Māijbhāṇḍāri tradition of Chittagong. Situated in the nation's southwest corner, the Māijbhāṇḍāri brotherhood is perhaps Bangladesh's most indigenous Sufi order. While its ideological and musical pervasiveness have gained much more attention in the past decades, Māijbhāṇḍār as an institutionalized phenomenon has not experienced the pervading influence on musicians and genres across the Bengali Muslim domain as the Chishtī and Qādirī orders have historically experienced.<sup>71</sup> Today, the Māijbhāṇḍār

---

<sup>71</sup> In addition, the Māijbhāṇḍār order, while comprising a unique genealogy of Sufi saints and a distinctive musical style, is technically considered a hybrid order, and apparently draws spiritual connections with the Qādirī order, and includes in its traditional ritual practices a display of homage to Chishtī saints, among other connections (Bertocci 2006).

complex is an elusive collection of spatial, administrative and social units, including a bewildering selection of old and new shrines, representing the continuously sprouting lineages of the major saint-figures of the order,<sup>72</sup> whose various family members occupy selective areas of the larger compound (Bertocci 2006).

Due to its long trajectory as a stationary space for Sufi asceticism and musical performance—witnessing the many reconfigurations of Muslim Bengal in the twentieth century—and due to its many saint figures and apostles who were ardent melodist-lyricists, its large and diverse song corpus—known as *bhāṇḍāri gān*—comprise a vast amount of literary styles, including original songs composed in Urdu but largely written down in Bengali.<sup>73</sup> While many of these songs are less performed today, in place of original (*ādi*) and newer (*ādhunik*) songs written more conspicuously in Bengali, they survive and are occasionally rendered by particularly knowledgeable specialist singers of *bhāṇḍāri gān* (Harder 2011). Like the most renown *qawwālī* singers of North India and Pakistan, who delight in performing older “Hindvī” or “Rekhtā<sup>74</sup>” compositions which have been preserved in Urdu script, such archaic Urdu-cum-Bengali songs are exclusive markers of a rich tradition, which is spiritually sanctioned by a

---

<sup>72</sup> Namely, the most influential and widely revered Māijbhāṇḍāri saints are Shah Sufi Syed Ahmadullah “Qiblah-i Ka‘bah” (1826–1906), Syed Ghulam al-Rahman “Baba Bhāṇḍāri” (1865–1937), Syed Dilwar Hussain “Dil-i Mainā” (1893–1982), Syed Zia al-Haqq (1928–1988), and Sayyid Shafī al-Bashr (1919–2002) (Harder 2011).

<sup>73</sup> Assorted and inexpensive song books which comprise of various *bhāṇḍāri gān* lyrics, known as *bāṇi-s*, have been a part of the experience and paraphernalia of Māijbhāṇḍāri pilgrimage since the wide-spread distribution of print media in Bengal. Traditionally, but unsurprisingly, not much is described by way of musical rendition in these booklets, except for the occasional mentioning of a melody name or *tāla*, leaving the actual preservation of song performance to oral tradition.

<sup>74</sup> Hindvī, Dehlevī and Rekhtā were older names given to the Hindustānī language continuum as its dialectal basis shifted to the Kharībolī dialect of Delhi. This style evolved in both the Perso-Arabic and Nāgarī scripts and is considered an early form of Urdu and Hindi. Rekhtā means “scattered” but also “mixed,” and implies that it contained Persian and Hindi characteristics. These terms were in greatest use from the late 17th century until the late 18th century, when it was largely supplanted by Hindustānī and then Hindi-Urdu, though it continued to be used sporadically until the late 19th century (Farooqi 2008).

robust stockpile of linguistic and sonic modalities over milieu that have interfaced and sustained relevance with a florid Muslim musical institution in Bangladesh’s southeast region.

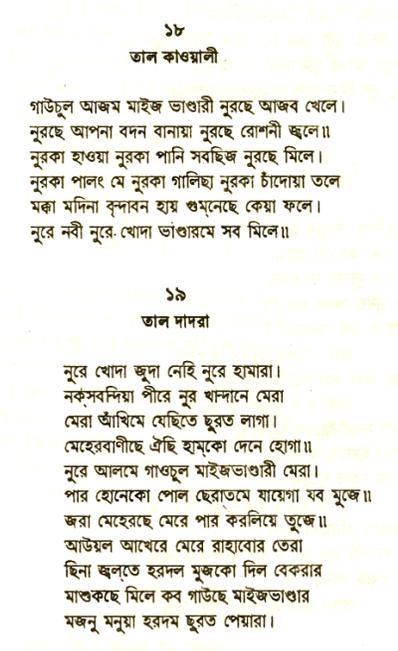


Figure 2.11. Lower composition: an original Urdu devotional lyric written in Bengali script, *nūr-e khudā judā nahi nūr-e hamārā*, by the poet Ramesh Sheel (1877–1967).

The above composition was composed by Ramesh Sheel, who was of Hindu background and originally a professional *kōbigān* singer. Sheel is typically regarded as the pioneering lyricist-melodist to compose and propagate the performance of *bhāṇḍārī gān*. Sheel composed about 350 songs in praise of the *Māijbhāṇḍārī* order and its founding saint figure Shah Sufi Syed Ahmadullah “Qiblah-i Ka’bah” (1826–1906), through which Sheel became indoctrinated into the brotherhood. Sheel’s compositions were posthumously published through a series of nine volumes, later republished as a single volume through the Bangla Academy (edited by Syed Mohammad Shahed in 1993). The Urdu lyric above is cataloged as no. 19 in Sheel’s anthology *Āfēkmālā* (“Garland of the Beloved”), a popular song compilation that is widely sung—as well

as distributed locally in inexpensive pamphlet form—at the Māijbhāṇḍār shrine. The text mentions that it is set to the popular six-beat cycle *dādrā*.

Unsurprisingly then, *bōyāti* artists not only appropriate Urdu song form and imagery into their own musical style, but are quite fond of revitalizing them for dialectical effect. Just as they have drawn attention to the songs of *Lālôn* which have been unremembered or rebuffed in the popular moment, so too have they experimented with the cherished and unfashionable compositions of Kazi Nazrul Islam, channelling his innate folk or devotional sensibilities, or his classicism or experimentalism, when required. Urdu itself as a point of contention in Bangladesh's history makes great dramatic fodder for the particularities of *bōyāti* performance, for articulations of longing and piety, for examinations of Bengali-ness through solidarity and discord, and for associative musical stylings that add pomp and vivacity to *bōyāti* performance.

### **Conclusion**

What makes *bōyāti* musicality simultaneously striking and elusive is that it is not shaped by the underlying characteristics of a specific musical community or genre. The *bōyāti* art form is remarkably robust in its ability to draw from the thematic, aesthetic, poetic, intellectual, and musical contours of a vast variety of ideological impressions that have ultimately converged to express Bengali Muslim cultural identity over milieux. This stunning pastiche, however, has trivialized the space of *bōyāti* performance, since *bōyāti* artists have attached themselves to different song forms or spaces of patronage in different eras of time, building a largely aggregative approach to style and rendering along the way.

Ultimately, what we know of the *bōyāti* artists today, and their contemporary musical outlook, is the result of certain formulations in musical presentation that began solidifying in late

nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries (see Chapter Three). In this period of colonial decline, the bôyāti community is largely sidestepped by the more pervasive bāul community as musical torchbearers of an indigenous Bengali song tradition, a phenomenon supported by the proclivities of a Hindu-driven Bengal Renaissance and the compositional achievements of Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), who increasingly viewed bāul-ness as a monolithic expression of native conviction and defiance. Within the boundaries of Muslim-dominated East Bengal, bôyāti artists at this time also began forging a stronger alliance with local Sufi shrines, with which they shared an increasingly productive relationship through an experimental musical atmosphere steeped in the contours of Bengali regionality (see Chapter Four). Yet, as an evocative form of ethnolinguistic nationalism began to pervade the sociocultural predilections of Bengali Muslims in the twentieth century, Sufi shrines increasingly became ambiguously positioned spaces in the Bangladeshi devotional landscape, provoking further obscuration for the bôyāti community at large.

The predominant features of bôyāti musicality, then, is better examined through a series of modalities that have permeated their performance style. Ideas of erudition through Islamic theology are critical in defining bôyāti stage presence. The manner in which assorted devotional topics are researched, presented, and cherished amongst bôyāti artists reflects their perception of themselves as bardic torchbearers of Bengali Muslim heritage, particularly though an emphasis on sharpening rhetorical skills. This focus is seen as a way of legitimating bôyāti art as more than just a musical presentation, but a stylized performance of Islamic scholarship. At the same time, this polemical flavor, while generally shared with other vernacular communities in Bengal, particularly highlights the bôyāti practice of moving between oral and written discourses,

between scholarly and public knowledge, as a way of expressing a certain Bengali Muslim discursiveness.

From Hindu devotional canons, one can discern the manner in which bôyāti music, as a largely Muslim tradition, is highly indebted to the much lengthier tradition of Hindu religious song in Bengal. Bengali song and poetry, like the Bengali language itself, is deeply rooted in Indic sensibilities and standard Bangladeshi Bengali today is not particularly overburdened with Persio-Arabic vocabulary. The musical contours and imagery found in Bengali Hindu song forms are very much cherished amongst Bengali Muslim artists, and are even approached as critical areligious contributions to the cultural heritage of Bengal, a canon that averts the more contentious place of an ostensibly Muslim form of music making.

Regarding bāul aesthetics, one is immediately drawn to the phenomenal resiliency of bôyāti musicality, especially in an ability to appropriate and navigate a way through the abiding imageries and poetic authorities of other song traditions. Rather than being subsumed by the ubiquitousness of bāul music and philosophy, bôyāti artists have uniquely integrated the bāul song form, especially through the tradition of Lālôn, into their personal repertoire. On the one hand, bôyāti artists have incorporated distinctively selected elements of the bāul sound into their own performance, subliminally extracting its heartfelt and deep-seated qualities in the Bengali musical imaginary. On the other hand, bôyāti artists have cleverly resurrected the more Islamically-themed compositions of Lālôn, increasingly overlooked by the secularist project that fueled Bengali cultural preservation in the formative years of nationhood, as important additions to their own Sufi canon.

As a fourth modality, Tagorian composition reveals an experimental side of *bôyāti* musicality, one that is situated in its modern performance context. Tagore's musical outpouring, and its lasting presence in Bengali music today, is particularly indebted to his creative ability to integrate various highbrow and vernacular musical forms into an unassuming and amalgamated style that articulated the changing sensibilities of a Bengali listenership in the early twentieth century. In doing so, Tagore legitimated a musical process in which, for example, a *rāga*-based melody or a *bāul* melody, could be sublimated, intentionally or unintentionally modifying its original structure or contour, without being heard as insipid or the consequence of unlearned musicianship. For *bôyāti* artists, this process reiterated a musical maneuver that was crucial to their contemporary performance style, one that borrowed from a continuum of discrete musical ideas that were otherwise considered detached from one other through conventions of pedagogy, patronage, social boundaries, or theological orientation.

Bengali folk contours and instrumentation ultimately represent the most foundational musical layer of *bôyāti* musicality. While the various modalities of *bôyāti* music encompass a range of genres and styles, Bengali and non-Bengali, the essential sound of *bôyāti* music—its song structures, instrumentation, and melodic contours—are rooted in regional Bengali music traditions. The materials of these traditions provide *bôyāti* artists with a large number of distinctive melodic and rhythmic ideas, inspired by various localized music forms, that represent the templates around which a composite musical approach is expanded. Related to this is a sixth modality, that of vernacular dramaturgy, which represents an enduring tradition of regionally-staged performance styles in Bengal that combine song with narrative and dramatic rendering to produce a slew of largely exegetical, dialectical, and suppositional presentations in open-air

spaces. The locationality of these performance traditions remain redolent of history and tradition for Bangladeshis today, who have long viewed Bengali Muslim identity as developing out of a history of insularity and aloofness, where the provinciality of East Bengal served as a powerful medium through which concurrent pieties and positionalities might be contested and explored.

Lastly, Urdu-based lyricism exemplifies the larger and peculiar geographical domain of *bōyāti* musicality, one not only situated within a Bengali Hindu cultural hegemony but along the peripheral boundaries of a more expansive non-Bengali Muslim aristocracy in North India. The cultural and political significance of the Urdu language in Muslim Bengal is a complicated story. In the early twentieth century, Urdu imagery was increasingly appropriated into the Bengali lexicon as a way of both linguistically distinguishing Bengali Muslims from their Bengali Hindu brethren, as well as to associate Bengali with the regality and sophistication of North Indian Muslim decorum through its Urdu speakers. Beginning in the 1950s, and certainly solidifying after the 1970s, the significance of Urdu was increasingly politicized as the language of oppression, as intrinsically un-Bengali and therefore unpatriotic. Yet, many song forms and music traditions—especially the *ghazal*, religious hymns, and even certain “light classical” stylings—came to be powerfully incorporated into Bengali music through the poetic vehicle of Urdu literature and the recordings of Urdu-speaking artists. This phenomenon remains a curious part of the legacy of music in East Bengali and Bangladesh, through localized traditions of *qawwālī* at *Māijbhāṇḍār*, to the unique compositional achievements of Bengali Muslim poet Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899–1976). For the *bōyāti* artist, a musical engagement with Urdu-based lyricism allows for a further articulation of otherness, in this case, the predicament of Muslim Bengal’s

isolated demographic expanse and its long history of defining itself against the disparate ideologies that it came into contact with through the cultural hegemonies of foreign governance.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Compositional Devotionalism in Discursive *Bicār Gān* Performance**

This larger three-part chapter introduces a form of stylized debate that is central to contemporary *bōyāti* musicianship. I scrutinize the amalgamation of its poetic, musical and responsorial features at live venues in order to interpret the nature, distribution and potency of rhetorical performance in a largely discursive and open-ended genre.

After introducing a critical approach for examining musical devotionalism in *bōyāti* performance, Part One begins a discussion of the evolution of a broad and modern devotional song base used in the debate which has been complicated by a slew of sociocultural realignments that inspired the transformations from East Bengal to Bangladesh. Part Two examines the individual components constructed around this song base that comprise the debate genre known as *bicār gān*—including its versified, saintly, thematic, and musical building blocks—and the manner in which these elemental ingredients are creatively rerouted through a performance by evoking a range of sentiments using biographical, syntactical, or sonic allusions. In Part Three, I investigate the life and career of *bōyāti* doyen Abdul Halim (1929–2007), which then allows for a discussion of original *bōyāti* compositions, and their poetic relationship to the aforementioned foundational material through techniques of devotional borrowing.

#### **Devotionalism**

Given the scope of this chapter and its attempt to encapsulate and theorize a vast and discursive genre, I begin by offering a perspective through which to examine musical devotionalism, especially regarding the complexities of its vernacularized, liminal, and interventional qualities within and beyond the representative boundaries of religious song.

Grasping some sense of the bōyāti artist’s performance in bicār gān must begin with recognizing the remarkable multivalence of their musical practice. The more this orientation is established, the more the bōyāti artist’s role as a standard torchbearer of devotional performance is complicated. For example, while bōyāti artists are largely situated at the mausoleums of Sufi saints, they are not exactly shrine functionaries that perform predetermined musical roles in rituals. Instead, shrine committee members operate more like impresarios, and bōyāti artists like independent contractors, with both groups interacting through mutually advantageous terms. Thus, while the bōyāti is performing a devotional service, it is not strongly delineated by some prestigious tradition of hereditary shrine singing and the associated customs or practices that such a phenomenon might entail. On the contrary, it is always already open-ended in its conventionalized performance style, relying more on the interplay of broader devotional impressions to suggest a connection or severance from perceived formalities. Furthermore, bōyāti artists are neither definitively pedigreed musicians nor sole guardians of the material which they perform, which itself invites a reexamination of the manner in which such specialists of music have been historically understood in South Asian contexts through various systems of patronage, and how associated notions of mastery, agency and production have been critically recognized through the infrastructure of a traditional feudal service or its residual consequences (Neuman 1990, Miller 1992, Qureshi 2002, Piliavsky 2014).

The puzzling topic of shrines as venues in Bangladesh will be further elaborated in Chapter Five but, suffice to say, this relationship already questions the very nature of devotional performance because it conflates two distinctive spaces for a contemporary musical

devotionalism: the shrine as pilgrimage site and the devotional music market.<sup>1</sup> As such, Bangladeshi shrines are themselves not only reflective of the various coteries of religious ideologies that coexist amongst Bengali Muslims but, in many cases, these venerated edifices also allow for a type of creativity and experimentation that might otherwise only be possible in the severed space of the studio. Ultimately, there are many aspects to the relationship between singers and shrines or studios, which in no way simplifies the obstacles that a *bôyāti* artist must confront in building a successful career across these platforms, but this alliance nonetheless weakens the validity of the longstanding tradition of scholarship that has exclusively examined devotional music through religious practice—and especially religious song—or has treated the parameters of shrine and studio as mutually exclusive domains in South Asia. For *bôyāti* artists and the traditional sponsorship of *bicār gān*, the performance of devotionalism and an economy of devotion casually operate in a shared space.

For now, the topic of shrines and commodified sound has been raised to simply draw attention to the fact that devotionalism in the context of *bicār gān*, while clearly informed by both an endorsed artistic specialization and the legacies of sacred locales, is more fundamentally governed by something else, something more stage-centered and mercurial in nature. This type of devotionalism encompasses several pertinent features. Firstly, it is centered around a certain style of musical navigation, a larger performance process which focuses on the transitional exchange of ideas in the devotional moment. The venerated elements of its repertoire are not just situated in panegyric song canons and sacred litanies themselves, but strikingly rely on the

---

<sup>1</sup> Commodified recordings of *bicār gān*, while sonically distinctive from an audio perspective, are often seen as extensions of shrine performance and not stark alternatives to them. For example, VCDs of *bicār gān* are often shot in a mock-shrine setting, or intersperse videos of *bôyāti* artists performing in the studio with reactionary shots of live audiences at unrelated shrine performances. See epilogue for more discussion on this topic.

shared reception history of compositions through a collection of evocative melodic and rhythmic motifs, as well as the independent devotional parlances of authors and their related hagiographical potencies, thus expanding the very parameters of a perceived devotionism. At the core of this endeavor is the atmospheric interplay of voice, melody, media, affect, and listeners' experiences, the sonic incitement of devotional sensations that are often difficult to summarize in a single expression (Eisenlohr 2018).

Secondly, this musical devotionism is cherished—by those who perform it and participate in it—as deeply immersed in the regional pride of Bangladeshis, which itself is tied to longstanding celebrations of decentralized landscape that symbolize an inherent aspect of Bengali Muslim-ness. Vernacular variation is itself a complex process in which activities regarded as regional engage with notions of what is distant, incongruous, or temporally removed (Munn 1990, Babiracki 1991, Slobin 1992, Appadurai 1997, Tsing 2000, Herzfeld 2004, Abel 2008, Wolf 2009, Bohlman 2013). Bangladeshi regionality represents a living repository of pieties situated within a heritage of “removals,” a playing field of devotional abstractions where broader cultural angsts have been catalyzed by states, policies, campaigns, and revivals that have redefined religious boundaries over milieux. The insular roots of Bengali Islam not only developed in the agrarian frontier, but was subsequently cherished as the birthplace of autochthonous discourse on Bengali Islam which existed beyond the intellectual margins of an urban Hindu reform. As such, it has strikingly retained poignancy as a site for the devotional imaginary in succeeding generations—from premodern conjectural mystics to fin de siècle reformists to underground political extremists—and has therefore been repeatedly recognized as

an influential nexus of discrete provincialities where various streams of religiosity might be challenged, reexamined, or set into motion.

Thirdly, this musical devotionism is not simply understood to be unapologetic or primordial in tone, but one which subtly mediates concurrent and conflicting notions of piety. Bangladeshi Islam today represents a religious prism where traditional Sufi institutions and their cultural contributions are neither fully endorsed nor fully repudiated in popular discourse. Shrine conveners and singers alike recognize the increasing dubiousness of Sufi authority in contemporary Bangladesh, which has been complicated by a range of shrine cultures both inside and outside the domain of state sponsorship, socioeconomic incentives that have elevated self-empowerment amongst the middle class through their subsequent and newfangled embracement of Muslim-ness, and a globally-supported Muslim propriety singularly based on hajj-centered pilgrimage in the Arabian Peninsula. Accordingly, in *bôyāti* performances at Bangladeshi shrines today, the Sufi notion of saintly intercession is somewhat trivialized, and is overridden by a stronger emphasis on the sonic intercessions of musical and nonmusical materials on stage. Delicately deflecting a corporeal sacredness, this performative material itself represents the devotional act, while the singer and shrine are the conduits for its sublimation.

## **PART ONE**

### **Bicār Gān**

Today, *bôyāti* artists engage in a popular style of performance known *bicār gān* (songs of deliberation) a polemically-driven genre of song and narrative recitation, largely staged in the improvised and open-air spaces of certain Sufi shrines in Bangladesh. Funded by mausoleum committees (Bengali: *kômiṭi* or *sôṅsthā*), regulated by communal judges (*bicārôk*), and enjoyed

by both aesthetes (*rôsik*) and random wayfarers (*jātrī*), the format of *bicār gān* allows two bôyāti musicians alternatively to take the stage and partake in a dialectical (*d̄andômūlôk*) display of artistry. Each bôyāti is assigned to a particular angle (*pôkhhô*) of a rhetorical argument, based on a prearranged and binary topic of discourse (*biṣoy*) that is performed through a series of alternate sessions on stage (*pālā*).<sup>2</sup>



Figure 3.1. Some common binary templates in *bicār gān*, as displayed on VCD covers. Top row, from right: Adam vs. Satan, Guru vs. Disciple, Death vs. Resurrection, Hindu vs. Muslim, and Khwājā Mu'īn al-Dīn Chishtī (1142–1236) vs. 'Abd al-Qadir Jilānī (1078–1166). Bottom row, from right: Lālōn (d. 1890) vs. Sirāj, Mother vs. Son, Woman vs. Man, Radha vs. Krishna, and Living vs. Dead.<sup>3</sup>

### Musical Components of Bicār Gān

The enthusiasts of *bicār gān* often refer to the creative navigation through song, music, imagery, legacy, gesture and listening as inducing *morākābā* (Arabic: *murāqabah*, meaning “to watch over” or “keep an eye on”), implying a sense of euphoria induced by meditation in which the seeker develops a deep “awareness” of the spiritual heart and, through it, knowledge of the

<sup>2</sup> The term *pālā* (“episode”) can sometimes refer to both the broader subject of the debate in a *bicār gān* performance (*biṣoy*), as in the *pālā Hindu vs. Muslim*, or each “turn” in the performance as the two bôyāti artists alternate on stage, as in the *fourth pālā* was performed by Shirin Dewan.

<sup>3</sup> See epilogue for a discussion of *bicār gān* as a commodified performance.

beloved. Thus, the concept of *morākābā* in *bicār gān* extends this classic Sufi appellation to correlate a mystical “condition” (Arabic: *ḥāl*<sup>4</sup>), or musical “sentiment” (Bengali: *bhāb*), that delight audiences and participants in the staged debate.<sup>5</sup> This is achieved in a number of ways, including the devotionalization of a particular performance moment by drawing figurative and apposite analogies with the miraculous legacies (*kerāmôt*) of saint-composers (*ḥadōkōrtā-s*, literally “verse-makers”) that dominate the song repertoire of *bicār gān*. Musically, *bōyāti* artists sound this extempore devotionalism by tuning such compositions to endless and nuanced permutations which cleverly amalgamate distinct and truncated melodic motifs (*sur*) and stock rhythmic patterns (*ṭhekā*), each with sonic allusions of their own. In addition, the *bōyāti* fortifies his or her own unique compositions—thrown into the polemical mix—by referencing these afore-mentioned conventional poets and their works through an extraction and “stringing together” (*mālā gāṭhā*) of their memorable song imageries (*chāyā*)—which are also enhanced by fanciful interconnections of authorship conjured through a literary device known as *bhōṇita*, the

---

<sup>4</sup> The word *ḥāl* (Arabic: “condition”) is a special-purpose state of consciousness generally understood to be the product of a Sufi ascetic’s spiritual practices. In traditional Sufi metaphysical discourse, *ḥāl* is by nature considered transient and not a prolonged experience. Since the idea of *ḥāl* is also understood to be a gift from God, there is nothing on the part of human beings that can be done to ensure that it is granted, man is merely the receiver. Yet, man also cannot do anything to avoid experiencing these special states (Schimmel 1975). Further, no prerequisites are determined for man to receive any particular *ḥāl* since the unindoctrinated occasionally experience such states, when granted by God. The explanation given for this phenomenon clarifies that there is an overabundance of divine grace and, thus, *ḥāl* must necessarily come into contact with nonbelievers or ordinary people at times (Nasr 2007). Ultimately, the idea of *ḥāl* is different from *maqām*, “stations” of enlightenment in Sufi terminology, which are only attained through rigorous spiritual practice. In addition, once one has achieved a particular *maqām*, he or she remains in that station until moving on to a higher plane, thus making the mystical navigation a more permanent and progressive one than any particular *ḥāl*, which is capricious, indiscriminate, temporal and sometimes irredeemable. There are many classically-defined states of *ḥāl*, including *qurb* (nearness), *wajd* (ecstasy), *sukr* (intoxication), and *wudd* (intimacy), though *murāqabah* is traditionally regarded as an initial station, in which the receiver first experiences the divine’s presence (Sells 1996). The idea of *ḥāl*, and especially *murāqabah*, seems particularly suited for the precipitous and transmutable inclusion of various compositions and their affect in *bicār gān*.

<sup>5</sup>Outside the realm of Sufism, the term *ḥāl* is used more generally in Arabic and Persian to describe any positive experience that transcends reality. In this sense, such states are not necessarily linked with a divine experience or encounter, and they are always desired states (Nasr 1972).

inclusion of the poet's signature *nom de plume* in the final line of song text. These individual musical elements will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

### **Songs of Bhāb: A Canonic Base**

In order to begin scrutinizing a *bôyāti* artist's "bag of tricks," it is important first to situate the evolution of canonic materials which critically govern song choice and supplemental discourse in a *bicār gān* performance, and the nature of their poetic leverage. In the larger network of *bāul* communities, a common distinction is made between those *bāul* practitioners that sing or perform pleasingly (Bengali: *ḥilpī*, or "artist" *bāul*-s) and those that possess deep knowledge of *bāul* practice (*sādhôk*, or "practitioner" *bāul*-s). In general, a *bāul* is one or the other and typically not both. Therefore, if a *sādhôk* *bāul* is also a composer of original songs, he or she may not be ideally suited to sing them. Inversely, the most talented *ḥilpī* *bāul*-s are not necessary song composers themselves, or have the ability to offer insight into the deeper meanings of the lyrics. For the legitimate *bôyāti*, one must possess and negotiate both skills. To be sure, each individual *bôyāti* will have a particular penchant that dominates his or her approach to repertoire, yet a *bicār gān* performance puts comparable demands on both poetic and musical dexterity, and the *bôyāti* is therefore compelled to both summon and concoct material in a staged debate that is perceived as both devotional entertainment and a creative "rereading."

Two larger anthologies of songs inform the modern performance repertoire of the *bôyāti*, each an ever-expanding collection of pieces. The first originates in the mid-nineteenth century and from outside of the tradition and across geographical and devotional spaces, representing a body of pieces that have exemplified regionalism through a canonized heritage of nonaligned spiritual personas. The second is rooted in the last century as a body of original compositions by

bôyāti artists themselves, which both draws on the first anthology’s definitiveness as well as treads new devotional ground and consequently aids in expanding dialectical opportunities. Thus, the lyrical material of contemporary bicār gān consists of parallel traditions of localized song composition, the relationships between the two delineating much of the charm of debate performance.

While I will return to the second body of compositions later in this chapter, the first compendium is taken up below. Known broadly as *bhāb sōṅgīt* (songs of sentiment)<sup>6</sup> or sometimes more generally *māṛōmī sōṅgīt* (mystical songs), the canonic base of songs for bicār gān consists of pieces that are widely enjoyed and rendered by various specialized communities of Bengali vernacular performance, including, but not limited to, bôyāti-s. From cerebral or metaphysical discourse to more facetious or self-deprecating observations, the *bhāb sōṅgīt* spectrum offers the bôyāti a vast collection of songs that have fundamentally shaped musical devotionalism in Bengal since the nineteenth century, these compositions ultimately represent archetypal examples than run the gamut of the modern devotional song spectrum in Bengali, embracing all its contradictions in the process. Whimsically moving between a suppositional tone to one of impassioned surrender, *bhāb sōṅgīt* compositions explore such varied topics as unrequited love, aesthetics, cosmological genesis and eschatology, the felicity of simple pleasures, the wonderment of nature, epistemological queries into the psyche, and ethical

---

<sup>6</sup> The Sanskrit term *bhāva* implies “emotion, sentiment, state of body or mind, disposition and character,” while *bhava* implies “being, worldly existence, birth, production, origin” (Musson 1951). The former term is rooted in latter. To correlate, in Bengali, *bhāb* is often correlated with the term *cintā-bhābnā*, referring to a “pondering” or “cogitation,” while *bhōb* refers to the physical world and, by implication, our transient existence in it. Regarding the latter, bôyāti artists will often incorporate imagery in songs which utilize the term *bhōb*, as in *bhōb sāgôr*, the “ocean of the world,” or *bhōb kāṅḍārī*, the “helmsman of the world.” The moniker *bhāb sōṅgīt* might thus imply a microcosm: an inward devotion which is always already examined through larger cosmological issues.

insights into communal strife, gender equality, the consequences of wealth and power, and the struggle to obtain righteousness.

The vast majority of bhāb sōṅgīt poets have not been historically associated with a particular *sampradāy*, or tradition of mysticism within Bengal.<sup>7</sup> Instead, bhāb sōṅgīt draws increasingly casual and experimental connections with the broader imagery of Vaiṣṇava and Sufi traditions in Bengal, as well as the many more indigenous mystical traditions of the region, especially through the bāul tradition and heritage of Lālōn.<sup>8</sup> The bhāb sōṅgīt spectrum is quite indebted to the songs of Lālōn (d. 1890), and contemporary composers still marvel at or strive to emulate something of his poetic style—especially his uncanny ability to compose terse yet eloquent mystical songs—even if they do not associate with Lālōnī asceticism or ritualized bāul practice.

Through a large collection of devotional impressions, bhāb sōṅgīt also represents material by equally diverse selection of *pōdōkōrtā-s*, or saint-composers explicitly situated in the historical and musical expanse of East Bengal or Bangladesh. In conjunction, this “open” compendium has allowed the bōyāti to incorporate the larger regional and devotional modalities embedded in its compositions—which are at once memorable, and thus referable, yet not bound to a particularly institutionalized form of mysticism—and implant them into the specifically trope-driven progressions of their own performances.

---

<sup>7</sup> While many saint-composers of bhāb sōṅgīt were of Muslim descent, it seems evident that their devotional style drew predominantly from their own religious background while not completely beholden to it; bhāb sōṅgīt represents both an exploratory and speculative poetic tradition and one which has been memorialized through standardized Sufi practice in Bengal with regard to hagiography, spiritual preservation and mausoleum culture.

<sup>8</sup> Some of the main saint-composers of the bhāb sōṅgīt continuum include Pagla Kanai (1809–1889) of Jhenaidah, Alif Chand “Alfu Dewan” (1839–1927) and Bhaba Pagla (1902–1984) of Dhaka, Manmohan Datta (1877–1909) of Brahmanbaria, Duddu Shah (1841–1911) of Jessore, Jalaluddin Khan (1894–1972) and Wakeel Munshi (d. 1978) of Netrokona, as well as Radharaman Dutta (1833–1915), Shah Abdul Karim (1916–2009) and Doorbin Shah (1920–1977) of Sunamganj.

## The Poetic Structure of Bhāb Compositions

The lyrics, or *bāñī*, in each section of a particular bhāb sōṅgīt composition, and its internal rhyme scheme, are ultimately determined by its prosodic construction. Yet from a lyrical standpoint, nearly every piece in the bhāb sōṅgīt spectrum is composed around a relatively simple song structure: a slightly modified variation of the strophic form, with a distinctive refrain melody assigned to the opening stanza, and a counter melody assigned to the opening section of each of the three or four subsequent verses (*kōli*). The refrain may contain one line of poetry and a primary chorus (*bōndōnā*), but commonly features a second line and secondary chorus (*ōntōrā*); the second line also functions as the refrain (*dhuwā*<sup>9</sup>) between verses, while the first line is only rendered at the beginning and end of the song, primarily for the sake of completion. In most cases, the melody attached to the last section of each *kōli* (*tān*) is in fact a reiteration of the motivic shape of the *ōntōrā*, which allows for a cadential return to the *bōndōnā* (which, in between verses, is known as *dhuwā*). Finally, while the last verse is musically identical to previous ones, it will conventionally contain a *bhōñita*, the inclusion of the poet's signature nom de plume or literary alias, serving as a specialized coda which poetically encapsulates the general theme of the song and divulges its authorship.

Given its modest poetic length, uncomplicated metrical scheme, organic layout and readily deconstructive melodic constitution, a bhāb sōṅgīt composition is not particularly difficult to tune or retune, yet the possibilities for arrangement are seemingly endless. This performance feature, combined with its pithy and subversive lyricism concerning a sundry

---

<sup>9</sup> The word *dhuwā* traditionally refers to a short and more generic dialectical song form—known as *dhuwā gān*—which might even be considered an important genre forerunner to the more elaborate oppositional stylings of *kōbigān* and *bicār gān*. However, as seen here, *bōyāti* artists often use the word *dhuwā* to differentiate melodic contours which commingle in the compositional format of the staged debate.

<u>Song Lyric</u>	<u>Rhyme Scheme</u>	<u>Song Section</u>	<u>Motif</u>
chorus <i>thākte mānuṣ cene nā re</i> <i>dūr dūr kōre tāṛāi tāre</i>	A <sup>1</sup> A <sup>2</sup>	bōndōnā ōntōrā	primary chorus secondary chorus
verse 1 <i>sārthe re kōre kōrtār ādōr</i> <i>sārthō feṣe kōrtā bādōr</i> <i>tākhōn gōlāy diyē reḥmi cādōr</i> <i>ṭhōṇṭhōne bābu e bājare</i>	B B B A <sup>2</sup>	kōli  tān	verse melody  recapitulation of secondary chorus
refrain <i>thākte mānuṣ cene nā re</i>	A <sup>1</sup>	dhuwā	recapitulation of primary chorus
verse 2 <i>tumi āmi unāner chāi</i> <i>āj āchi to kāl nāi</i> <i>e je pōcā deher emni bōrāi</i> <i>durgōndhō chōṛāy sūtikāgāre</i>	C C C A <sup>2</sup>	kōli  tān	verse melody  recapitulation of secondary chorus
refrain <i>thākte mānuṣ cene nā re</i>	A <sup>1</sup>	dhuwā	recapitulation of primary chorus
verse 3 <i>bhōbā pāglar* kōrtāgiri</i> <i>o go e nōy bhōbār bāhāduri</i> <i>āmāy cālāy cōli sāin kāṇḍāri</i> <i>e pāre ār o pāre</i>	D D D A <sup>2</sup>	kōli  tān	verse melody  recapitulation of secondary chorus
chorus <i>thākte mānuṣ cene nā re</i> <i>dūr dūr kōre tāṛāi tāre</i>	A <sup>1</sup> A <sup>2</sup>	bōndōnā ōntōrā	primary chorus secondary chorus

\**bhōṇita* (nom de plume), this song is composed by Bhoba Pagla (1902–1984)

**Table 3.1. The strophic form of the *bhāb sōṅgīt* composition *thākte mānuṣ cene nā re*, with rhyme scheme, song sections, and motifs.**

collection of spiritual and mundane topics, structurally validates its perennial and diversified charm. At once accessible, yet highly interpretive, the materials of *bhāb sōṅgīt* comprise the foundation building blocks of *bōyāti* musicianship, laying the sonic groundwork for the conjoining debate face-off.

### **Hegemonies, Subversion, and the Sublime**

The *bhāb sōṅgīt* compendium is a modern one with venerable dimensions, and this is an important facet of its significance. The following three sections examine the social climate from which the tradition *bhāb sōṅgīt* emerges, beginning with a politics of mysticism that is

significantly articulated in late colonial Bengal. The collective endeavors of bhāb sōṅgīt composers easily draws parallels with the historically-pervasive Bhakti movements of South Asia, which were most active between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>10</sup> However, the qualities of its song-centered tradition essentially began to flourish in the early nineteenth century, marking its entrance in the era of colonial Bengal.

The compositional groundwork of bhāb sōṅgīt can be viewed as a more grassroots and vernacular articulation of concurrent bourgeois pursuits in socioreligious reform, emancipatory discourse, and literary refashioning paramount to fin-de-siècle Bengali-ness, and was partially in reaction to its resulting inaccessibility and misalignment with the affairs of everyday Bengalis in quotidian spaces. Yet, as colonialism rapidly transformed traditional centers of authority through the spheres of social, economic, cultural and political institutions, bhāb sōṅgīt emerged as a distinctively regional variety of devotionism—informed by alternative positionalities within the mechanisms of the colonial enterprise, and set into motion by the novel musical contributions of Lālôn—allowed for this burgeoning tradition to particularly germinate in the provincial expanse of East Bengal, neither fully ashṛāf nor non-ashṛāf in lineage,<sup>11</sup> where it gained prominence amongst fakirs and sadhus who instinctively embodied its parochial candor and proletarian spirituality.

---

<sup>10</sup> The Bhakti movement regionally developed around deities of different traditions, including Vaishnavism (Vishnu), Shaivism (Shiva), Shaktism (Shakti goddesses) and Smartism (a Hindu synthesis of four philosophical strands: Mīmāṃsā, Advaita, Yoga and theism). The movement was inspired by many poet-saints, who championed a wide range of philosophical positions, and has traditionally been considered an influential vehicle for social reformation, especially in Hinduism, which provided an individual-focused and alternative path to spirituality regardless of one's caste of birth or gender. Other scholars suggest that the Bhakti movement was less a rebellion or reform than a revival, reworking and re-contextualization of ancient Vedic traditions (Nice 1989, Pollock 2006, Guy 2001, Pechilis 1999). This viewpoint is rather insightful, especially when considering that the nature of bōyāti musicality and their accompanying repertoire as parallel entities, which similarly coexist as a reprocessing of prevailing material packaged through novel exposition.

<sup>11</sup> See Chapter One's discussion of premodern social structures in Muslim Bengal.

During the colonial era, the location of the marketplace became a critical locus of struggle, as the British Company sought “to undertake a progressive conquest of markets, a systematic effort to regulate, control and more effectively administer key economic and political focal points” (Sen: 229). Further, as Ranajit Guha has shown in his study of peasant resistance in colonial Bengal, the market was a special site of criticism and subversion, a regular gathering place where the lower classes could speak out and criticize the dominant order in a potentially threatening environment (1983). Hugh B. Urban’s work on the enigmatic *kartābhajā* sect in late colonial Bengal, which he calls “mystic romantics,” suggests that this community’s largely unstudied collection of sacred songs, known as *bhāver gīta*,<sup>12</sup> represents a type of counter-renaissance song tradition that can be juxtaposed with the modernist proclivities of Kolkata’s upper classes in that era.<sup>13</sup> Just as scholars of European history have discussed a darker underworld of renaissance discourse that gravitated toward “magic, occultism, and irrational forces which went against the grain of rationalism, science and social progress” (Haydn 1960, Kinsman 1974), Urban suggests that *kartābhajā* saint-composers popularized and democratized fashionable ideals of the monotheistic and elitist-motivated Brahma Samaj reformation in Bengal—including a universal, non-sectarian, caste-free liberality—and transferred them to new

---

<sup>12</sup> The songs of *bhāver gīta* (or *bhāber gīta*) were composed sometime between 1825 and 1870 (Maity 1989). Etymologically, the moniker *bhāber gīta* is ultimately synonymous with *bhāb sōṅgīt*, the latter compositional tradition broadly appears around the time that the former begins to experience a decline in popularity. The tradition of *bhāb sōṅgīt* is thus indebted to *bhāber gīta*, especially through the stylistic parameters of its metaphorical content, but *bhāb sōṅgīt* is significantly different in its standardized song format, its specialized geographical area of compositional prominence in East Bengal, and its aloofness regarding the ideological confines of a particular sect or occult practice.

<sup>13</sup> The *kartābhajā* (literally, “Worshippers of the Masters”) community is largely considered to have been founded by the semi-legendary ascetic Ālcād (1686–1769), who is popularly said to have been “Śrī Caitanya in the disguise of a Muslim fakir” (Urban 2003); the *kartābhajā* community is perhaps the most important late-colonial branch of the Sahajiyā tradition, certainly a final vestige of that tradition in the imperialist milieu, which carried over from the traditions of premodern and early modern Bengali mysticism.

extremes designed for lower class absorption and enjoyment.<sup>14</sup> In particular, Urban argues that kartābhajā songs “make extensive use of mercantile imagery and economic discourse, the language of commerce, market exchange and even regulatory terminology used by the British East India Company, to produce their own esoteric code language” (2003: 507).<sup>15</sup> Thus, in bhāver gīta, we find direct borrowings of English words such as *invoice*, *contract*, *platoon*, *company* and *money*, as well as Perso-Arabic and Bengali-derived ones such as clerk (*mutasaddī*), scribe (*munṣī*), treasurer (*bhāṇḍāri*), moneylender (*mōhājōn*) and middleman (*dālāl*) to arcanelly describe metaphysical tenets through a subversive and satirical appropriation of colonial and bourgeois undertakings.

The bhāb sōṅgīt spectrum, while continuing to incorporate similarly non-devotional language into a metaphysically-centered song tradition, expanded the concept of embracing and realigning both ostensibly modern figurative language with enduring parochial ones and, in doing so, did not simply construct a searing or inversive commentary of the ventures of a foreign monarchy or domestic aristocracy, but one that altogether deflected attention away from the hegemonic sociopolitical nexus west of the Padma River, that of a predominantly Hindu and decisively West Bengali domain. As such, the bhāb sōṅgīt spectrum represents a creative outpouring discreetly shaped by the many styles of song and poem that have flourished in East

---

<sup>14</sup> According to Urban, at the height of their power, the kartābhajā community was a group not unlike the bāul community, or the Vaiṣṇava-Sahajiyā community, and perhaps more numerous and powerful. The reason for their eventual decline is a matter of conjecture, but it seems plausible to believe that the kartābhajā community did not so much disappear as become engulfed by other increasingly prevalent mystical-esoteric coteries of early twentieth-century Bengal, many of which began as sub-traditions within or parallel to the kartābhajā tradition and grew exponentially as its original community of leaders—*guru-s*, *mōhājōy-s* (hosts) and *bārātī-s* (guests or entourages)—splintered and dissipated (2003: 203).

<sup>15</sup> The use of mercantile imagery is certainly not without precedent in the world of Bengali literature and song—in the fifteenth-century Caṇḍimaṅgal folk deity eulogies, in Rāmprasād Sen’s (ca. 1718 or 1723–1775) hymns to the goddess Kālī, and in certain Vaiṣṇava devotional texts, money-lending, taxation and trade have often been used to express transactions and exchanges of mortal life; the *kartābhajā* community, however, seems to have used this type of economically-situated much more extensively.

Bengal. Rather than extreme sublimation, its thematic objectives are much more steeped in quotidian regionality, and through it a rustic liminality. While its poetic and musical development is not tied to the infrastructural workings of a specific geographical or metropolitan center, or a particular clique of renegade mystics, its composers do accentuate an expansive class of independent sadhu-lyricists exploring a speculative otherness borne in upon the partition politics and disparate religious movements which have informed the region's ideological landscape for centuries. Yet, the saint-composers of bhāb sōṅgīt have at heart remained politically dispassionate and, perhaps partially as a result, most have also undergone a somewhat cloistered poetic life, in many cases only experiencing posthumous popularity, but this predicament has also left an indelible space for bhāb sōṅgīt to formulate in a somewhat neutral but creative middle ground.

### **Partition, Regional Poets, and the Othering of Space**

The following section looks at the particular sociopolitical predicaments of both Bengals in the era of the 1971 Liberation War, focusing on how a profound reconfiguration of space affected the subsequent memorialization of its regional song heritages on either side of the border. In time, the two partitions of Bengal in the twentieth century, and the ultimate indifference to these partitions in later generations of Bangladeshis, reassessed the legacy of bhāb sōṅgīt through a different set of terms. This was further compounded by a tertiary remolding of East Bengal into Bangladesh, the ramifications of which placed a much stronger emphasis the memorialization of the 1971 struggle for statehood, and the humanism and ethnolinguistic pride which informed such sentiment.

On the other side of the political trajectory—in West Bengal in the 1970s and 1980s—severe power shortages, strikes, and a violent Naxalite movement<sup>16</sup> damaged much of the state's infrastructure, leading to a period of economic stagnation, coupled with the influx of millions of East Bengali refugees to West Bengal, causing significant strains on its resources (Banerjee 1984). West Bengali politics underwent a major change when the Left Front won the 1977 assembly election, defeating the incumbent Indian National Congress. The Left Front, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), governed the state for the next three decades. Ultimately, devotional song and its rhetoric have been so critical to supplementing and giving cadence to the objectives and moral imperatives of Bengal states, yet are also reflective of its discrete modern histories that critically escalated in the waning years of colonial dominion and transmuted through a series of pivotal border negotiations in the twentieth century.

The film *Mohun Baganer Meye* (1976) is a Bengali sports film that is situated in the famous rivalry between two distinguished football clubs, Mohun Bagan and East Bengal, in an annual and intensely-followed match known as the Kolkata Derby.<sup>17</sup> In the film, a father, played by Utpal Dutt (1929–1993), creates increasing family tension when he demands that his daughter-in-law must be a Mohun Bagan supporter. While the two leagues were historically known to have engaged in friendly competition, team supporters became increasingly hostile toward one another in the liberation era of Bangladesh, as an influx of mostly Hindu refugees

---

<sup>16</sup> A Naxal or Naxalite is a member of the Communist Party of India (Maoist). The term *Naxal* derives from the name of the village Naxalbari in West Bengal, where the movement had its origin. Initially the movement was thus centered in West Bengal. In later years, it spread into less developed areas of rural southern and eastern India (Dasgupta 1974).

<sup>17</sup> In some ways, the growing tensions and rowdiness of fans could be likened to a similar football hooliganism amongst British fans in the 1970s and 1980s, which was not simply attributed to juvenile delinquency and ritualized male violence, but also developed from a number of factors relating to interaction, identity, legitimacy and power in the political and cultural backdrop of British society in that decade (Dunning 2002).

fleeing the conflict resettled in West Bengal. Beginning as an émigré crisis, and leading to widespread communal riots and economic stagnation on both sides of the border, the growing antagonism which mushroomed from this displacement was notably exemplified in soccer team allegiances, as Mohun Bagan supporters and members were proudly *ghôṭi*<sup>18</sup> (those whose ancestral home were firmly in West Bengal) and the constituencies of the East Bengal team who were unapologetically known as *bāṅgāl*. The *ghôṭi*-*bāṅgāl* divide, in the Bengali psyche, continues to be unique in its social expression of the perceived cultural superiority, or inferiority, of one group over another. For example, a *ghôṭi* is often perceived as risk-adverse, conniving, stingy and pretentious, while a *bāṅgāl* is awkward, uncouth, rowdy and felonious, and this divide is further distinguished by other sociocultural markers—including language inflection, clothing and cuisine—that still exist today.

Partition historiography in South Asia has not only been prejudiced from the standpoint of its regional focus (the Punjab and India-Pakistan relations), but with regard to its central themes situated in the high politics debate, which is to say those issues that are vital to the very survival of the state, and namely national and international security concerns. The historian Joya Chatterji's work *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967* (2007), however, offers critical insight into the Bengal partition of the postcolonial era at a more complexly intimate level, mainly through the instigations and ultimate disappointments of the Hindu *bhadrōlok*, the privileged “gentlefolk” class that emerged until British imperialism, and their seminal involvement in the splitting of Bengal. Unlike the 1905 partition of Bengal, which occurred

---

<sup>18</sup> The term *ghôṭi*, referring to a small pitcher or pot, was apparently named as such because of its resemblance to the Kolkata Derby trophy. However, others have claimed that the terms *ghôṭi* and *bāṅgāl* were in use long before their athletic association, but were exacerbated by large-scale population shifts which molded their connotations into more modern distinctions (Chakrabarty 2004).

under British governance and was rescinded in large part due to bhadrôlok opposition, Chatterji argues that the bhadrôlok “believed this [new] partition would lead them out of the wilderness [of independence] and deliver them from the tyranny of a Muslim majority . . . by creating the small, manageable, Hindu-dominated state of West Bengal inside independent India—to restore a lost golden age of . . . power and influence.” Unlike the Punjab, Bengal escaped the “specter of violence to a great extent, but failed to anticipate or facilitate the rehabilitation of refugees that disintegrated the [bhadrôlok] dream” (140).

Critically, the ghôṭi-bāṅgāl distinction is very much reflective of the demographics and history of the modern Bengali population in West Bengal. This distinction is made along cultural lines delineated by geographical roots, not by religious identity, and in fact both the ghôṭi and bāṅgāl communities of West Bengal are primarily Hindu. Conversely, the ghôṭi population in Bangladesh, who are inversely Muslims that originated in West Bengal, are not perceived as ghôṭi by Bangladeshis, and in fact these two terms are seldom heard in contemporary Bangladeshi context. The expatriate ghôṭi population, contrarily, integrated more readily into the larger and formulating structures of life in East Pakistan and, later, in post-liberation Bangladesh, particularly through the camaraderie of the Language Movement and its inclusively Bengali-centered platform in the fifties and sixties. This is not to say that Bangladesh was not substantially affected by partition (as influential Hindu masses obviously fled its borders), or did not experience major political or sociocultural upheavals in the decades that followed statehood (such as the mismanagement of ecological disasters and the spiraling nepotism of its own political arena), but that the experience of partition was sentimentalized differently in the other Bengal, certainly less informed by the political quandary of a West-East bifurcation, and instead

remembered fondly by the willing relocation of its foreign Bengali settlers who envisioned opportunities in a new but familiar land,<sup>19</sup> and the unwavering promise that horrendous warfare and genocide aroused during another reshaping of its borders in 1971. On the one hand, the solemnity of contemporary Bangladeshi patriotism has trivialized its 1947 partition from India, a fact which can be discerned by Bangladeshi indifference to Indian Independence Day on August 15, which instead is memorialized as the assassination of its founding father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920–1975) on the same date decades later. On the other, while this solemnity is clearly marked by the grave injustices of the Pakistani regime, it is concomitantly consummated and made meaningful through a sense of regional pride, which collectively binds the less homogenized contours of Bangladeshi nationalism under the rubric of invariable geography rather than a tendentious attention to populace encroachment therein.<sup>20</sup> When two Bangladeshis first meet, rather than determining whether one is a *ghôṭi* or *bāngāl*, they are greeted with the question *āpnār defer bāri kôthāy*, literally “what country are you from?”, the

---

<sup>19</sup> Joya Chatterji’s work, however, also reflects on the residual Muslim minority in West Bengal, which is substantial but, as she claims, were at the time too economically immobilized to afford the cost of migration to Bangladesh. On the other hand, she argues, the vast majority of Hindus fleeing East Bengal were of middle or lower class, but possessed enough skill and determination, much to the chagrin of their adversaries, to become leading members of a generation of artists, intellectuals, politicians and writers (2007). Ultimately, both groups successfully integrated into the societies that they entered, but over fairly different trajectories circumstances. After decades of mistrust, *ghôṭi-bāngāl* marital union is now exceedingly common in West Bengal, and has given birth to the cheeky portmanteau *bāṭi* (literally “bowl”).

<sup>20</sup> The three-part docuseries *India’s Frontier Railways* (2005) examines the reopening of the Maitree Express, the first modern passenger train service connecting Kolkata and Dhaka, built forty-years later on the track structure that once existed between the two regions before the partition of India (in 2017 a second service, the Bandhan Express, was inaugurated to connect Kolkata with the Bangladeshi city of Khulna, recreating the previous Barisal Express route, first launched in 1844) (Gautama 2012). The film explores the lives of passengers who regularly ride these historical routes that have reconnected families, cultures and history. In doing so, the train service has allowed Bengalis raised in one region but living in another to differentiate ideas of Bengali-ness. A particular theme that is explored in the episode suggests that Bangladeshis living in West Bengal have a stronger desire to maintain contact with their specific territorial roots in Dhaka or an ancestral region of Bangladesh, even if they were not raised there or have obligations to residual family or property.

insinuation being that every region of Bangladesh is its own country, and yet part of a “greater” country.

Given this backdrop, it is necessarily to mention that more modern researchers and collectors of folk music in West Bengal with particular interests in East Bengal have tended to approach bhāb sōṅgīt quite selectively. For example, the avid folk song collector Kali Dasgupta (1926–2005) was profoundly influenced by the leftist protest campaigns that emerged in West Bengal in the forties and fifties,<sup>21</sup> and also by concurrent politically-centered performance artists in England, especially the singer-playwright-labor activist Ewan MacColl (1915–1989). As a result, Dasgupta’s engagement with East Bengali folk music (and a broader area of East India) is entirely focused on the plebeian struggles within folk songs—for example, the everyday toils of tea plantations workers and impoverished families endangered by river erosion—which ultimately shaped his adherence to a compositional anonymity that excluded or else trivialized the legacy of bhāb sōṅgīt saint-composers. More recently, Kalikaprasad Bhattacharya (1970–2017) has mobilized a resurgence of interest in East Bengali folk music in Kolkata, but one that, in his case, was nostalgically focused on Sylhet in western Bangladesh, by means of his original ancestral home in the adjacent and Bengali-dominated region of the Barak Valley in South Assam.

### **Post-Independence Reclamations of Sufi Heritage**

This final section on the compositional heritage of canonic poets seeks to complicate the manner in which a state-sponsored and post-liberation sense of regionalism in the formative years of Bangladesh’s history ironically side-stepped the legacies of bhāb sōṅgīt saint-

---

<sup>21</sup> Salil Chowdhury (1922–1995) was a leading Bengali Indian music composer, lyricist, writer and singer whose early career left an indelible mark on the sound of leftist-leaning studio-based musicians of the era.

composers, further situating their liminality in the shadow of more amicable Sufi personas and mausoleums associated with East Bengal's antiquities.

For all its regional glory, the cultural groundwork laid in the formative years of Bangladesh's evolution primarily recognized bhāb sōṅgīt through the figure of Lālōn. With few examples until recently, definitive editions of bhāb sōṅgīt poets, or analyses of their poetic or musical style, have been quite rare. This can easily be contrasted with, since the 1960s, copious works of Bangladeshi littérateurs who have been engrossed in deconstructing or anthologizing Lālōn's poetic genius, but only tangentially with the architects of bhāb sōṅgīt (Mansooruddin 1948, Abu Rushd 1964, Debdas 1997, Dasgupta 2000, Solomon, Cantú and Zakaria 2017). While Lālōn's creative output clearly inspired the stylings of bhāb sōṅgīt saint-composers, they remained ideologically unassociated with his subsequent socio-mythical construction, and thus their marginal identity was further peripheralized.

In some ways, the Bangladeshi government faced the dilemma of concretely commemorating the regional and often remote spaces of the nation's heritage—particularly through the less tangible legacies of bhāb sōṅgīt saint-composers—in its endeavor to champion an image that symbolically imbibed its native ethos and projected an outward likeness as it garnered relationships with nation-states in South Asia and beyond.<sup>22</sup> Lālōn's residual fame, however, exemplified both a Bangladeshi mystic headquartered within her borders, and one with historical connections in a centrally-situated region of undivided Bengal that was more widely

---

<sup>22</sup> The latter became increasingly relevant as Bangladesh transitioned from chiefly exporting jute to a major competitor in the global garment industry, particularly through its beneficial agreement with the Multi Fibre Arrangement, which governed the world trade of textiles from 1974 to 2004, and as Bangladesh became a crucial member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), a geopolitical union of nations in South Asia founded in Dhaka in 1985, which maintains permanent diplomatic relations at the United Nations and links with multilateral entities such as the European Union (Qadri 2008). This, in combination with the country's robust NGO sector, has helped produced not only thriving and sustainable—but inclusive—economic growth.

recognized, particularly through Rabindranath Tagore, and even American counterculture figures like Allen Ginsburg (1926–1997)<sup>23</sup> who took interest in Lālôn’s poetic sublimation. As such, Lālôn’s shrine, or *ākhrā*, has been partially funded, expanded and maintained by the government over the decades.

Internally, the spaces of piety and politics in Bangladesh would create further complications and, in the 1990s, despite hitherto never officially being an Islamic republic, the nation witnessed the emergence of Islamic politics in parliament, aided by both a short period of military rule and a succeeding rise in power of oppositional parties. This administrative change additionally brought a significant reintroduction of Islamic symbols in public life, which were seen as the emblematic accoutrements of social change, made additionally visible from the inflow of global ideas of Islamic decorum brought back by migrants from the Arab Gulf states, and further fostered by a growing working class at home that wished to embrace a new Islamic propriety which affirmed their modernity and relevance in both moral and spiritual terms (Banu 1992, Riyaz 2004).

More recently, certain shrines in Bangladesh have not only been nationally celebrated as sacred spaces within the country’s regional expanse, but also as historical landmarks detached from current political connotations or, ironically, grass-roots Islamic piety. For instance, the Dacca International Airport<sup>24</sup> became known as the Zia International Airport in the early 80s, after a structural redesign was instigated by then-president Ziaur Rahman (1936–1981), who was

---

<sup>23</sup> Ginsburg’s poem *After Lalon* very much reflected his quirky, irreverent ethos, and inspired a generation of everyday Americans to explore South Asian traditions. Further, his legendary poem *September on Jessore Road* is set in the Bangladesh Liberation War, after he visited refugee camps and witnessed the plight of those fleeing violence and disenfranchisement (Ginsberg 1974).

<sup>24</sup> In 1983, the Government of Bangladesh officially changed the spelling of the city’s name from the anglicized Dacca to the more phonetically-inspired Dhaka (Choguill 1987).

assassinated before its completion. When an oppositional form of government, led by the original and founding Awami League party, regained power in the 90s, the airport's name was changed to Shahjajal International Airport, in honor of Shāh Jalāl al-Dīn al-Mujarrad (1271–1346), one of Bangladesh's most recognized Sufi saints. The names of regional airports in Bangladesh today follow suit, honoring historically important regional saints that have neither political nor musical affinities in the contemporary cultural climate, including the Khān Jahān 'Alī (d. 1459) airport in Bagherhat, the Shāh Amānat (n.d.) airport in Chittagong, and the Shāh Makhdūm (d. 1313) airport in Rajshahi.

Thus, the mass popularity of bhāb sōṅgīt has been curiously derailed by both literary studies of the luminaries of mystical poetry—as they were aligned with post-Independence Bangladeshi subjectivity regarding indigenous poetic and devotional achievement—further accompanied more recently by imposing premodern saint figures of non-musical legacies whose official shrines have become somber, monolithic markers of regionality through state-sponsored initiatives. In this manner, both bhāb sōṅgīt and Sufi shrine performance have remained localized, yet in many ways just out of the purview of bourgeois or administrative affairs.<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, the voyeuristic positionality of bhāb sōṅgīt saint-composers has allowed them to critically engage outwardly in song with the forces beyond their own poetic world, yet their works have not been fully engulfed by popularist preoccupations with vernacular devotionism, and thus, have co-existed alongside modernists tropes of Bangladesh's devotional imaginary.

---

<sup>25</sup> Other important shrines in Bangladesh have received occasional patronage from various government administrations or particular heads of state, though certainly not recurrently or on the same scale. While these shrines maintain enormous popularity with everyday pilgrims, their heritages are not nearly as connected to Bengali Muslim antiquity, but are rather the shrines of modern-day saint figures of the twentieth century, including Muḥammad Hashmat Allāh “Āṭrōjī Pīr” (in the district of Gopalganj) or the Māijbhāṅḍār shrine complex (in Chittagong). The alliance between the state and Sufi shrines is thus a complicated one, though musical legacy and sainthood have always had a precarious relationship.

Embracing a more visceral side of Bangladesh’s regionality, the legacies of individual poets of *bhāb sōṅgīt* have been commemorated, but not as a collective, or through demarcated associations of genre, schools of thought, or politicized rhetoric. Instead, these saint-composers have flourished in an inarticulate space which, at once, allows for the impact of allusion and authority to be rendered, yet offers pointillistic impressions of devotionism which stimulates the mobility and agency accorded to *bōyāti* artist through their embracement of *bhāb sōṅgīt* compositions.

The connection between the legacies of *bhāb sōṅgīt* saint-composers and the equally complex legacies of regional shrines in Bangladesh is a particularly consequential one.<sup>26</sup> Unlike in West Bengal, where the performance of devotional song has long been attached to time-honored musical festivals or *melā-s*,<sup>27</sup> such festivals are only a recent phenomenon in Bangladesh, where devotional song has been much more critically and symbiotically tied to shrine performance.<sup>28</sup> Some of the most important shrine centers in Bangladesh that have been pivotal centers for both the propagation of *bhāb sōṅgīt* and regional-based Sufism remain significantly attached to liminal yet physical spaces of piety, including the shrines of Shāh Lāl Shāh “Shāhnāl Fakīr” (in the district of Narsingdi), Ghanī Shāh (Brahmanbaria), Bābā ‘Ālam Nūrī al-Sureśwarī (Shariatpur), and Sulaymān Shāh “Leṅṅṅā Pīr” (Patuakhali). Ultimately, the musical repertoire and ceremonial customs associated with these shrines are delicately situated in an ideological expanse in-between, capable of drawing annual crowds of plebeian pilgrims and

---

<sup>26</sup> See Chapter Five for a detailed discussion of *bōyāti* musicality and the *bicār gān* debate genre, as performed at shrine-based venues.

<sup>27</sup> For example, Pous Mela at Shantineketan, the Jaydev Mela at Birbhum, or the Fakiri Utsav at Nadia.

<sup>28</sup> The Dhaka International Folk Festival and Sufi Fest Dhaka, and even the more successful yet classically-oriented Bengal-ITC SRA Classical Music Festival, have all developed as mainstays of arena-style public celebrations of music in the last decade.

yet exhibiting an apparent disengagement with the mainstream contours of Muslim piety, the religious orientations of educated and increasingly sedentary Bangladeshis whom remain skeptical of the dynamics which inform saintly intercession, unabashed spiritual fervor and a progressively perceived alien devotional language. Conversely, the enduring import of shrine heritage in Bangladesh is retained and conveyed by a government-sanctioned approval for regional sacredness, as epitomized by the country's grandiose Sufi mausoleums of antiquity, edifices that exude a connotative charm made equitable through an ethereal and discarnate connection with sainthood. In the process, bureaucratic attention to these legendary shrines that dot the sacred landscape consequently sidestep the latter-day modest and music-centered shrines of bhāb sōṅgīt saint-composers, whose legacies are ironically but acutely suited to articulate notions of vernacular pietism, yet whose song traditions are perhaps too discursive or incredulous in tone to typify the resolute conceptions of regionality and devotionism favored by regulative forces.

## **PART TWO**

### **Personifying the Debate: Compositions and Saintly Legacy in Bicār Gān**

The embodied practices of a bicār gān recital might be examined from four distinct vantage points: (1) the music performed, (2) the execution of the music and factors affecting it, (3) the effects of the performers on the audience and vice versa, and (4) the contributions of all the stakeholders to the success of the event. The first two of these angles will be taken up in the remaining sections of this chapter, while the last two—regarding inter-performer and audience interactions, and the ambience of a venue and the influence of its administrative functions—will be addressed in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, respectively. Having offered an overview of the

modern evolution of *bhāb sōṅgīt* compositions and the reception history of its saint-composers, I turn to an examination individual components of such songs as they are interpreted by *bōyāti* artists in the *bicār gān* debate, beginning with saintly legacy.

The concept of *kerāmôt* (Arabic: *karāmah*, generosity or high-mindedness), legendary and often miraculous biographical accounts, is deeply tied to Sufi hagiography and refers to supernatural wonders performed by Muslim saints (Frembgen 2006). In the technical vocabulary of Islamic religious sciences, *karāmah* has a sense similar to charisma, a favor or spiritual gift freely bestowed by God. The gifts ascribed to Muslim saints typically include supernatural physical actions, predictions of the future, and various privileged insights. Historically however, a belief in the miracles of saints (*karāmāt al-awliyā*’, literally “marvels of the friends of God”) seems to have been inextricably connected to the theological development of Sunni Islam. This is evident from the fact that an acceptance of the miracles wrought by saints is taken for granted by many of the major authors of the Islamic Golden Age (ca. 700–1400), as well as by prominent late-medieval scholars (Lombard 1975, Adamson 2016). According to orthodox Sunni doctrine, all miracles performed by saints are done by the leave of God and usually involve *kharq al-‘ādah* (“that which breaks custom”), an extraordinary happening which defies the normal course of *sunnat Allāh* (divine custom) (Brown 2009). Traditionally, Sunni Islam has also strictly emphasized that the miracle of a saint, however extraordinary it may be, is never the sign of a

prophetic mission, and this has been stressed in order to safeguard the Islamic doctrine of Muḥammad as being *khātām al-nabīyīn*, the Seal of the Prophets.<sup>29</sup>

In bōyāti customs of deference, the idea of kerāmôt informs a significant dimension of the reception history of a certain saint-composer, and sometimes to a particularly acclaimed composition. Nearly every bhāb sōngīt or bōyāti composition contains a *bhōṇitā*, a lyrical colophon or nom de plume in which the saint-composer’s own pen name is inserted into the last lines of lyrics.<sup>30</sup> The feature of the bhōṇitā often appears in surprising or creative ways, whereby the poet uses his or her sobriquet to make self-deprecating remarks for humorous or poignant effect, to honor his guru or community through the poetic undertaking, or to deliver a quirky or clever “punchline” that functions as an epiphanic denouement. In most cases, the inclusion of the bhōṇitā allows for a reflexive and transitional moment where any number of broader themes are connected to the main idea of a particular song, as the poet epithetically ponders through a type of third-person “out-of-body” observation.

---

<sup>29</sup> The doctrine of the *karāmāt al-awliyā’* seems to have emerged from the two basic Islamic doctrinal sources of Qur’ān and Aḥādīth. As the Qur’ān referred to the miracles of non-prophetic saintly people such as the figure of Khidr (18:65-82), the disciples of Jesus (5:111-115), and the People of the Cave (18:7-26), many prominent early scholars deduced that a group of venerable people must exist who occupy a rank below the prophets but who are nevertheless capable of performing miracles (Kugle 2007). The references in the corpus of Hadīth literature to bona fide miracle-working saints only lent further credence to this early understanding of their miracles. Thus, practically all of the major scholars of the classical and medieval eras believed that the lives of saints and their miracles were incontestable (Meri 2002). In the modern world, the doctrine of the miracles of saints has been challenged by certain movements and Islamic modernists, in particular, have had a tendency to dismiss the traditional idea of miracles of saints. Various reasons have commonly been attested to this, including Saudi-sponsored conservatism that is significantly funded by the state’s deep pockets around the Muslim world, as well as Saudi interest in preserving the centrality of the *ka’bah* as an Islamic pilgrimage center as opposed to the regional shrines of saints. Other notions have subscribed to aligning traditional Muslim piety with the doctrinal-centered devotionism of educated Muslims around the world. Despite this presence, the doctrine of *karāmāt al-awliyā’* continues to thrive in many parts of the Islamic world today, especially where Sufism is most prevalent.

<sup>30</sup> This poetic “stamp” is also found in bāul songs, but is not specific to Bengali poetry. It is also found in the Hindi devotional *bhajan* hymns of North India, *kāfi* poems in Punjabi and Sindhi, *vācana* poetry in Kannada, the compositions of the Sikh gurus and *bhagat-s* of the Guru Granth Sahib, Hindustani (the *antarā* section of a *bandīś*) and Carnatic (the *caraṇam* section of a *kṛti*, called the *mudra*) classical music, the Urdu *ghazal* (where it is known as the *takhalluṣ* and occurs in the *maqta’*, or last couplet), connected further to similar traditions conventionalized in early Persian poetry, the Old Anatolian Turkish poems of Yunus Emre (1238–1320), or the *fakhr* (“self-exaltation”) section of the Arabic *qasīdah*. In addition, premodern Bengali compositional forms, especially ones meant to be heard or performed, are replete with inclusions of the bhōṇitā appellation.

In bicār gān performance, the singing of the bhōṇitā is a symbolic moment in the debate where a poet’s pseudonym is sonically rendered, which thus enables participants and listeners to concretely identify the bōyāti artist’s distinctive evocation of a particular saint-composer as the song draws to a conclusion. When the inscriptive bhōṇita of a bhāb sōṅgīt composition is sung, the bōyāti will, as a matter of courtesy, stylistically gesture by raising an open palm to the forehead (Bengali: *salām*, salutation), or by bringing the hand to the lips and heart (*cumu*, kiss), a symbolic act of the glorification and internalization of the poet’s message. The inclusion and rendering of a bhōṇita is, in fact, a complex performative act, and not only have canonized saint-composers established novel and surprising ways to include this poetic device, but living bōyāti artists, in their own compositions, sometimes indirectly bind their own pen name with that of their guru or a prominent bhāb sōṅgīt poet<sup>31</sup>. This real or imagined “two-fold bhōṇita” provides a dual opportunity to demonstrate personal compositional proficiency as well as authenticate and further correlate devotional sentiment. For example, a song composed by Hasan Boyati entitled *mārfôte sei nōbuwātūr niḥānā* examines the *niḥānā* (aim or goal) of *nōbuwôt* (Arabic: *nubuwwah*, prophecy) in *mārfôt* (*ma’rifā*, gnosis), and in the final verse states:

*āllāher rōng jār phuṭeche gāye*  
*tāri to āllāher oli kōy*  
*isrāil fāh tār ækjōni hōy*  
*hāsān bokā chilā nā*

---

<sup>31</sup> The sometimes indistinct nature of a bhōṇita is ultimately not specific to bōyāti musicality, though their very intentional approach to exploit and harness its poetic and recollective power is quite imaginative. Historically, the true authorship of a bhōṇita is occasionally difficult to obtain, as a single pen name has sometimes been used collectively by multiple composers over diverse regional and generational spaces, which tellingly reflects the communal process of certain types of genre development. In other cases, apocryphal addendums have been added to a poet’s oeuvre by careless editors or otherwise well-intentioned acolytes, which critically presents a logistical issue to preservation, but also sheds light on the delicate manner in which such compositions are negotiated and safeguarded through both written and oral mediums.

*from he whose body radiates the color of divinity  
that soul is surely the friend of God  
Israil Shah is one of them  
but the foolish Hasan has failed to understand*

While the bulk of the song’s lyrics examine the nature of *nôbuwôt* (prophecy), its final verse aims to reiterate the symbiotic relationship between *nôbuwôt* and *belāyôt* (sainthood), a concept central to the tenets of *mārfôt* (Islamic gnosis). Thus, in the *bhônita*, the composer Hasan Boyati describes his own spiritual inadequacies—a common literary device in Bengali devotion song which represents an act of candor and humility—but simultaneously and boldly proposes an imagined spiritual bond with Israil Shah (d. 1934), a *bhāb sōngīt* saint-composer particularly known for his *māromī* (mystical) allegory. In this third-person expression, the out-of-body declaration of the final *bhônita* line provides a sort of devotional “punch line,” with which to conclude the song, simultaneously acknowledging self-compositional skills and fortifying genuine pedigree.

### **Drunken Madness and the Legacy of “Mātāl” Razzak Dewan**

The famed artist Razzak Dewan provides another distinctive and more detailed example of *kerāmôt*, this time from a recently-deceased *bōyāti* composer. Razzak Dewan is fondly referred to as *mātāl Razzak*, or “Razzak the drunkard,” by his disciples and fans, which intentionally holds connotations of madness and unbecomingness in Muslim Bengali society. To this accusation, Razzak was known to have famously responded in verse:

*mā-te mohōmmad āmār priyô jōgôt guru  
tā-te tōpōsī māne bānchā kōlpôtôru  
lā-te lā fōrīkā lāh jōpi cirōkāl  
ei tin oḳkhôr jog diye loke bōle āmāy mātāl*

*The “m” is for Muḥammad, beloved world-guru for me  
The “t” is the heart of the tapasi,<sup>32</sup> wherein resides the Kalpataru<sup>33</sup> tree  
The “l” is for lā sharīka lah,<sup>34</sup> which I declaim day and night  
In conjoining these three letters, they call me “mātāl” with delight*

To be sure, both bhāb sōṅgīt and bōyāti composition have been fortified by certain social constructions of madness or insobriety which have been plentiful in Bengal and, while certainly not specific to the region, eloquently cultivated its poetic and musical potential in devotional performance. In her work on *The Madness of Saints*, June McDaniel argues that “the Bengali devotional tradition is a history of people who are considered saints, incarnations of deities, and liberated souls,” and that “their words change the course of the tradition [and] their ecstasy is the sign of the truth of their words” (1989: 2).

Attached to the saintly persona of Razzak Dewan within bhāb sōṅgīt, through his compositional achievements, are conventional and enduring aphorisms of madness in Bengali society which further consolidates their devotional potency in the idiomatic spaces of the mundane. Common expressions in the Bengali language are permeated with ideas of *pāglāmi*, or “madness.” The proverbial expression *pāgōl ki nā bole, chāgōl ki nā khāy* (“what does a madman not say, what does a goat not eat?”) accentuates the indifference or impulsiveness of being mad. Alternatively, a Bengali parent will affectionately address a young daughter as *pāglī*, or “crazy little girl,” which intimately connotes madness with a type of fondness and endearment. In addition, both bāul and bōyāti artists sing cautionary songs which speak of the *nōkōl* or *bhōṅḍō pāgōl*, a “poser madman” or plaster saint, which consequently equates madness with a sort of authenticity and sincerity. The equally subversive and aspiring term *rōsik pāgōl*, the

---

<sup>32</sup> An ascetic.

<sup>33</sup> In Indic cosmology, the Sanskrit word *Kalpataru* refers to a magical wish-granting tree in paradise.

<sup>34</sup> “No partner has He,” in Arabic, an important *kalimah* or phrase in Islamic piety, which confirms Allah’s oneness.

“consummate madman,” has its etymological origins in the ornate Sanskrit theological-aesthetic concept of *rasa*,<sup>35</sup> from which *rôsik*<sup>36</sup> is derived, meaning the “juice, flavor, essence or sentiment” particular to the characteristic quality of music, literature, and drama.<sup>37</sup>

Razzak Dewan’s *mātāl* persona is ultimately inseparable from his compositional legacy.<sup>38</sup> However, while his insanity is likened to both traditional understandings of proper asceticism and a slew of quotidian aphorisms of madness and inebriation, it also highlights Razzak Dewan’s own compositional internalizations. The “meta-kerāmôt” which is informed by his persona quite easily correlates with general Sufi depictions of madness stimulated by intoxication that frequently appear in Persian and South Asian Muslim poetic and song contexts. As such, Razzak Dewan was fond of using the conventional vocabulary of Persian-Urdu to legitimate his devotional madness and intoxication, with words such as *nashah* (addiction), *mast* (euphoria or inebriation), *dīwānah*, (madness), *sāqī* (barkeeper), *sāghar* or *paimānah* (goblet), *sharāb* (wine), and *maikhānah* (tavern). One of Razzak Dewan’s most beloved songs, for instance, begins with the opening line *sāki purā bōtōl de āmāre neshā lāge oi* (“barkeeper, give me the whole bottle, the addiction grows stronger”). In a quintessential fashion, Razzak Dewan’s intemperance

---

<sup>35</sup> The word *rasa* appears in ancient Vedic literature and is also mentioned in the notable ancient Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Although the concept of *rasa* is fundamental to many forms of Indian arts including dance, music, theater, painting, sculpture, and literature, the interpretation and implementation of a particular *rasa* differs between different styles and schools (Schwartz 2004).

<sup>36</sup> As will be elucidated later in Chapter Four, the term *rôsik* can also apply to an aesthete of *bicār gān* performance.

<sup>37</sup> Translating more directly into mystical practice, the visionary Vaiṣṇava saint-reformer Caitanya Mahāprabhu (1486-1534) notably encouraged and induced a sort of transcendental madness in his followers, a madness which—rather than being perceived as the exploits of an apostate or dissenter—was said to have been embraced or, at the very least, excused as harmless or involuntary (Bhatia 2017). This sort of ulterior madness sidesteps belligerence, masking a powerfully contentious and creative impulse stimulated under the pretense of a malady, one with great potential to capacitate evasiveness.

<sup>38</sup> Daniel Neuman’s pioneering work *The Life of Music in North India* (1990) famously correlated the concept of *rīāz*, here meaning “practice,” in Hindustani music pedagogy with *sāadhanā*. Through this association, admirable ideas of musical dedication, genius and perseverance are likened to the grueling and insufferable immoderation of deep immersion, in any skill, and its subsequent affiliations with unabating devotion, supernatural feat and madness.

subsequently permits subtle heresy, as demonstrated in another one of his opening lines: *kôlbe momin ārfe āllāh ei to āllāher thikānā mōsjid ghore āllāh thāke nā, o re māolānā* (“the throne [Arabic: *arsh*] of God resides in the heart [Arabic: *qalb*] and therein lies his true address, dear cleric, you won’t find Allah in the mosque”).

Despite his memorable compositions, the legendary biographical details of Razzak Dewan’s life are not only plentiful, but equally celebrated, allowing for frequent anecdotal asides in the *bicār gān* performance which particularly fortify devotional explorations of pietism, especially the spiritual annihilation of the self (Arabic: *fanā*’), worldly detachment (Bengali: *udāsīnôtā*), unsparing candor or simplicity (*scrôlôtā*), and the self-inflicted poverty of asceticism (Arabic: *faqr*). Often, when cleverly juxtaposed in the debate, the mere mentioning of Razzak Dewan’s name elicits exclamations of praise and affirmation from audience members and judges, such as *sādhu*<sup>39</sup> (“excellent!”) and *fābāf* (“well done!”).<sup>40</sup>

### **Situating Kerāmôt in Bicār Gān**

The following figure lists several saint-composers who are frequently integrated into the performance of *bicār gān* through *kerāmôt*. While many poetic figures are woven into the debate—old and new, prolific and obscure—particularly prominent and admired saint-poets illuminate salient features of Bangladeshi regionalism and the debate’s discerning liminality, as its music-religious figures function as thematic catalysts for a devotionalized entertainment.

The significance of *kerāmôt* in *bicār gān* can be examined from several perspectives, including the nature of its incorporation of lyrical authorities in the musical unfolding, its

---

<sup>39</sup> This Sanskrit-derived word is particularly utilized as recognition of spiritual success or achieved awareness.

<sup>40</sup> See later discussion in this chapter on theorizations of audience reception.

localized navigation of saint-composers and their legacies, its broader appeal through the rendering of biographical content, and its nuanced approach to the propagation of Sufi piety.

<u>Poet</u>	<u>Kerāmôt</u>
Jalaluddin Khan	solitary devotion
Lalon	intellectual austerity
Matal Razzak	spiritual madness
Bijoy Sarkar	egalitarian devotion
Abdul Halim Boyati	scriptural devotion
Pagla Kanai	Prophet-centered devotion
Shah Abdul Karim	vernacular devotion
Bhoba Pagla	supplicational devotion

**Table 3.2. Examples of common saint-composers in bicār gān and their associated kerāmôt.**

Ultimately, the idea of kerāmôt is attached to the spiritual qualities or eccentricities of a saint-composer’s celebrated biography and the manner in which it is exemplified in songs.

From a lyrical perspective, kerāmôt is typically conjured through the incorporation of supplementary and stylistic commentary around a song, divulging a bôyāti artist’s intricate knowledge of the saint-composer’s memoir or mythologized life story. Compositionally, the bôyāti artist may also critically utilize the bhôṇita, the final self-appellation verse in the song’s lyrics, as a way further harnessing kerāmôt into the larger debate unfolding through stylized personalization, drawing poignant connections between himself and the saint-composer, real or imagined.

From a geographical perspective, kerāmôt incorporates saintly legacies that are central figures in a broadly regionalized Sufi history of Bangladesh. While most of these figures—the saint-composers of bhāb sôṅgīt—reside outside the purview of a more nationalized endorsement of localized fakirs, they retain a palpable spiritual presence for Bangladesh’s provincial middle class (see Chapter Two). This can be contrasted with the other hyper-regionalized identities that also shape the spiritual ambience of bicār gān, including individual bôyāti artists and their own compositional addenda (see subsequent sections of this chapter), or the legacies of smaller, more

obscure saints whose shrines function as integral venues within the debate's performance network (see Chapter Five). The implementation of *kerāmôt*, then, discloses the complex localization that informs saintly palpability in the dialectical performance, interweaving macro- and micro-level personas whose spiritual characteristics constitute a significant portion of the regionalized devotional landscape.

From a storytelling perspective, *kerāmôt* is additionally understood through the *bôyāti* artist's supplementary endeavor to locate devotion in the secularized mundane. Given the rhetorical weight of the *bicār gān* debate, the incorporation of *kerāmôt* is only as functional as its ability to articulate broader associations with evocative states of being in Bengali society, to make quotidian correlations that tangibly identify a saint-composer's exclusive spiritual accomplishment with culturally relatable and valued concepts. Broadly speaking, this feature of storytelling is common to the legacies of other Indic saints, or Muslim saints throughout the Islamic world, who have been traditionally memorialized in comparable ways. However, when the *kerāmôt* of Razzak Dewan situates his legacy, not only as a Sufi or a saint-composer but as a generalized representation of spiritual madness, it critically presents many more possibilities of thematic integration into the discursive and entertaining parameters of the debate.

Last but not least, from a contemporary devotional perspective, the popular application of *kerāmôt* in *bicār gān* is carefully steeped in modern sensibilities regarding Sufi piety. During my first visit to Sylhet, in western Bangladesh, I visited the highly popular but non-musical shrine of Shāh Jalāl al-Dīn al-Mujarrad (1271–1346), widely known as Hazrat Shāh Jalāl. As thousands of pilgrims do each day, I entered the busy compound barefoot and climbed the hundreds of steps leading up to the tomb. The tomb itself, however, was in an elaborately decorated room, filled

with the many trappings of saintliness one would find in an important Sufi mausoleum. In front of the tomb, leaning against an elaborately embroidered shroud, rested a conspicuous handwritten sign that asserted: *sejdā korā nifiddhō* (“prostrating is impermissible”). This emphatic statement, and its curiously direct placement, acutely problematized the saint’s legacy within his own shrine, welcoming pilgrims to the tomb, but noticeably severing devotional worship from intercessory power.

The particular approach that *kerāmôt* offers in validating Sufi concepts of sainthood through the *bicār gān* debate exhibits its own in-betweenness, since it is primarily concerned with the poetic extraction of legacy without encouraging a bodily encounter with the unseen through trance, saintly intercession, or sonic healing. Renewed interests in trance have recently brought attention to the tension between native explication of possession, which grants agency to supernatural beings, and the parameters of academic discourse, which are shaped by the search for “rational” explanations (Jankowsky 2010). This “wrestling” with the limits of epistemology is also deeply embedded in the hearts and minds of many educated and practicing Bengali Muslims today, who often grapple with the place of Sufi piety in their modern lives, as it exists alongside an increasingly empirical and personal form of piety that is centered around scriptural study and self-motivated spiritual improvement. For many, the idea of sainthood, as delineated through Sufi traditions of intercession, is the pivotal notion, the mystical threshold that delineates what their personal religious convictions can comfortably permit. On the one hand, belief and admiration for Bengali Muslim saints is thoroughly wrapped in a sense of regionalized cultural pride and an abiding religious history. On the other, saintly worship, or any bodily experience that is cultivated through it, is often considered debased and potentially threatening. The *bôyāti*

art of *kerāmôt* is strikingly mindful of this dilemma, invoking saintly persona through referential devotion, but in a manner that is more concerned with deducing wisdom than inducing possession.

That the larger history of *karāmah* in Islamic theology is itself contentious also provides great teleological fodder for the staged debate, since traditional arguments in favor of, or in opposition to, this belief have traditionally been attached to scholarly scrutiny through Qur’ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*), Aḥādīth commentary (narrated reports of Muḥammad’s words, actions and approvals), and the tradition of independent reasoning in Islam (*ijtihād*). In fact, *bōyāti* preoccupation with hierarchical strata of authority or divine intervention and their complex interactions in the Islamic cosmological order are something of a specialty, as manifested in *bicār gān* debate topics such as *nōbī-āshāb* (“Muḥammad vs. the Companions of Muḥammad”; Arabic: *nabiyy* and *ṣaḥābah*, sg., or *aṣḥāb*, pl.), *nōbuwāt-belāyāt* (“prophethood vs. sainthood”; Arabic: *nubuwwah* and *walāyah*), and *mānuṣ-fereftā* (“man vs. angels”; Persian: *farishtah*). These very topics legitimate the exploration of saintly legacy as a bedrock pursuit of Islamic erudition.

### **Contouring the Devotional: Interconnections of Text, Tune, and Form**

This transitional section represents another overview, looking at the inner musical dimensions of some major devotional genres in South Asia—the relationship between their lyrical, structural and functional qualities—in order to situate a subsequent discussion on the sonic reconfigurations of *bhāb sōṅgīt* compositions by *bōyāti* artists in the *bicār gān* debate, through their own compositional contributions.

While the lyrical content of bhāb sōṅgīt has been orally preserved with considerable accuracy—certainly in the case of Lālōn, whose inheritors may have influenced the practice<sup>41</sup>—original melodic content has often been haphazardly safeguarded. Typically, this phenomenon is not simply one of unguardedness but indifference, reflecting a distinctive disassociation between saint-composers and their poetic form and the tuning of their creations into song by others. The standard approach to composing Bengali mystical song material has been to arrange lyrics into a limited number of aforementioned prosodic systems; but melodies themselves have either (1) not been specified by the original saint-composers, (2) been orally and sometimes textually preserved with the name of a pre-circulating stock melodic figure (leaving the actual rendering and expansion of the melody to the individual performer), (3) been given a conventionalized and more significant melody through popular performances of disciples or specialists over time, or (4) are openly impressionable due to an unstandardized performance history.

This application and strategy for song tuning or formatting is not unique to bhāb sōṅgīt, and can be readily perceived in the musical work of artists across South Asia who specialize in pervasive devotional genres such as *qawwālī*, *bhajan*, *ghazal* or *kīrtan*, who freely incorporate standardized poetry not originally written for their musical parameters, or the poetry of other composers not historically belonging to their devotional style. Yet together, these aforementioned four genres comprise popular forms which have shaped the general sound and practice of South Asian devotional song performance, particularly because all embody a distinct

---

<sup>41</sup> The torchbearers of the Lālōnī tradition in Bangladesh—who mainly reside in the area around his hermitage in the region of Kushtia—represent a pedigree of literate ascetics who have not only insisted on preserving canonic songs in written form, but have ritualized the transfer and safeguarding of such physical material over generations, despite Lālōn’s own spiritualized orality.

and enduring style that is not undermined by a resilient and robust approach to musical reconfiguration.

For example, composers of the ghazal in India have historically considered it a poetic form—amongst a range of poetic forms common to Urdu literature—with specific metrical, allegorical and recitation conventions, though not necessarily with the end result of producing a song, which arrangers and performers have interpreted on their own over the centuries (Naim 1999). A modern standardized bhajan, conversely, while not necessarily subscribing to a precise literary structure, is typically composed with a specific performance setting in mind: short, personal and uncomplicated lyrics that aid in creating an emotive response through repetition, accompanied by energized yet codified drumming patterns. The traditional repertoire of qawwālī, while also emphasizing a stylized repetition of its own, consists of a wide range of devotional compositions written by Sufi poets in a number of languages (especially Urdu, Hindi, Persian and Punjabi), which have been supplementally adapted and musically systematized through the framework of qawwālī. In the Sikh tradition of kīrtan, canonized songs found in the devotional scripture Guru Granth Sahib have been ascribed to particular rāga-s and tāla-s, yet the specialized *granthī*-s who recite them are known to re-tune the songs in other melodies, especially outside of *gurdwārā* temple services, further to invigorate an otherwise fixed tradition of compositions (which, incidentally, are written by poets inside and outside the Sikh religious tradition).

While each of these four styles retain a stand-alone relationship to their core poets and compositions, and some form of stylistic allowance with regard to external lyrical sources, they concurrently possess a distinguishing and effectual sound. As a musical genre, the ghazal,

ostensibly in Urdu, is moderately paced and accompanied by a particular approach to tabla variations known as *laggi*, which allows for a leisurely and stylistic musical pondering over the complex literary expressions in its couplets while emphasizing its particular rhyme scheme. The contemporary bhajan, commonly but not specifically in vernacular Hindi, is accompanied by a steady and unvarying rhythmic cycle at a brisker pace, and further marked by the percussive sounds of the brass *manjira* hand cymbals, which together produce a certain devotional backing to the genre's typically undemanding yet euphoric lyrics. The ubiquitous sound of qawwālī is layered with vigorous hand-clapping patterns, inserted verses tied into the larger composition (known as *gīrah*), and a distinctively punctuating style of drumming meant to exemplify its deeply Sufi embodiment of *sama*, ritualized listening and remembrance. Sikh-style kīrtan, like the other three genres, makes ample use of the harmonium and rāga-based configurations, and is ostensibly written in a liturgical idiom known as *sant bhāṣā*, also known by its endonym *gurmukh* ("from the mouth of the guru"), prominently used in the central Sikh scripture as an amalgamation of Punjabi and Hindi dialects, with words from Sanskrit, Prakrit, Apabhramsha, Persian and Arabic.<sup>42</sup>

Unsurprisingly, specialists within one of these four genres often freely move in between them with a certain amount of musical liberty, while retaining something of their home genre's larger allusions to poetic legacy, devotional flavor and lyrical impressions. Some artists, as in the late Pandit Bhimsen Joshi, have mediated classical, devotional or popular boundaries within the spectrum of one genre—in this case, the bhajan—through a contextually-based notion of liveness

---

<sup>42</sup> Theologically, its macaronic lyricism reflects the Sikh tradition's multicultural monotheism, while its rāga-esque style, for many, invokes Sikhism's historical contributions to the arts, especially regionally-based classical music innovation in the Punjab (Shackle, Singh and Mandair 2001).

(Schultz in Booth and Shope 2014). Devotional song in South Asia seems particularly amenable to this phenomenon given the creative space that often exists between the works of saintly lyricist-composers, or esteemed poets, and the eventual musical realizations of their opera. For example, the popular devotional singer Anup Jalota has made a career out of alternating between bhajan and ghazal traditions in his concert format, which emphasizes moderately-virtuosic renderings, eclectic instrumentation, and a shared enthusiasm for both genres through casual Bollywood-based appropriations. A slew of contemporary pop kīrtan singers—within both the regional varieties of a Punjab-based Sikh style and a Bengal-based Vaiṣṇava style—have musically exhibited a pan-kīrtan flair that also incorporates New Age-like sentimentalities, the ethereal vastness of ambient electronic timbres, and popular interests in sonically-guided audio recordings used to promote a pseudo-spiritual mindfulness. In the realm of modern qawwālī, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, while not the first artist in his tradition to perform internationally, gained an unprecedented cult following of largely uninitiated listeners through remarkable adaptations to qawwālī musicality: breakneck tempos and streamlined percussion, exuberant artistry through solo-oriented improvisation within customary group-style delivery, an unrestricted attitude toward new collaborations or drastic rearrangements, and, most importantly, consistently novel approaches to retuning traditional song melodies which were ultimately appreciated, accepted, and accorded by his widespread genius.

### **Tuning the Debate: Stock Melodies and Rhythms in Bicār Gān**

A bōyāti artists' interpretation of bhāb sōṅgīt can span the breadth of a particular composition's musical and poetic history in a single rendition. Given that the bhāb sōṅgīt spectrum of compositions is mutually shared and enjoyed by a variety of vernacular artists, any

number of popular musical interpretations can be associated with a given song. In this manner, the bôyāti can draw upon the various musical lives of a composition, or rearrange one particular song in a number of ways—through the use of stock melodic motifs, or *sur*-s, and rhythmic patterns, or *ṭhekā*-s—and depending on the contours of the staged debate in which he or she is engaged.<sup>43</sup>

In bôyāti debate, melodic figures known as *sur*-s are easily adapted to songs that are mostly composed around a basic strophic form. In addition, while many distinctive *sur*-s exist, a significant number of them are essentially based around a minimal number of important melodic contours central to Bengali folk music. While each of these variations often have particular connotations to genre, poet or region—distinguishable from each other by subtle but conventionalized changes in contour—their shared melodic content easily allows them to be strung together in endless permutations, in both preconceived and improvised settings. This utilitarian technique, however, can be applied with judiciousness and delight, allowing seemingly disparate musical and thematic associations to flow whimsically and incessantly into the poetry of the debate, subliminally adding complex and perceptive viewpoints to the dialectical development. Most critical to the debate’s instrumentalism, the *ḍhol* drummer is not only expected to fulfill the laborious task of providing exuberant and vigorous accompaniment, but to have a discerning ear as well, recognizing and following the bôyāti artist’s spontaneous

---

<sup>43</sup> In some cases, unpublished songs by canonic poets have also been examined with keen interest by bôyāti artists, who attempt to research, collect and revive them. For example, the poet Jalaluddin Khan (1894–1972) left behind a great number of original songs that were largely unknown to the general public, or even other singers, and thus do not have a conventionalized history of being tuned or performed. The bôyāti Sunil Karmakar, who was a protégé of Jalaluddin Khan, has re-composed and popularized a great number of these songs in debate performance. It remains to be seen as to whether such songs will be further manipulated or repositioned by future generations of bôyāti-s as they become durable additions to the collaborative pool of *bicār gān* compositions.

polemical trajectory—the weaving of lyrics, genre, and poetic sensibilities—and rendering complementary *ṭhekā*-s, stock rhythmic patterns with compatible associations, in performance.

In one particular *bicār gān* debate, I observed the *bōyāti* artist Mukta Sarkar sing a composition by the doyen of *bōyāti* song poets in the twentieth century, Abdul Halim. The song ruminated on *pāk pōñjātōn*, (Persian: *panjatan-i pāk*, the “five holy ones”), a popular image found in Sufī and Shī‘a discourse which refers to the figures of Muḥammad, his righteous successor ‘Alī, the wife of ‘Alī and daughter of the Prophet, Fāṭimah, and her two sons Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. Through stylized narration, the song’s numerological incorporation of *pāk pōñjātōn* ultimately explored a deeper correlation with divinity within the cosmos through five primal “elements,”<sup>44</sup> as well as an inverse and internal correlation with personified “thieves”<sup>45</sup> that disrupt meditation. Furthermore, this metaphysical discourse was situated in the *bicār gān* debate template known as *nūr-ākār*, which deliberates on whether the divine presence emerged from primordial light (*nūr*) or physical manifestation (*ākār*):

*nirākāre udṃy je jōn, hāwāy āse hāwāy miṣe, hāwāy bhāse pāk pōñjātōn*  
ascending from the void, *pāk pōñjātōn* appears in the ether, permeates it, drifts through it

Representing light, Mukta Sarkar, a female *bōyāti* artist, used the opportunity to further offer a gendered exposition through poetic legacy and musical arrangement.<sup>46</sup> Firstly, the song’s author—Abdul Halim, who is cited in the *bhōṇita*—is widely credited for promoting female disciples on stage, and incidentally helped in pioneering a new debate style, known as *nāri-*

---

<sup>44</sup> The “five elements” (Sanskrit: *pancha tattva*) have different interpretations in various Hindu, Tantric and Buddhist traditions. Generally speaking, they represent sky (*ākāś*), air (*vāyu*), water (*jal*), fire (*agni*), and earth (*prithvī*) (Rudert 2017).

<sup>45</sup> Another Indic concept, here: lust (*kāma*), anger (*krodh*), greed (*lobh*), attachment (*moh*), and pride (*ahankār*) (Singh 1990).

<sup>46</sup> Chapter Six explores in detail the phenomenon of female *bōyāti* artists in *bicār gān* performance, and larger cultural associations with motherland, motherhood and mother tongue.

*puruṣ*, which debates the merits of men versus women. Secondly, the rendition by Mukta



**Figure 3.2. The bôyāti artist Mukta Sarkar.**

Sarkar was based around a *sur* known as *prôṣādī*, popularized by eighteenth-century poet Ramprasad Sen, who belonged to the Bengali Shakti tradition that, within Hinduism, interprets primordial cosmic energy through a feminine creative power, embodied by the Mother Goddess. Mukta Sarkar's performance was thus inspired by an association between poet (Abdul Halim) and melodist (Ramprasad Sen), which ultimately asserted the inherently feminine nature of light. The accompanying *ḍhol* drummer began with a rhythmic idea known as *lophā*, based a leisurely 12-beat pattern known for its popularity in Hindu Bengali devotional song, but transitioned to the more lively and visceral *ḥalqah-i zikr*, a triple-meter pattern in a 6-beat cycle associated with Bengali-style shrine song. The latter's simplified and more condensed cycle, easily transferrable by remaining in triple meter, also marks a change from one rhythmic idea's association with Hindu hymnals to another that is ostensibly Muslim. This change in *ṭhekā* became most apparent

in the final verse, when the bhōṇita revealed the pen-name of saint-composer Abdul Halim and the song's larger Sufi leanings.

The following two figures enumerate key melodic motifs and rhythmic ideas used in contemporary bicār gān, including their allusions to important genres, regions or poets, as well as their principle application in the debate. The list of sur-s is broadly organized by category of melodic allusion, beginning with (1) those whose melodies distinctively allude to regional folk music forms or the compositional style of certain bhāb sōṅgīt saint-composers, followed by (2) those melodies whose allusions are particular to bicār gān and are specifically composed and popularized by bōyāti artists, and finally (3) ostensibly rāga-based melodies featured in bicār gān, whose allusions are also largely conventionalized by bōyāti artists. The subsequent list of ṭhekā-s is organized by number of beats in the rhythmic cycle, revealing the debate genre's penchant for a range of duple and triple meter variations which have specific allusions of their own. These two figures are followed by a discussion of their musical significance in bicār gān.

<b><u>Sur Name</u></b>	<b><u>Song Example</u></b>	<b><u>Melodic Allusion</u></b>	<b><u>Debate Application</u></b>
<i>dhuwā</i>	<i>āwwāl ākhir jāhir bātin</i>	general folk music	varied
<i>mājhi</i>	<i>tāre kænō pāinā</i>	downstream, genre of <i>bhāṭiyāli</i>	introspection
<i>birôhō</i>	<i>fôn bôli sôkhi</i>	genre of <i>bicched gān</i>	despondence
<i>ujān</i>	<i>beheste dekiye bôle</i>	upstream, genre of <i>sārigān</i>	felicity
<i>prôbhupôd</i>	<i>ontôre birôhō jālā</i>	genre of <i>kīrtan</i>	Vaiṣṇava hymn
<i>puthi</i>	<i>bismillāh bôliyā</i>	genre of <i>puthi pāṭh</i>	historical account
<i>jôp</i>	<i>tomār nāme pāthôr gôle</i>	Bengali <i>dhikr</i> melody	ecstasy; Sufi
<i>nāt</i>	<i>māṭir kāyā chere jôdi</i>	a cappella Islamic hymns	worship
<i>côkkôr</i>	<i>premer prôtidān</i>	genre of <i>dhāmāil</i>	Vaiṣṇava folk
<i>lālônī</i>	<i>ātôfe toiri jin</i>	Lālôn (d. 1890)	deliberation
<i>boirāgī</i>	<i>ādôm ke bānāiche āge</i>	genre of <i>bāul gān</i>	reclusiveness
<i>jārī</i>	<i>je bāndā āfek-e māulā</i>	genre of <i>jārigān</i>	Muslim eulogies
<i>prôsādī</i>	<i>pāk pōnjātôn</i>	Ramprasad Sen (ca. 1718–1775)	feminine essence
<i>pāhārī</i>	<i>munājāt kôri māulā</i>	region of Sylhet and Assam	playfulness
<i>bhāṇḍārī</i>	<i>kāhā ke pōrāilô jibrāil</i>	genre of <i>qawwālī</i>	Bengali saint veneration
<i>murjīdī</i>	<i>khode khodā āllāh rādhā</i>	genre of <i>murjīdī gān</i>	guru veneration
<i>khās</i>	<i>jāre bôlchô khodā</i>	bōyāti-composed melody	theological
<i>behāl</i>	<i>māulār bhāb tôrôṅge</i>	bōyāti-composed melody	cosmological
<i>bilās</i>	<i>fôriyôte pāiche mājā</i>	bōyāti-composed melody	scriptural exegesis
<i>māromī</i>	<i>sejecho je sāj</i>	bōyāti-composed melody	metaphysical
<i>khæpā</i>	<i>e dhōrāy pāk nirôṅjôn</i>	bōyāti-composed melody	defiance

**Table 3.3. Some truncated melodic motifs, or sur, used in bicār gān.**

<i>imān</i>	<i>ṁniyōme bhājōn brithā</i>	bōyāti-composed melody	faith
<i>dhæn</i>	<i>torā dekhchō ni go cāiyā</i>	bōyāti-composed melody	solitary devotion
<i>jhijhiṭ</i>	<i>e sob niye dōndō kaenō</i>	rāga-based	condemnation
<i>bāgesrī</i>	<i>cāi nā jānnāt</i>	rāga-based	defiance
<i>bhoirōb</i>	<i>bhrōhmāṇḍer mājhāre</i>	rāga-based	invocation
<i>pilu</i>	<i>birōhō bedōnār mājhe</i>	rāga-based	juxtaposition
<i>bhoirōbī</i>	<i>dōrud o sālām jānāi</i>	rāga-based	Chishtī/Qādirī panegyrics
<i>kedār</i>	<i>de pānā de</i>	rāga-based	entreaty
<i>khāmmāj</i>	<i>tumi bōlō nā phōkir</i>	rāga-based	perseverance
<i>bhupālī</i>	<i>gān hōlō āttār khōrāki</i>	rāga-based	objectivity
<i>def</i>	<i>khājā bābār gān funiyā</i>	rāga-based	love
<i>mālkoj</i>	<i>āsā jāowā ki jōntrōnā</i>	rāga-based	transience

**Table 3.3, continued.**

<b><u>Thekā Name</u></b>	<b><u>Beats Per Cycle</u></b>	<b><u>Rhythmic Allusion</u></b>	<b><u>Debate Application</u></b>
<i>āgōmōnī</i>	6	festival of Durga Puja	in segues; auspiciousness
<i>jhumur</i>	6	general folk music	varied
<i>hālkā-e jikir</i>	6	region of Chittagong	ecstasy; Sufī
<i>dhāmāil</i>	6	region of Sylhet	despondence
<i>teorā</i>	7	Rabindranath Tagore	felicity
<i>bhāṭiyāli</i>	8	bhāṭiyāli	introspection
<i>khemṭā</i>	8	general folk music	varied
<i>mālsi</i>	8	jātrā	satire
<i>lōṛāi</i>	8	traditional stick fighting	polemics
<i>surphōk</i>	10	dhrupad	invocation
<i>lophā</i>	12	kīrtan	bāul; Hindu
<i>bānglā æktāl</i>	12	kōbigān	supposition
<i>tintāl</i>	16	general rāga-based music	refinement
<i>dāspāhirā</i>	16	kīrtan	general discourse

**Table 3.4. Some stock rhythmic patterns, or *thekā*, used in bicār gān.**

### Situating Broader Sonic Amalgamations

In Bangladesh, an entire collection of writings and songs, known as *ekuṣe sāhittō*, literally the “literature of the twenty-first,” form a canon of patriotic works which are memorized and performed each year in public spaces and on television, venerating fallen heroes and significant events in the independence movement which punctuate the Bangladeshi calendar.<sup>47</sup> Songs composed in this idiom often seem to collectively recall state violence and suffering through a sort of regional nostalgia, which, during the years of occupation, also functioned as the perfect

<sup>47</sup> In Bangladesh, February 21 is Language Movement Day, a national holiday that commemorates the protests and sacrifices of the Bengali Language Movement of 1952. International Mother Language Day (IMLD) is a worldwide annual observance held on the same day to promote awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity, and multilingualism. First announced by UNESCO in 1999, IMLD was formally recognized by the United Nations General Assembly in a resolution establishing 2008 as the International Year of Languages (Emajuddin 2006).

antithesis to the Urdu-speaking bureaucracy in the Pakistani era, who spoke the lingua franca associated with the educated urban elite of North India. Nazneen Ahmed’s work ties this notion to orality, and she mentions that composing such songs in the folk idiom also allowed for a clandestine musical proliferation that evaded state censorship through printing restrictions, since the songs themselves relied on staple folk melodies with which the average Bangladeshi was well acquainted (Ahmed 2014). This remarkable ability to harness the utilitarianism and allure of a melody (or rhythm) seems to speak volumes about its embedded possibilities in the Bengali psyche.

Thomas Turino states that “musical forms that ‘sound like’ . . . other parts of social experience are received as true, good, and natural”, asserting the importance of “feelings of iconicity or ‘naturalness’ created through the correspondence of style across different practices” (1999: 234). In *bicār gān*, a variety of melodic motifs and rhythmic ideas exude such a feeling, yet these qualities are effectively emphasized and valorized by recomposing musical material that is intentionally out of place, consolidating the power of allusion yet creating differentiated and demonstrable variants. This musical methodology, packaging the familiar with the unfamiliar, is ultimately enjoyed as a form of sophistication, and it likens the *bicār gān* performance to a celebrated yet fragmentary pathos that underlies Bangladeshi aesthetics. The imagined possibilities are enthralling, the alternative realities fortifying, and they empower the debate moment with a sense of purpose.

The above example of the song *pāk pônjātôn*, performed by Mukta Sarkar, demonstrates the manner in which a particular *bicār gān* artist may incorporate lyrical, authorial, and musical allusions to stake both polemical and professional claims, navigating the many potential

rhetorical dimensions of a debate template as well as emphasizing personal affiliations to genre, the bōyāti community, or even larger social issues. However, despite a striking juxtaposition of components, the detailed interconnections of such a maneuver certainly might seem a bit *recherché* for the average audience member. While I will offer a closer examination of audience perspectives in Chapter Four—through a discussion of gestured responses and larger venue-driven criteria—I briefly turn here to the manner in which such compositional strategies might spontaneously composed and simultaneously heard by a varied and semi-initiated audience.

In *bicār gān*, the combined incorporation of *kerāmōt* with *sur* and *ṭhekā*—saintly legacy with melodic motifs and rhythmic patterns—seems to suggest a number of general techniques for the extemporized amalgamation of poetic, melodic and rhythmic allusions on stage. In one manner, the power of allusion is lyrically informed by the nature of the composition and its authorship, drawing from either the canonic repertoire of *bhāb sōṅgīt* or, as will be elucidated in the following section, those compositions authorized by *bōyāti* artists themselves. This distinction is based on the allusion’s original and locationalized identity inside or outside the performance tradition of *bicār gān*. Therefore, there are *sur*-s whose allusions draw externally on poets, genres, regions (especially *bhāb sōṅgīt* compositions and broader regional folk forms), and those whose allusions draw internally on their conventional function within the confines of the *bicār gān* debate (especially *bōyāti* compositions and sometimes *rāga*-based compositions). This distinction further suggests a discrepancy in listenership, between those audiences who are generally familiar with *bhāb sōṅgīt* (lay listeners) and those audiences who have a particular familiarity with the musical customs of *bicār gān* (aesthetes). As will be examined below, various

approaches and their innumerable permutations point to a mercurial and intense quality of bicār gān musicality that can produce happy coincidences as easily as potential misreadings.

A manner in which one might further examine musical allusion is through the very nature of the borrowing of kerāmôt, sur, and thekā in performance. In my observations of bicār gān debates, I have discerned three distinctive approaches, which I refer to as (1) nonaligned, (2) established, and (3) experimental. A nonaligned allusion may be either the result of poor compositional strategy by the bōyāti, and/or his or her ineffectual delivery style. More commonly, however, a nonaligned allusion is based on an intentionally indifferent or random approach to composition. This phenomenon simply highlights that fact that the bōyāti is not overly concerned with compositional borrowing in every moment of the debate, as many other factors—narration, recitative, audience interaction—also inform the rhetorical weight of the moment. In these cases, a bōyāti casually chooses a musical format for song, delivers it, and moves on to the next phase of his or her performance. In some cases, this approach is favored by bōyāti artists who excel at discourse over song, though no bōyāti would consistently apply this technique in a debate, since its question-rebuttal format invariably requires devotional variance from one moment to the next.

The second approach refers to an established allusion, that is, the compositional process of connecting one allusion with other “matching” allusions. For example, a song by the saint-point Jalaluddin Khan—whose kerāmôt is frequently an allusion to solitary devotion—might be easily composed in the sur *dhæen* and accompanied by the dhol drummer in the thekā of *bhāṭiyāli*. Accordingly, both of these musical components conventionally draw from similar allusions in the bicār gān debate. This approach is obviously very aesthetically aligned, but is not necessarily

regarded as the “safe” or uninteresting option. In some cases, relying on solid, conventionalized allusions can provide a much needed bolstering for a *bôyāti* and his confidence on stage.

Established allusions also clearly showcase the general musical knowledge of the *bôyāti*, and can prepare the audience for more complex permutations later in the debate through a standardized reference at the onset. Lastly, smaller musical details within the interpretation of established allusions can further reveal a *bôyāti* artists’s individualized talent as a singer, demonstrating his or her personalized rendition to a larger section of the general audience who would straightforwardly recognize the stock allusions.

Thirdly, experimental allusions, as in the case of the example by Mukta Sarkar, make intentionally unusual connections between disparate allusions. This approach is particularly catered to aficionados of *bicār gān* since the insinuations are subtler and necessitate a wider and more intimate knowledge of the debate’s musical building blocks. Experimental allusions are also a musical endeavor of no small feat since they further require a close and trustworthy relationship between a *bôyāti* and his or her drummer to produce maximum effect. If, for example, a *bôyāti* artist is attempting to draw correlations between a saint-composer’s polemically-flavored *kerāmôt* and the underlying satire of a particular song, the *ḍhol* drummer’s careful listening might inspire him to appropriately move between the *ṭhekā* of *lôṛāi* and *mālsi* (both eight-beat patterns), as these rhythmic ideas respectively carry similar connotations: *lôṛāi* through its associations with traditional drum accompaniment in *lāṭhi khælā*, a stylized form of stick fighting (polemics), and *mālsi* through the subdued sardonicism of *ḵātrā* theater (satire).

## Debate Accompaniment: Heterophonic and Responsorial Instrumentalism

Admittedly, the demanding and indispensable work of supporting singers and instrumentalists in a *bōyāti* artist's ensemble (*dohār* or *dol*), frequently, though not entirely, go unnoticed by *bicār gān* audiences. Their inconspicuous presence can be further deterred by insufficient amplification (the bane of many accompanying musicians), or is simply the consequence of their position on stage, sitting behind a standing and moderating *bōyāti*. However, I turn briefly here to a discussion of the members of a *dohār*, their typical configuration, their relationship—socially and musically—to the *bōyāti* artist, and various features of their performance in the unfolding debate, namely a form of heterophonic improvisation by instrumentalists and an accompanying responsorial-style reiteration by supporting singers.

A *bōyāti* artist's ensemble typically consists of a variety of musicians whose nature of participation is predicated on both their musical responsibilities and their social relationship to the lead artists, including “session” musicians (harmonium, bamboo flute, *dotārā* lute, violinist), disciples (the supporting singers and percussionists), and close colleagues (especially the *dhuli*, or *dhul* player). Session musicians, who are contracted out through a monetary advance (*bāynā*) in both live settings for the debate and local studio recordings of *bicār gān*, are an indispensable element to the music, but their primary goal is to provide simultaneous variation of a single melodic line as it is sung, as well as occasional and improvised interludes. As is frequent in many settings for traditional South Asian music, this common type of instrumental support clearly requires a great deal of proficiency—and further aids in producing a conglomerate sound that is common for vernacular musical arrangement—but is also not as critical a component in determining the progressive outcome of *bicār gān* performance. For example, the bamboo flute

typically weaves in and out of the debate song's melodies in a wailing octave above the singer. Ultimately, it is an incontestable feature of Bengali folk music<sup>48</sup> and, as a wind instrument, strikingly complements the idiosyncratic contours of the voice. The bamboo flute, however, while displaying a certain form of subtle innovation through improvised reiteration (Alaghband-Zadeh 2017), is not a direct agent in the dialectical advancement of sonic configurations.

The violin and dotārā, while supplementing the bamboo flutes objectives in their own ways, contribute more significantly to the broader visual appeal and sonic texture of the debate's engaging performance. The violin (*behelā*) has increasingly replaced the bōyāti artist's more traditional *sārindā* lute. Its more recent incorporation is less informed by intertwined musical and social meanings inspired by the colonial encounter—as in the violin's shaping of South Indian musical culture (Weidman 2006)—but rather seems to be governed by an immense practicality in Bengali vernacular performance. Mainly, the violin has been praised by Bengali musicians due to its facilitation of bowing technique over four strings (as opposed to the *sārindā* lute's three strings), its flexibility in accommodating both sitting and standing playing positions (under the chin, or held between the shoulder and the heel of the foot), and the noticeably dulcet timbre of its synthetic gut strings (in comparison to the sharper, brighter, and ultimately less accommodating timbre of the *sārindā* lute's steel strings in group setting). As a bowed instrument, however, an important aspect of the bōyāti artist's bardic persona is discernibly transferred to the violin, and it seems to carry a residually visual connotation of professionalized storytelling and verse-making. As such, the standing bōyāti artist typically holds a violin in hand,

---

<sup>48</sup> Notably Bengali musicians have been critical to the bamboo flute's development and appreciation as a concert instrument in Hindustani classical music, including Pannalal Ghosh (1911–1960) and Ronu Majumdar (n.d.).

even if he or she plays its infrequently or without much expertise, in addition to the master violinist sitting in the ensemble.

Last but not least, the sound of the dotārā accentuates another important component of Bengali folk music, providing a type of accompaniment that is between the bamboo flute’s echoing embellishments and the violin’s underscoring melody.<sup>49</sup> As both a melodic instrument (as a plucked lute) and a rhythmic instrument (through its staccato-like picking patterns), the dotārā can both play along with the bamboo flute and violin, as well as “fill in spaces” between notes with lively arpeggiations of the melodic contour and other tremolo-like material that align with the metric pulse of the drumming accompaniment. In addition, its fretless fingerboard allows for a limited amount of glissandi, not unlike *mīṇḍ* patterns on the Hindustani sarod, which permit the instrument to mimic certain rāga-esque qualities or even the swooping melodic slide of the æktārā, a one-string bāul instrument. In these instances, the dotārā does seem to have its own ability to present sonic impressions of various melodic materials from divergent sources, although its overall function, along with bamboo flute and violin, is to mirror the bōyāti artist’s musical ideas while reiterating a quintessential folk-style accompaniment.

Supporting singers are a secondary element in the musical accompaniment of bicār gān, whose vocal reiterations of song refrains add a responsorial charm to performance. Such singers are typically acolytes of the bōyāti artist,<sup>50</sup> studying under them to learn the craft, and are thus able to provide immediate musical responses in realtime performance because of their intimate relationship to, and knowledge of, a bōyāti artist and his or her personal repertoire. While the

---

<sup>49</sup> See Chapter Two’s discussion of the dotārā in Bengali folk contours and instrumentalism.

<sup>50</sup> A discussion of bōyāti indoctrination, pedagogy and discipleship will be further discussed in Chapter Five.

implementation of vocal reiteration in bicār gān does not involve the complex dissections of text and its stylized rehashing that can be found in various forms of kīrtan and qawwālī, its conscious resounding of a mystical idea invokes a general kind of devotionism that can be likened to both the Hindu notion of *japa* and the Islamic notion of *dhikr*, both of which embrace the stylized act of meditative, mantra-like repetitions as worship. In addition, as with many forms of call-and-response singing, the supporting singers allow the audience to hear reiterations of key lines of poetry and their relationship to the lyrically independent, but thematically connected, verse material. This is particularly important, given the frequently rarefied wording in bicār gān compositions and the interweaving of lyrical allusions in the debate style. Furthermore, the disciples' very inclusion in bicār gān performance also allows the bōyāti artist (and even the other instrumentalists) critical moments of respite in a long and punctilious musical battle.

### **Referential Drumming**

While rhythm in bicār gān is consistently emphatic and lively, and accelerates quickly in tempo, what is particularly interesting about rhythmic accompaniment is the prominence given to drummers over other instrumentalists in the musical backing, which is critical to the sound of live bicār gān performance and its eventual progression through a complex series of devotional allusions. Contrary to the historically low social status of tabla drummers, sarangi players, and dancers in Hindustani music, the ḍhol in dialectical vernacular performance in Bengal—as in the genres of kōbigān and bicār gān—occupies the most critical supporting role to the bōyāti artist, and a famous ḍhuli often enjoys a popularity of his own. Due to the ḍhol family of drums'

associations with auspiciousness, celebration, and rapture throughout South Asia,<sup>51</sup> the *ḍhuli* in the *bicār gān* debate, while typically sitting with the rest of the ensemble, is accustomed to occasionally standing and playing, and even moving around stage during particularly exuberant moments of performance, with the large drum hanging from his body. In addition, the *ḍhuli* is also known for his vociferous and flamboyant technique, and is equally noticeable through his



**Figure 3.3. Video still of a sitting *ḍhuli*, followed by (from right to left): a bamboo flute player, second supporting singer, first supporting singer with *manjira* brass cymbals, and a harmonium player. A violin appears in the bottom left.**

iconic presence: a typically tall physique with shoulder-length hair that trashes about in performance.

Martin Clayton's seminal exploration of time in Indian music suggests that, while meter is abstract and inferred by the listener, *tāla* is something that exhibits broader metric qualities

---

<sup>51</sup> Consider, for instance, the Punjabi *ḍhol* drum's indispensable place in *bhangra* and its traditional allusions to youthfulness and harvest, or the impassioned solo/ensemble *ḍhol* drumming traditions at various Sufi shrines in Pakistan.

(2001).<sup>52</sup> In *bicār gān*, *ḍhol* drumming has two important functions: to mark a changeover or to enhance allusion. Changeovers accentuated by the *ḍhol* emphasize the instrument's role beyond time keeping (unlike the restrained, slow-tempo *tabla* accompaniment known as *vilambit laya*, used in the Hindustani singing style known as *khyal*). These changeovers, known as *chāc* ("mold" or "pattern"), involves many punctuating interjections that may appear suddenly, or even momentarily break the cyclical structure, through small and independent cadential patterns and drum rolls. Ultimately, the performance of *chāc* allows the *bōyāti* artist to segue from one discursive moment to the next by rhythmically highlighting the end of a polemical argument or the transition into song or recitative.

With regard to enhancing allusions, the performance of *ṭhekā* in the debate is not considered an interpretive sequence of rhythmic variations or compositions situated within the larger aesthetic parameters of one rhythmic system. Instead, *ḍhol* drumming involves the performance of a changing string of variations, considered separate rhythmic patterns that invoke a succession of complementary allusions. Richard Wolf has explored how repeating cycles of beats are not the only way to organize drum patterns, suggesting that many vernacular patterns in South Asia are based on prosody, or the patterns of sounds found in poetic texts. Through this study, he uses the connection between rhythmic meter and poetic meter to problematize the rhythm/melody dichotomy, showing how drum patterns can "sound like texts and be melodic" (2014: 9). As mentioned in previous sections of this chapter, the *ḍhuli* is remarkably

---

<sup>52</sup> The concept of *tāla* in Hindustani music involves an arrangement of drum syllables (*bol*) and in a distinctive rhythmic arrangement (*ṭhekā*) that specifies a certain number of metric pulses (*mātrā*). These pulses notably include deemphasized ones (*khāli*) and the return of the downbeat (*sam*), further delineated through a grouping of the collective beats into sections (*vibhāg*) and the repetition of its overall cyclical performance (*avartan*). Beyond this structural description, *tāla* in Hindustani music is also crucially understood through complex ideas regarding tempo and subdivision (*laya*) and its various implementations in performance (*layakāri*).

evaluative in his ability to reinforce, complement, or further elaborate on the bôyāti artist’s weaving of lyrical and sonic materials, given that stock rhythmic patterns in bicār gān, known as ṭhekā-s, contain allusions of their own. In bicār gān, ṭhekā patterns not only invoke poetic structure, but emotion and agency, suggesting an entire range of allusions related to genre, a devotional community, geographical region, or even poet, and a range of complementary sentimentalities embedded therein. The fact that rhythmic allusions are assembled by someone other than the bôyāti also highlights the important symbiosis which occurs between the bôyāti and ḍhuli through the debate’s musical specialization. Beyond the interactions between bôyāti artists and their individual relationships with audiences, this “dual interaction” produces a type of tandem devotionalism that broadens and further juxtaposes the palette of allusions, and the many possibilities of their artistic convergences in a given debate moment.

Lastly, it is important to mention that, while Western instruments such as the cornet, clarinet, and banjo have long been integrated into various Bengali vernacular music performances (such as jātrā and kôbigān), their presence is less common in contemporary bicār gān. These instruments are not necessarily perceived as foreign or unsuitable, but less relevant to the requirements of the genre’s accompaniment style, which its traditional melodic instruments (harmonium, bamboo flute, violin, and dotārā) adequately provide. However, in recent years and at larger functions, a variety of compact, programmable, and MIDI-equipped electronic drums have become popular accessories, such as the stick-operated Roland Octapad and the hand-operated Roland HandSonic. These instruments are played by a secondary drummer, and are used to sporadically support the rhythmic ideas of the ḍhuli with an ostensibly modern backing

that, while superfluous, further draws attention to the important interplay of rhythmic ideas in the debate.

### **PART THREE**

#### **The Oeuvre of Abdul Halim Boyati**

This detailed biographical section looks at the life and career of Abdul Halim Boyati (1929–2007), citing anecdotes and other asides taken from numerous interviews with him. The far-reaching research strategies and musical contributions of Abdul Halim—arguably the most influential *bōyāti* persona of the twentieth century—are not only noteworthy and plentiful, but provide critical insight into how *bōyāti* artists have further integrated and enhanced *bhāb sōṅgīt* compositions with their own compositional and rhetorical prowess. This discussion leads a subsequent section which begins an evaluation of compositional borrowing through imagery between canonic song bases (that is, *bhāb sōṅgīt* authors and *bōyāti* authors) in the *bicār gān* debate.

Abdul Halim is not only an outstanding performer initiated into the *bōyāti* musical realm at a young age, but a prolific saint-composer from within the community, which has had enormous consequences for the geographical contours of the *bōyāti* performance belt<sup>53</sup> (through his home district of Faridpur, today an important nexus), the future constitution and pedigree of *bōyāti* artists (through his vast acceptance of dedicated and talented disciples), and the burgeoning prospects of *bicār gān* as a specialized debate performance (through his own voluminous collection of songs covering an eclectic range of traditional and pioneering themes). In addition, Abdul Halim has famously performed on numerous occasions with Hajira Bibi

---

<sup>53</sup> See Chapter Four for a geographical examination of today's *bicār gān* shrines.

(1913–2006)—the first successful female Muslim performer on the vernacular Bengali stage, through the medium of *bicār gān*— and this collaboration has had unprecedented effect on the stylistic and demographical contours of contemporary *bôyāti* artists themselves. Lastly, as a former *muktijuddhō* (freedom fighter) in the Liberation War, Abdul Halim continues to receive deep reverence from generations of *bôyāti* artists and *bicār gān* connoisseurs alike, and is very much memorialized as an inherently Bangladeshi musician and stalwart of regional Sufism.

Abdul Halim was born in 1929 in the village of Baradowali, in the Shivachar district of Faridpur, an area steeped in vibrant regional music traditions. Raised in a semi-musical family, Abdul Halim displayed an early familiarity with music, and particularly with those genres which he would refer to as *boiṭhōkī gān* (songs of assembly),<sup>54</sup> which were performed by folk and devotional artists at a designated *āsōr* (gathering). Halim’s father, Abdul Jabbar Moral (n.d.), was initiated into the Chishtī brotherhood and also a *hekim* (a Unani homeopathic healer), while prominent relatives on both sides of his family were also locally-known dervishes within the Sufi community. Thus, Halim’s immersion into Bengali Sufism, from the standpoint of both pietism and the accompanying craft of *boiṭhōkī gān*, were integrated aspects of his lifestyle well before he began his professional career.

At a young age, Halim encountered several obstacles that inhibited his natural curiosity toward languages and learning, but which consequently instigated his fascination with *bôyāti* discursiveness:

---

<sup>54</sup> Derived from *baiṭhak* (seat), a word used in a variety of ways in South Asia. For example, a *Pushtimarg Baiṭhak* is one of 142 sites in India considered sacred by the followers of the Pushtimarg tradition of Vaishnavism, while *baiṭhak gāna* is both a social gathering and a form of music originating in Suriname by descendants of the Indian community. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, *baiṭhak* also connotes a *mehmān* (guest), and therefore a space where guests are fed and entertained (*baiṭhak khānā*), perhaps leading to further historical associations with regality.

While the local Hindus learned English with great progress, the Muslim clerics in my village denounced it and, one particular cleric named Yasin Maulvi issued a *fatwā* (decree) against it. I had much interest in learning English as a boy but the clerics repeatedly chastised me. My own father, who secretly desired me to learn it, reluctantly forbade it too, out of fear of communal antagonization. So, following convention, I took to formally learning the Qur'ān but did not get far in that pursuit either. Most of us had very little skill in understanding Arabic, even if we were taught to read it, and *bôṅgānubād* (Bengali translations) of the Qur'ān were unheard of at that time (B. Kibreah, personal communication, 2005).<sup>55</sup>

In many ways, and through many such anecdotes, Abdul Halim describes the palpable schism between rural Bengali Hindus and Muslims in the early twentieth century, the latter having to negotiate agrarian-based Islamic orthodoxy that increasingly viewed colonial-supported education with much more suspicion, alongside time-honored approaches to Islamic study—both of which presented a serious disconnect with source language material. Notably, Halim (and presumably his father) had trouble understanding the taboo of English, despite its perceived ability to procure socioeconomic stability, while equally puzzled by a strong communal encouragement to interface with Arabic by non-cognitive and rote immersion.

While the political and epistemological attachments of English-language knowledge were at odds with the regional Muslim clergy's notions of progressiveness, Bengali itself was perceived to sully the sanctity and authenticity of Arabic liturgy in Islam. During the early years of Abdul Halim's intellectual development, he was thus forced to consider the appropriate vehicle for musical expression in song and performance, a precarious endeavor since, apart from English, he viewed the common tongue (Bengali) and the sacramental language of Bengali

---

<sup>55</sup> As mentioned in Chapter One, this predicament reflects a larger historical phenomenon of Qur'ānic book printing and the centrality of liturgical Arabic found throughout the non-Arab Muslim world. In Bengal, popular and sanctioned copies of the Qur'ān with parallel Arabic text and Bengali pronunciation/exegesis were not widely disseminated in rural areas until later in the 20th century (Uddin 2006). Thus, for hundreds of years, the average Bengali Muslim's interface with the Qur'ān was through a cursory understanding of its stylized recitation conventions through the rules of *tajwīd* (elocution) in the original Arabic. While the sacred sound of the Qur'ān through this vocalized interface was independently admired as an act of devotion, an understanding of scriptural content and its linguistic eloquence primarily came from specialized clerics in the community, and orally-disseminated commentary.

Muslims (Arabic) as individually restricted in expressivity, including how they related to one another. On the one hand, this cultural-religious divide was not particular to East Bengal, since translations of the Qur'ān were neither popular nor commissioned throughout much of the non-Arab Islamic world until the modern era. On the other, this predicament seemed to produce an obstructive twofold nullification because it not only distanced the scriptural accessibility of Arabic, but put into question the poetic validity of Bengali and its essentially Indic roots for Bengali Muslims in Halim's social environment. It is particularly useful here to note what a language such as English or Arabic represented by sonic force alone, what it simply evoked through association or mere utterance. For many bôyāti artists who have followed in Abdul Halim's footsteps, bicār gān represents a musical platform which not only infuses concurrent religious viewpoints into a larger devotional performance, but permits and values the many routes through highbrow and demotic discourse in which devotional knowledge is comprehended in their traditionally rural spaces.

Reminiscing about some of his seminal performances of bicār gān, Abdul Halim continues:

In those days, *murfidī* (songs in praise of the Sufi guide) and *mārfōtī* (songs of Islamic gnosis) were known as *kôṛôcā gān*<sup>56</sup> in my area. People also had the time to listen to groups of performers singing such songs for days on end. I was at a large venue, with many people in attendance, and a well-known singer named Afiluddin Sardar (n.d.) really enjoyed my songs. He was amazed that I knew so many compositions. Afiluddin Sardar was a *dôlil lekhôk* (middleman or scribe) in the local registry office and was literate, and would compose and preserve song lyrics with pen and notebook. He gave me *æk tākā* (a one-unit monetary note) for my performance and, as the performance progressed, I received more money from other listeners. When I brought the money home, my father was pleased and said, "people actually gave away money just for listening to songs?". It was a lot of money in those days, and I was able to sing *gāner piṭhe gān* (back-to-back songs, or without interruption) (Ibid).

---

<sup>56</sup> The meaning of *kôṛôcā* here is unknown, though one definition seems to imply a book of records a landowner would retain to manage tenants' accounts. The term *kôṛôcā gān* may perhaps refer to a random miscellany of songs, or, generally, the music making of a peasantry.

This particular discussion introduces another critical threshold in Abdul Halim’s musical career that challenges the Bengali Muslim cultural standards of his milieu: the encyclopedic nature of vernacular bicār gān repertoire and its coinciding approach to oral-written exposition and preservation, as well as the justifications of bōyāti livelihood as a paid Muslim profession. The respected singer and educated civil servant Afiluddin Sarkar sees much promise in young Abdul Halim’s mental skills, precisely due to his own ability to, and reliance on, documenting written song. This is supplemented by the account of Halim’s father, a religious man, who is genuinely surprised that people are willing to pay Halim to witness his musical adeptness on stage.

Abdul Halim’s life as a celebrated bōyāti is filled with many legendary accounts of musical battles which would have a profound effect on both his creative and pedagogical pursuits. For instance:

When I was still young, my family moved to a neighboring village where there were many *gorā lok* (conservative people of faith). There was a cleric named Maulvi Jamaluddin Mandal (n.d.) who was a graduate of a Deobandi<sup>57</sup> madrasa, and everyone feared him. I had already become quite well known for my performances of bicār gān and he approached me about this. He asked, “is singing and listening to music *jāyej* (Arabic: *jā’iz*, meaning permissible)?”. I said, “yes, I think so.” He looked sternly at me and replied, “there will be a time when people will no longer listen to *owāj* (Arabic: *wa’az*, sermons), but thousands will *somōbetō* (gather) to listen to music. If you can add a *dhōrmīyō rūp* (religious flavor) to bicār gān, then *āmi somōrthōn kōrbō* (“I will endorse it”). He gave me six months to take up the task while he was away on a mission. He returned to see me perform at the village of Patali in a bicār gān debate against Ahmad Ali Boyati. At the event, there was *bipul sōṅkhōk dōrfōk srotā* (an immense number of audience members). Also, this particular region was known for its very demanding music battles. There was even a local saying: *āge mārō bāṅ tārṅore hōbe gān* (“first shoot the arrow, then song will ensue”). I saw the cleric Jamaluddin observing from afar, with some reservation in his eyes. The debate was on

---

<sup>57</sup> Deobandi is a revivalist movement within Sunni Ḥanafī Islam, and initially developed in North India under the auspices of Shah Waliullah Dehlawi (1703–1762). It was founded in 1867 in the wake of the failed Sepoy Rebellion, a major uprising against the British East India Company, a decade earlier. Very much a reaction to British colonialism, the Deobandi movement sees itself as a scholastic tradition and geographically expanded across the Indian Subcontinent, and later in the South Asian diaspora, through a series of religious seminaries (*dār al-‘Ulūm*). While the Deobandi school was not initially adverse to Sufism in terms of its intellectual heritage, its latter-day conservatism and fundamentalist theology led to a de facto fusion of its teachings with the growth of Wahhabism in Pakistan and Bangladesh, which “has all but shattered the mystical Sufī presence.” (Abbas 2011).

*jinn* (supernatural creatures)<sup>58</sup> vs. *insān* (man), and I was representing *jiner pōkkhō* (the side of *jinn*). I wrote several compositions based on the seventy-second chapter of the Qur'ān, which mentions how the *jinn* were miraculously created from smokeless fire and that the Prophet Muḥammad was sent as a guide to both human and *jinn* communities. The first song was *ātōser toiri jin dhore kotō rūp re* (“the fire-born *jinn* take on so many forms”) and then I sang *jinerā kore ibādōt tārā srbōkkhōne pāite cheṣṭā āllāher rōhōmōt* (“the *jinn* worship, always striving to obtain God’s mercy”). I also mentioned in detail how the Prophet Sulaymān (Solomon) was gifted with the ability to talk to animals and *jinn*. Ahmad Ali Boyati was not expecting such detailed lyrics or discussion, and I easily won the battle. I never discussed the matter further with Maulvi Jamaluddin, but I continued writing many more songs in this manner for the rest of my career (Ibid).

This account elucidates how Abdul Halim’s own talent for extracting scriptural material helped to complement and broaden the scope of *bicār gān* beyond a general dialectical battle into a distinctively Muslim-oriented one. Specifically, his combined musical skill and penchant for textual citation allowed him to introduce a particularly referential flavor to the staged debate that had hitherto not existed and, through his popularity, this strategy legitimated the presence of *bōyāti* compositions in *bicār gān* repertoire since they covered specific topics from Qur’ānic parables and Islamic mythology that were less emphasized in the speculative objectives and abstract impressionism of *bhāb sōṅgīt* compositions. Lastly, this emphasis on erudition through compositional mastery further gave validity to the genre’s intentions beyond entertainment, as a performance with a valid didactical approach to pietism. In Abdul Halim’s case, his sublimation of *bicār gān* allowed the genre to sidestep the aggressive crackdowns of hardline mullahs in his area, yet without detriment to the fanciful parameters of the stylized debate. Tellingly, in his lifetime, Abdul Halim would have other encounters with oppositional *ālem* (Arabic: *‘alim*,

---

<sup>58</sup> As entities born of smokeless fire, the *jinn* are often thought of as occupying an intermediary plane between *malā’ikah* (angels) and *al-nās* (mankind) in Islamic cosmology. Like angels, they may inhabit a realm unseen by humans, but can also take physical form and interact with mankind. Unlike angels, the *jinn* share the trait of human fallibility due to their possession of free will, and are therefore understood to be semi-spiritual creatures with a moral ambivalence (Lebling 2010). Their origins date from pre-Islamic times, and share a lengthy history with other religious traditions, as well as witchcraft, magic, and the occult, making their inclusion as a *bicār gān* topic one of great importance. In addition, for many classical scholars of Islam, the Qur’ānic character of Iblīs was considered a fallen angel, but contemporary scholarship regards him as a *jinn*. His fall from grace, and eventual manifestation as *Shayṭān* (“Satan”), is thus also a topic of interest for *bōyāti* artists.

scholar) in formal *bāhāc* (Arabic: *bahāth*, discussion or debate), a popular public format in early twentieth-century Muslim Bengal which itself was a dialectical performance.<sup>59</sup>

Yet, Abdul Halim does not simply describe his musical journey as a series of serendipitous events. While these previous episodes might be recognized as a harbinger to the theological and textural scrutiny that would later galvanize *bicār gān*, Halim’s childhood was concurrently permeated with several mystical encounters that would align his musical style with spiritual epiphanies. The details of his personal upbringing and the social conditions of village life in East Bengal clearly shaped his attraction and capacity to internalize the compositions of *bhāb sōṅgīt* and, later, to devise many memorable compositions of his own. However, Abdul Halim’s *āddhāttik cintācetônā* (spiritual inclinations), *sādhônā* (asceticism), and *mānôsjṅgôt* (persona) are very much attached to his legendary *môṅcer lôṛāi* (stage confrontations), and this is supported by his own earliest musical impressions:

Once, I was sleeping in the boat of Akbar Ali when a vision came upon me. A few *dôrbef* (holy men) approached me and asked me to take them across the river. I did not want to disappoint them, so I did so. The holy men were quite grateful for this and then asked me if I desired anything, but I was too young to have particular aspirations. One of the holy men instructed me to open my mouth, so I did, and he blew into it. He then said, “now go, music will be your destiny and livelihood” (Ibid).

In another account, he states:

My father was a deeply religious man and spend many months away from the family, visiting the *āstānā* (dwelling or abode) of fakirs across the country. Once, after spending my months at a shrine in Barisal, a local *sādhu* (another word for holy man) wanted to give my father something. My father saw a *sārindā* fiddle in the holy man’s hand and asked him for it. The holy man said, “what use do you have for this? Well anyway, take it, it’s yours. Someone in your family will find use for it.” Later, I would acquire the *sārindā* from my father and recited *dôṛūd fôrīf* (salutations to the Prophet Muḥammad). I would carry the fiddle with me and play it for the rest of my life (Ibid).

---

<sup>59</sup> See Chapter One for the historical setting behind the phenomenon of *bāhāc*.

In his own words, Abdul Halim’s ability to both become a professional musician and possess his trademark *sārindā* fiddle<sup>60</sup> are spiritual blessings conferred upon him through the acts of holy men. His deep spiritual connections to living saint figures such as his father, the dervish Abdul Jabbar Moral (through which he became familiar with Bengal’s Sufi heritage by means of extensive *ziyārat*, or pilgrimage), and his *pīr murfīd* (master or guide) Hazrat Ismail Chishti Nizami (n.d.)—through which he was educated in the larger tradition of Chishtī Sufism in the Indian Subcontinent—are particularly noteworthy. In his lifelong spiritual quest, Abdul Halim repeatedly endured the ritual performance of *cillāh nashīnī*, a forty-day retreat of penance and solitude common to the Indo-Persian traditions of Sufism<sup>61</sup>—typically involving minimal sleep, food, and interaction with the outside world—in order to induce mystical arousal through asceticism. From these experiences, he recalls many *āloukik ghawānā* (supernatural incidents), including traveling to Makkah in his sleep to make ḥajj, subliminally receiving inspiration for his memorable song lyrics, and hearing the voice of the Prophet Muḥammad instruct him to wear *kōmlā rānger libās o ṭupi* (orange-colored robes and skull cap), which he and his disciples would don from there afterwards. On the one hand, his unique spiritual pedigree gave him profound access to knowledge of both the provincial intricacies of Bengali sainthood as well as classic Persian and Urdu writings of mysticism, including *malḥūzāt* (collected sermons, litanies and personal letters of scholars and poets). This combined insight into native-based and colloquial devotionalism, as well as the cultivated Sufi thought of Indo-Persian antiquity, would supply him with unprecedented thematic and lyrical material for *bicār gān* composition. On the other hand,

---

<sup>60</sup> See Chapter One for a discussion of the *sārindā* fiddle.

<sup>61</sup> elsewhere in the Muslim world, this practice is known as *khalwah*, *chihlum*, or *al-Arbaʿīn*

Abdul Halim’s broader legacy is made exclusive not only through his compositional genius, but by the indelible nature of his spiritual pursuits, such as his religious perseverance and distinctively dream-inspired attire. These idiosyncratic personal accounts and physical details further fortified his presence on stage, adding an element of reverence and charm which would have lasting effects on the exhibition and razzle-dazzle that would become a significant feature of *bicār gān* performance.

One of Abdul Halim’s senior disciples, Daliluddin Boyati (n.d.), narrates the following curious episode:

The *zamīndār* (land owner, but here, someone of regional aristocracy) Milu Miyan (n.d.) had arranged for a concert at his estate, where Halim was invited to perform against the famous *kōbiyāl* Mangal Sarkar (n.d.). As Halim approached the area, he realized that two women, named Veena and Parveen, were a part of Mangal Sarkar’s *dol* (ensemble). Halim began to worry, not only because they were very beautiful and talented women, but because he had never performed with or shared the stage alongside female performers. Halim had thought that they were *bōyāti* artists too, but they were dressed quite lavishly in colorful *saris*, and even wore make-up and eyeglasses. At that time, Halim was still young enough to wear long shorts to venues, with which he always donned his *tupī* (Muslim skull cap). The *pāllā* (debate template) was Hindu vs. Muslim, and Halim performed first, representing the Muslim side. Halim sang a *bōndōnā* (here, an introductory hymn)<sup>62</sup>: his own composition entitled *kātōi je sundar khodā tomār surōtkhāni* (“how beautiful, Lord, is your countenance”). After this, he gave his salutations to Allah, the prophet, the saints, and formally introduced himself to the audience. Mangal Sarkar then approached the stage and sang a *bōndōnā* as well, but one which sounded odd to Halim. However, he had heard that *kōbiyāl* performers sang much longer and more ornate *bōndōnā* compositions. The audience began to request that the two women dance, knowing that they had become famous in the *jātrā* world. Mangal sat down, and the women danced for about thirty minutes, accompanied by cassette recordings of *ādhunik* (modern) songs. Because this was not a shrine-based performance, there weren’t any senior *bicārōk* (judges) to object, but even the audience grew tired of Veena and Parveen after some time because the *ādhunik* songs were not enjoyable. Some people asked the women to respond to Halim’s question, to which they replied that they did not perform in the question-answer format, and just happened to be acquaintances of Mangal Sarkar. The debate came to an abrupt end, followed by Halim and Mangal performing individual sessions (Ibid).

---

<sup>62</sup> As mentioned earlier in the chapter, contemporary *bōyāti* song structure refers to the *bōndōnā* as the opening stanza of a composition.

In this lengthy but intriguing narration, the experimental convergence of disparate performance traditions at a non-shrine venue leads to an ineffective conclusion, which is largely prompted by the conflicting aesthetic associations of musical style. While female musicians in the *bôyāti* world were uncommon at the time (an absence which Halim would later help to remedy), women affiliated with *ĵātrā* suffered particularly unfavorable connotations in the Muslim performance circuit, for Muslim *ĵātrā* troupes had lost institutionalized backing that, many commonly claim, allowed for the rather salacious reputation of the feminine star in folk performance. While *bicār gān* has and continues to allow for contrasting, heterogeneous narratives to enter the mix, their individual potencies are axiomatically molded by the dialectical exchange. Therefore, the *ĵātrā* actresses dressed as *ĵātrā* performers—and without negotiation skills—ultimately destroyed the ambience of the *bicār gān* concert, as the unregulated audience at this estate-based performance were both distracted and confused by Veena and Parveen’s place in the dialogue. The young Halim, however, came dressed and armed for battle and, in fact, was equally adept at representing the opposing voice in the Hindu vs. Muslim debate in other performance venues, for which he donned the *dhuti* robes of the Brahmin *bābu* (sir) instead of the Muslim *hujūr* (Arabic: *hadhūr*, or “lord”). More importantly, Halim was well-versed in the succinct parameters of the debate, offering laconic welcoming remarks and setting the stage for battle. Conversely, the *ĵātrā* dancers not only disfigured the rhythm of the battle, but Mangal’s own presumable lack of skill is evidenced by his prolonged *kōbiyāl*-style *bōndōnā*.

Abdul Halim’s legendary battles with Hajira Bibi (1913–2006), the first Muslim woman to professionally enter the *bôyāti* world, are numerous. Over the course of their mutual careers, the two received much attention on the *bicār gān* stage, which was a testament to both their

musical skill and the ease with which they spontaneously collaborated. In time, the two realized that their joint popularity and creatively could heighten the complexity of bicār gān with the introduction of new templates, styles of commentary, and dramatic renditions, which could ultimately present the genre as a more complete entertainment package. In one account, Abdul Halim mentions:

On the bicār gān stage, Halim-Hajira was a *jonôpriyô juṭi* (popular pair). I performed many times with her, in front of thousands. Hajira was born Shyamadasi Sarkar and from a Hindu family. Her father's name was Ishwar Rajkumar Sarkar (n.d.), and was a *kôbiyāl*. She learned many Sufi songs from her first mentor, Azhar Mandal (n.d.), who later married her. From then onwards, she took the Muslim name Hajira Bibi. Azhar Mandal was actually a disciple of national folk poet Jasimuddin, and Hajira also developed a very important relationship with Jasimuddin. Through her career, she regarded him as her guru, not Azhar or some other *bôyāti* or *pīr* (saint). Jasimuddin was very fond of Hajira and her performances, and greatly inspired her to enter the *bôyāti* world. Hajira had a wonderful memory, strong voice and knew how to work the crowd. Over time, the debate *nārī* (woman) vs. *puruṣ* (man) became popular when we performed together, as well as *nūr* (light) vs. *ākār* (form). They were not popular before then. People would have enthusiastic *prôṭikriyā* (reactions), and would even make certain *môntôbbô* (comments) such as: *meye jôkhôn uni, uni meyer tôttôî bôlben, ar jehetu uni puruṣ sehetu uni puruṣer sunām bôlben* (“since she is female, she should discuss the essence of the feminine, and since he is a man, he should discuss the merits of men”). However, they sometimes enjoyed it when we switched positions, which we could do because of our rapport. She was so good at drawing correlations between women and the world. She would say *mā kintu meye* (“the mother is female”), or *hāowā hōcche bātās* (“Eve is the wind”)<sup>63</sup>, or *māṭir jôkti meye* (“the woman represents the primordial earth”) or *pānikeo gôṅgā bôlā hōy* (“even water is referred to as Ganga”)<sup>64</sup>, or *mīm jôktite māiyā, môkkā o môḍinā* (“the Arabic letter *mīm* represents femininity, and is used to spell Makkah and Madīnah”)<sup>65</sup> (Ibid).

In the case of Hajira Bibi, we see a female counterpart to Abdul Halim's musicality whose physical stage presence also transgresses cultural conventions of Muslim Bengal through

<sup>63</sup> a play on words, since it is both the name for the first woman, Eve (Arabic: *Hawwāh*), and a word for wind (Bengali: *hāowā*)

<sup>64</sup> the Ganga being both a sacred river and the Hindu consort to several major male deities

<sup>65</sup> The reference here is to the letter *mīm* in the Qur'ān, as it is some times found in combination with up to four additional ones—together known as *hurūf muqaṭṭa'āt* (“disjoined letters”). These letters are found at the beginning of certain *surah-s* (books) of the Qur'ān, and exist independently from other syntactical verses. The original significance of the letters is unknown. Traditional *tafsīr*, or exegesis, has interpreted them to be abbreviations for either names or qualities of God, or for the names or content of the respective books of the Qur'ān. A variety of interpretations have existed, linking the letters to acrophony (Ali 1917), scribal intrusion or corruption (Nöldeke 1860, Luxenberg 2000), and numerology (Loth 1888, Khalifa 1974), but Sufism has generally upheld the notion that there are mystical significances to these letters. The details differ between schools of Sufism, but *hurūf muqaṭṭa'āt* are generally believed to be an extension of *'asmā' u llāhi l-husnā* (“the ninety-nine names of God”), with some authors offering specific “hidden” meanings for the individual letters.

a musical sublimation of the sublime, ultimately negotiating the gendered demarkations of *mardānā and zanānā*, the traditional indoor and outdoor domains of Muslim men and women. Firstly, Hajira's own family background as a Hindu convert to Islam (and later in life, to *bāul* practice) and into a family of *kôbigān* performers gives her critical theological insight into multiple traditions which would not have been accorded to her otherwise. Secondly, Hajira's own guru, the national folk poet Jasimuddin is also telling, as she learned the art of *bicār gān* from *bôyāti* gurus, including her first husband, but promoted herself as a disciple of Jasimuddin. While fully immersed in the *bôyāti* musical world, this act gave her a much broader and culturally recognizable endorsement, one which indirectly aligned her vernacular artistry with the burgeoning folk nationalism that critically informed celebrated notions of Bengali-ness in the East Pakistan-era. With the tremendous support of these accommodations, the Halim-Hajira duo made novel additions to *bicār gān* performance, in some cases reviving or devising new debate templates that would specifically become ideal for a male-female *bôyāti* duel. As *bicār gān* became a more exclusively shrine-based performance genre, the inclusion of female *bôyāti* artists only increased, as Sufi shrines in Bengal, unlike traditional Bengali mosques, have not been as adverse to permitting women devotees to enter their sacred spaces. In fact, certain Sufi shrines in Bengal are particularly known for their female pilgrims, which in some cases is supported by the interred saint's particular form of *kerāmôt*, which can be connected to discretely feminine concerns, such as fertility.

Unsurprisingly, the heritage of Abdul Halim is also strengthened by his resoluteness in initiating many artists into the *bôyāti* world of *bicār gān*, both male and female, including critical ones of the subsequent generation, such as Lal Miya Boyati (b. 1948) , Asaduzzaman Boyati (d.

1988), Shamsur Ali Boyati (b. 1935), Daliluddin Boyati (b. 1946) , Shamsur Ali Boyati (b), Aynal Boyati (b. 1938), Aleya Boyati (b. 1951) and Aklima Boyati (b. 1949). Abdul Halim states:

It has not been hard for me to take *fāgred* (Persian: *shāgird*, disciples), for they mostly approach me, though I do not choose just anyone to receive *bāyāt* ( Arabic: *bay‘ah*, indoctrination) by my hand. It is a special ceremony that forms an *āttiyōtā* (kinship) with your student for life. All of my disciples show an affinity for the *sārindā*, and they must play it on stage while they perform. We do a lot of talking in the debate, and the instrument is a reminder to the audience that we are trained musicians, not just *cārōṇ kōbi* (bards). But I also give them books to read and absorb about important topics in the Qur’ān and Veda-s, so that they become familiar with *fāstriyō kāhinī* (scriptural stories) and such, in order to learn *tōrkō bitōrkō* (disputation). We also gather every Thursday night to make *jikir* (Arabic: *dhikr*, a ritualized recitation of litanies) and *ibādōt* (Arabic: *‘ibādah*, worship). Some of my students have not gained as much popularity over the years, but I always tell them to never be *nirāf* (disappointed), since I have chosen each of them for their *prōtibhā* (genius). Some of them have discovered other ways to promote the art of *bicār gān* by being interviewed on radio programs, or by publishing their own song books. I myself did this, and am very proud of the collections *Hālim Sōṅgūt Prōthōm Khōṇḍō* (“Songs of Halim, Volume One”) *Gān Dōrpōn* (“Mirror of Knowledge”) and *Premasudhā* (“Nectar of Love”) (Ibid).

Unusual for a *bōyāti*, Abdul Halim was both a *dīkkhā* or “initiation” guru (i.e., a pedigreed religious guide from a Sufi brotherhood), and a *jikkhā* or “instructive” guru (a senior *bōyāti* artist) for his students.<sup>66</sup> As such, he offered his disciples both spiritual guidance and musical tutorship, which was inspired by his own expansive experimentation and overhaul of the features of *bicār gān*.<sup>67</sup> Ultimately, Abdul Halim’s expertise is profoundly strengthened by his

<sup>66</sup> See Chapter Four for a discussion of *bōyāti* indoctrination and pedagogy.

<sup>67</sup> Amongst Abdul Halim’s hundreds of compositions exists a sub-genre which he has called *bornōmālār gān*, songs on a range of metaphysical topics, but conforming to a stylistic guideline whereby all lines in any given song begin with the same letter of the Bengali alphabet. Abdul Halim’s objective in producing these songs—of which there are many composed in the Bengali language’s forty-three main vowels and consonants—was to create provocative and complex devotional poetry in the manner of children’s alphabet-based rhymes. This songwriting approach, at once accessible and esoteric, is not only a dazzling display of his compositional mastery but also serves the didactic purpose of providing his acolytes with an introductory textbook-like collection of prototype *bōyāti* songs for the *bicār gān* debate. On the other hand, one might consider another sub-genre of Abdul Halim’s songs, known as *bindurōkkhār gān*. These songs are ultimately designed to instruct one on how to invigorate the *ādya śakti* (primal energy) within the body, a metaphysical and yogic concept which Abdul Halim identifies with his Sufi-centered austerities. According to Abdul Halim, the *bindu* (point or dot, but perhaps here referring to an innate internal source associated with the creation process) becomes disintegrated over one’s lifetime, but can be re-aligned for *rōkkhā* (preservation), by means of various and elliptical meditational exercises. This very different genre of song, while perfectly suitable for *bicār gān*, are also deeply instructional, in this case providing spiritual guidelines for asceticism through melody and lyrics.

dedication to acolytes, since he not only reinvigorated the theoretical and stylistic parameters of the staged debate, but imparted strategic knowledge that would ensure its future preservation and relevance in the religious, sociocultural and administrative changes that would reshape the regional spaces of Muslim Bengal in the twentieth century.



**Figure 3.4. Construction begins on a pandal announcing the upcoming Halim Melā, an annual festival honoring Abdul Halim, in his home district of Faridpur.**

### **Dual Compendia in the Performative Duel: Sublimation Through Imagery**

The following section examines a compositional technique which devotionally binds bhāb sōṅgīt compositions with bōyāti compositions, and the consequential affect it produces in the bicār gān debate. Abdul Halim’s own compositional talent cannot be overstated, and he ultimately expanded and juxtaposed two distinctive canonic sources for bicār gān performance. Songs from the bhāb sōṅgīt compendium and bōyāti-composed ones can each be seen as providing complementary objectives to the debate song canon, complicating a traditional

distinction in contemporary Bengali songwriting between *surôkār*, “melodist,” and *gītikār*, “lyricist.”<sup>68</sup> This latter anthology of songs comes from within the *bôyāti* world, the poems of contemporary performers and their gurus and colleagues.

The same body of *sur*-s and *ṭhekā*-s, or stock melodic motifs and rhythmic patterns, are at the disposal of the *bôyāti* when devising original compositions. However, since these melodies are attached to a newer body of song lyrics, or at least ones enjoyed by a more specific audience, their utilization does not necessarily carry the same rhetorical weight or evocativeness. In such cases, the *bôyāti* focuses more on ideas of mystical recollection and citation through lyricism, borrowing and altering imagery (*chāyā*) from established poets of the canonic base. A more syntactical prowess is thus highlighted in the *bôyāti* artist’s approach to rendering compositions of his own, or relatively unfamiliar ones of his colleagues or guru. When describing the strategizing or interplay of song choices in *bicār gān*, *bôyāti* artists use the term *mālā gāthā* or “stringing the garland,” which represents a tactic to consolidate the enduring compositions of *bhāb sōṅgīt* and their saint-composers with an ever-expanding body of original compositions by *bôyāti* composers, often the very *bôyāti* artists on the debate stage.

To situate the incorporation of *chāyā* in *bicār gān*, I first turn to a comparable technique found in the genre of *qawwālī*. In some ways, the concept of *mālā gāthā* is not unlike the musical execution of *girah* or “tying the knot” (or sometimes *band*, meaning “to fasten”), which exists in

---

<sup>68</sup> In much of the history of modern song recording in South Asia, melodist and lyricists have existed as separately established professions, just as actors and playback singers have profoundly contributed to the musical division of labor in film. In the Golden Age of Bengali “modern songs,” from the late 50s through the 60s and early 70s, this type of allocation within the studio was a highly efficient process, and independent songs and albums outside of those associated with film scores enjoyed equal, if not more popularity, amongst music lovers, which was an unprecedented phenomenon in its heyday. Interestingly, *bôyāti*-s who “moonlight” as playback singers today also produce albums of their own, in which a “model” is sometimes filmed to lip synch against their song tracks, which is very much another conventionalized aspect of music distribution in Bangladesh today, but consequently modifies the experience of *bicār gān* distributed in the form of music video (see epilogue).

traditional long-form qawwālī performance. In North Indian and Pakistani qawwālī, the girah represents the singer’s attempt to expand and diversify the poetic and musical boundaries of the main text that is being sung. The girah is essentially a brief inserted verse—at the beginning of the performance or at particularly-placed intervals in the midst of performance—who inclusion is ultimately designed to please and enrapture listeners through a skillful weaving of smaller poetic pieces into the central composition of the qawwālī performance. Importantly, the girah—typically a *sher* (couplet) or *rubā’ī* (quatrain) of poetry—also represents an opportunity for the singer to explore the larger repertoire of Sufi texts used in qawwālī and it thus typically involves the poetry of other composers, the imported lines sharing a common thematic idea with the larger poem to which it is being connected. Musically, the rendering of a girah is also sonically noticeable since its introduction is often preceded by the continuous “looping” of a specific lyric from the larger main poem—typically one with rarefied tone—through a technique known as *dohrānā* or *takrār*. Once this stylized repetition has been established, the main singer(s) will eventually break the repetition (which is vocally maintained by the group’s supporting singers) by introducing the girah in a “freestyle” fashion over the rhythmic accompaniment, or in a manner similar to recitative. This approach thus uniquely highlights the girah within the text of the main poem, since its distinctive transition contravenes the larger performance’s *cal*, or musical gait, which is both set to a specific melodic structure and more metrically aligned to the accompanying drumming.

If the inclusion of a saint-composer’s *kerāmôt* provides a distinctive strategy for devotionalizing a debate moment in *bicār gān*, a parallel poetic strategy is achieved through the incorporation of compositional imagery, *chāyā* (literally “shadow” or “shade,” but sometimes

also *dhṛti*, meaning “conception” or “impression”), the conjuring of notable themes and sentiments found in *bhāb sōṅgīt* lyrics themselves and tying them to *bōyāti*-composed compositions. The plentiful idiomatic expressions unique to *bhāb sōṅgīt* represent an established phraseology for mystical parlance which have fortified its enduring and robust contributions to modern Bengali devotional song. Since devotional songs in Bengali are often replete with atypical imagery—made memorable through their perceived quirkiness—a single word or phrase can have lasting impact on the listener’s appreciation of a composition, indirectly drawing further correlations to a poet’s mystical temperament or the regional dynamics of a particular genre.

<u>Image or Phrase</u>	<u>Literal Meaning</u>	<u>Associative Poet</u>
<i>kārigôr</i>	craftsman	Ramesh Sheel (1877–1967)
<i>ājôb khælā</i>	strange play	Doorbin Shah (1910–1977)
<i>rōṅger bārôî</i>	colorful boat	Shah Abdul Karim (1916–2009)
<i>dōmer mālā</i>	the garland of breath	Pagla Kanai (1809–1889)
<i>khācā</i>	bird cage	Lalôn (d. 1890)
<i>premer bājār</i>	the bazaar of love	Hasan Raja (1854–1922)
<i>bhrômôr</i>	bumble bee	Radharaman Dutta (1833–1915)
<i>bhāb tārōṅgô</i>	wave of <i>bhāb</i> (“sentiment”)	Jalaluddin Khan (1894–1972)
<i>liluwā bātās</i>	cool breeze	Wakeel Munshi (d. 1978)
<i>kôlōṅkinî</i>	ill-reputed one (feminine inflection)	Manmohan Dutta (1833–1915)
<i>āfā sindhu</i>	ocean of hope	Bijoy Sarkar (1903–1985)
<i>mānôb rôtôn</i>	jewel of humanity	Bhaba Pagla (1902–1984)
<i>kôlôber thikānā</i>	the heart’s address	Razzak Dewan (d. 2010)
<i>tôn bhūbôn</i>	the body-universe	Alif Chand Dewan (d. 1982)
<i>khāker putul</i>	clay doll	Shitalong Shah (1800–1889)

**Table 3.5. Examples of notable *chāyā*, or compositional imagery, used by some saint-composers of *bhāb sōṅgīt*.**

However, the idea of *chāyā* is not exclusive to the genre of *bicār gān*, as lyrical phrases in traditional song have a long tradition of allusion in Bengal. An example can be given through the 1970 film *Jibon Theke Neya*, produced by novelist and filmmaker Zahir Raihan (1935–1972).<sup>69</sup>

As a political satire based on the Bengali Language Movement, *Jibon Theke Neya* is considered a

<sup>69</sup> The success of this film not only lies in its pioneering style, but that Raihan was heavily involved in the independence struggle and went missing while searching for his brother, the notable novelist and activist Shahidullah Kaiser (1927–1971).

milestone of Bangladeshi cinema. In its intimate visual setting, the tyranny of a matriarch in her extended family symbolizes the political dictatorship of Ayub Khan in East Pakistan, an autocrat notoriously remembered for his corruption and segregational policies, which disintegrated East-West Pakistan relations, and motivated the emergence of the liberation movement for Bangladesh. As an early example of nationalist cinema, *Jibon Theke Neya* incorporates a discretely localized locale to build a broader representation of Bangladeshi identity. In one memorable scene, members of the family begin to resist the internal despotism of their home, subtly mirroring the rise of political unrest in the streets outside. Sitting on the rooftop with a harmonium—precariously situated between the domestic turmoil beneath and the social resistance beyond—the actor Khan Ataur Rahman sings the song “ei khãcã bhãngbô ami kæmôn kôre” (“How Can I Break Free from This Cage?”). While the musical arrangement and melody are squarely composed in the film music style of 70s Bengali cinema, the subtle use of the word *khãcã*, meaning “cage,” is particularly noteworthy. In the Bangladeshi psyche, the word itself indirectly but powerfully evokes Lãlôn’s most widely recognized song, *khãcãr bhitor ocin pâkhi kemne ase jãy* (“How Does the Unknown Bird Come and Go from Within the Cage?”). Lãlôn’s pensive description of the soul of man, encaged by the vices of the world, is an allegorical description of *sãdhanã*, the yogic tradition of spiritual exercise, which naturally extends to longstanding themes of bondage and liberation in Muslim Bengal.

In *bicãr gãn*, the incorporation of *chãyã*—as its name “shadow” implies—is a more subtle technique than the implementation of *gira* is in the genre of *qawwãlĩ*, but the overall performance objective is similar: to demonstrate the singer’s indexical knowledge of repertoire through a crafty approach that amalgamates compositions, and to subsequently enthrall the

audience through this lyrical devotionalization. In the larger realm of *bicār gān*, the performative application of *kerāmôt*—involving the exploitation of poetic legacy and saintly excellence—utilizes both extempore narrative exegesis and the compositional authority of songs to draw on the lyrical and popular sentiments associated with an original authors of *bhāb sōṅgīt*. The application of *chāyā* is more impressionistic or fragmentary in nature, and involves the extraction of a distinctive image or phrase from beloved *bhāb sōṅgīt* compositions, for the purpose of intertwining conventional mystical parlance into newer *bōyāti* songs written specifically for the *bicār gān* debate, thereby enriching them with the enduring qualities of canonic material. If the end result of *kerāmôt* is to figuratively weave history and mythology in order to articulate or validate elements of Sufi thought, the dynamics of a native shrine culture, and their abiding connections to the Bangladeshi psyche, *chāyā* offers the *bōyāti* an opportunity to succinctly assess and fuse together a vast heritage of song through witty internal rhymes, puns, and otherwise unexpected turns of phrase—to further highlight and legitimate personal musicianship.

The act of *chāyā*, as one *bōyāti* jokingly explained to me, is a *snehô bhōrā rōcônā curi* (“affectionate form of compositional plagiarism”). This idea aligns with Justin A. Williams’ fresh insights into the well-worn scholarly territory of hip hop’s traditional “open-source” culture, which he perceives as an “intracultural hermeneutics,” focusing on the internal history of musical borrowing over the broader historical influences on a genre (2013: 20-21). While *bicār gān* as a whole is immensely overarching in its connective undertaking, *chāyā* is more focused on the *bōyāti* artist’s own self-referential prowess. Though clearly relying on the sweepingly evocative power of saint-composers in other debate strategies, *chāyā* offers a reflexive examination of *bhāb sōṅgīt* through its compositional relevance within the world of *bicār gān*,

with the aesthetic aim of overtly subsuming posthumous authors and preexisting material to new ends.

## **Conclusion**

The musical components of *bicār gān* provoke an aggregative devotionalism. This is telling, as neither the evolution of *bōyāti* musicianship nor the format of the debate genre has developed along a discrete or singular trajectory with regard to specialized performance, spaces of patronage, or conventionalized style. Concurrently, this distinctive bricolage of musical ideas, devotional themes, and legacies consist of intensely malleable and stimuable ingredients because their appeal is also drawn from other communities, mythologies, and epochs, and are thus saturated by a layered devotional imaginary. Ultimately, the *bōyāti* artist's performative task of borrowing, conjoining, and rereading on stage is also a poignant expression of otherness that accentuates the regionalism of Bangladeshi piety. Poets, saintly personas, and supplemental *bōyāti* commentary collectively evoke literary heritage, metaphysical musings, and cultural impressions that are steeped in a real and imagined sense of agrarian identity, representing the central appeal of *bicār gān*. As will be examined in the subsequent chapter, the seemingly absurd act of disputation through rhetorical hyperbole is further made meaningful through the self-referential tone of the debate, its athleticism through polemical endurance, and the multidirectional qualities of its engagement, all of which are critical to its charm.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Gestured Positionalities and Debate Consolidation**

This chapter turns to an analysis of non-musical elements of the bicār gān debate. In the previous chapter, I examined the many musical components of bicār gān, which allowed for an evaluation of performance as an object of analysis, especially focusing on individual elements and techniques of transfer within the bricolage. A subsequent section focused on the musical execution of bicār gān, which then allowed for the investigation of a different facet of performativity, where the performance itself becomes an epistemology. This chapter furthers that investigation and asks, in an expansive genre such as bicār gān, how is devotionism gestured and how is it received or reciprocated?

Given its discriminative weaving of not only semiotic or sonic but somatic components, the musical provocation that bicār gān inspires allows one to reconsider assumptions about its affect and how it functions in between performers, audience and benefactors. If no winner is officially declared, what exactly is at stake in such a performance? Why are some performances more coherent or offer more creative “magic” than others? What are the moderating forces in such a debate, and who the various guardians and interpreters of intermediacy? How do we align artists’ personal convictions and the expectations of the crowd in a larger performance that is perceived to be both devotional and entertainment? Such questions are difficult to pinpoint with accuracy in a genre such as bicār gān, however an examination of stylized physical movements on stage and responses radiating from the audience can provide supplementary insight into the anticipations of both musicians and spectators through gestural and responsorial actions and their ability to navigate discursiveness and consolidate independent experiences.

In Part One of this chapter, I examine musical play, style, and rendering to pursue how gestures emanating from stage serve as prescriptive indicators of musical deliberation. I consider the manner in which gestures draw attention to the multiple devotional positionalities a bôyāti embodies on stage, both inner states and inter-performer states, through a variety of stylized gestural acts that exhibit both expository and transformative qualities. Part Two reincorporates the materials discussed in chapter three in order to offer a broader analysis of the overarching performance. I scrutinize the overall disposition of rhetorical weight to grasp to what end its dialectical unfolding is moralized by the ambience of a Sufi-tinged propriety.

## **PART ONE**

### **Conceptualizing Gesture and Reception**

Studies on gesture have been informed by a diverse body of literature that incorporates broader writings situated in the interdisciplinary field of gesture studies (Calbris 1990, Kendon 2004, McNeill 2005), those focusing more intently on the performative body (Blacking 1977, Csordas 1994) including special attention given to its correlations with musical practice (Baily 2006, DeWitt 2003, Gritten and King 2011, Le Guin 2006), various forays into cognitive linguistics and psychology (Kühl 2007, Malloch and Trevarthen 2009, Zbikowski 2017), as well as works utilizing a more phenomenological approach in order to articulate a corporeal musicality (Husserl 1964, Merleau-Ponty 2002). Adding to this literature are important ethnographies of dance and embodied ethics (Hahn 2007, Hirschkind 2006, Wulff 2006) that also comprise those situated in the dance reform ideologies of Indian music in the twentieth century (Quinn 1982, Subramanian 2006, Soneji 2012). This literature aids in conceptualizing gestures generally, but also provides a perspective through which to situate devotional gesture, especially

regarding its improvised act of piety, its unique correlations with the semantic properties of religious texts and narratives, and its mediation of Islamic impressions of corporeality in performance.

Another body of material across disciplines seeks more specifically to interrogate listening and its physical manifestations by examining what it means to move or not move and its connections to broader ideologies (Qureshi 1986, Johnson 1994, Racy 2003, Taylor 2003, Plourde 2008, Becker 2010, Gross 2012, Rahaim 2012, Weidman 2012). This literature has particularly inspired a number of examinations within the realm of Hindustani music, including the driving force of listening in the progression of a performance (Daniel Neuman 1990), the connotative aspects of listening with regard to a nostalgic past (Silver 1984), the complex social dynamics of a performance in which listening behaviors are embedded (Clayton, Dueck, and Leante 2013, Alaghband-Zadeh 2017), and the influence of newer technologies and changing musical ideologies on the act of listening itself (Dard Neuman, 2009 and 2012). Overall, these various sources provide useful tools for understanding audience reception and its enactment, and many of them directly or indirectly drawing on the practice theory of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984) regarding the concept of *habitus*—the internalized form of class condition and of the conditionings it entails—and its bodily component, which he calls the *bodily hexis*.<sup>1</sup>

### **Gesturing Devotion: Aesthetic Sources**

This section begins a discussion of gesture by examining the underlying devotional stimuli of certain bodily expressions on the *bôyāti* debate stage. What does it mean for a gesture to have devotional consequences in *bicār gān* performance? Several aspects critical to classical

---

<sup>1</sup> Within his discussion of people's varied tastes in culture, Bourdieu argues that "art and cultural consumption . . . fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences" (1984: 7).

Indic aesthetics provide insight into the stimulation that gesture incites on the *bicār gān* stage. Firstly, *līlā* traditionally describes the creation and maintenance of the universe through the act of divinity descending into the material world and taking physical form in order to experience the interplay between the elements of the cosmos. Ultimately, it is a concept that has been used by Indian thinkers and performers alike to explain or describe, with greater or less emphasis, a paradox in the metaphysics of cosmic creation (Sax 1995, Nelson 1998). *Līlā* is thus commonly aligned with aesthetic motivation and the “sport” of divine play, and is an important idea in the traditional worship of certain deities such as Krishna (as prankster) and Shiva (as dancer).

Furthermore, in shaping modern Bengali aesthetics, the works of Rabindranath Tagore critically endeavored to bring together the concept of *līlā* with cosmic and artistic creation in the Bengali literary imagination. John F. Butler has mentioned that Tagore’s philosophical worldview “contains both a main approach to religion through beauty and an unwillingness to break fully with the Vedānta<sup>2</sup> tradition of monism and *māyā*<sup>3</sup> [and] it is those elements in his thought which compel him to speak of the world process as ‘the play’ and the Creator-God as ‘the great artist, the *māyāvin*<sup>4</sup>’” (1960:12). In Bengali poetry and song, the concept of *līlā* is not specific to Hindu devotional rhetoric, and is often used by vernacular artists in conjunction with other poetic phrases such as *putul khælā* (doll-playing), *miche māyā* (thwarting illusion), *ājôb*

---

<sup>2</sup> “End of the Vedas,” one of the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy. While Vedanta is umbrella term for many sub-traditions, ranging from dualism to non-dualism, Advaita (“not two”) Vedanta is a well-known sub-tradition which has its roots in monism (Fowler 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Meaning “illusion,” *māyā* has multiple meanings in Indian philosophies depending on context. In ancient Vedic literature, *māyā* seems to have implied extraordinary power and wisdom (Sax 1995). In later Vedic texts and modern literature dedicated to Indian traditions, *māyā* connotes a kind of magic show, an illusion where things appear to be present but are not what they seem (Beck 2002). The term *māyā* is also a spiritual concept connoting that which exists, but is constantly changing and thus is spiritually unreal, and the power or the principle that conceals the true character of spiritual reality (Fowler 2002).

<sup>4</sup> “Master of illusion”

*kudrôti* (peculiar fate), or *tāl bāhānā* (prevarication or childish whim), suggesting the fickle or unfathomable nature of destiny from a human perspective. From a compositional standpoint, the notion of *līlā* thus incorporates the idea of expressing the inexpressible, or an earthly articulation of sublimity.

Secondly, a *mudrā* (Sanskrit: “emblem” or “mark”) is a spiritual gesture and a seal of authenticity employed in the iconography and spiritual practice of Indic religions. While a traditional *mudrā* may involve the entire body, most are performed with the hands and fingers. In some cases, the incorporation of a *mudrā* may serve as a powerful didactical tool, as in the complex ritualized memorization and recitation of Vedic scripture (Witzel 1997). In other cases, a *mudrā* can draw critical correlations with *rasa* (Sanskrit: “juice” or “essence”)—the aesthetic flavor of any visual, literary or musical work—as commonly employed in *abhinaya*, the embellished expression of lyrical sentiment by dancers’ bodies (Nair 2008). The word *mudrā* also has poetic connotations, and is sometimes used in the Carnatic tradition of Indian classical music in a manner that reflects the significance of the *bhōṇita* in *bōyāti* song lyrics, functioning as the composer’s self-appellation in the final verse (Thompson 2007).

In *bicār gān* performance aesthetics, a *bōyāti* is not necessarily a conduit for divinity through which gesture is legitimated (as the concept of *līlā* might suggest), but is rather dramatically mobilized to offer a momentary *īngit* (hint or suggestion) that, like divine play, can evoke supplemental, impish or more subliminal qualities, yet may also accentuate entirely secular or practical objectives in the musical evolution. Accordingly, the aim is not to articulate the metaphysical act of mediation between elements of the cosmos, but rather heighten the interplay of cosmological dispositions formulated on stage. Therefore, gesture allows for a visual

juxtaposition of the sonic and lyrical reciprocity as it transpires, but can also effectively clarify obscure viewpoints, provide tangential distractions, demonstrate refined musicianship, or provoke euphoria amongst audience members. When likened to a *mudrā*, the performance of gesture is not just indicative, but very much a codified motion or countenance. As a corporeal marker, gesture thus incorporates upper body movements, facial expressions, and acts of showmanship to draw the observer deeper into the theatrical unfolding, combining immediately discernible cultural actions with systematized stylizations specific to *bicār gān* performance.

### **Ijārā: Gestures on the Debate Stage**

In *bicār gān* performance, a wide variety of expressions and movements are consciously referred to as *ijārā*, or “gesticulations” (and sometimes, *rōṅg*, meaning “color”). While general facial and hand movements can perhaps be a habitual and involuntary act of performance, or possibly adopted mannerisms developed through close and extensive observation of a guru, the incorporation of *ijārā* in *bicār gān* performance also suggests something more pervasive. In the staged debate, some gestures intentionally draw out the significance of song lyrics (such as *khed*), while others are designed to complement narrative discussion (such as *bækkhā*); some accentuate discrete musical contours (such as *soundōrjō*), while others inspire feeling through body movement aligned with accompanying drum rhythms (such as *jādu*). Thus, a spectrum of gesticulations are replete in *bicār gān* performance and, considering the gamut of musical styles and theological arguments that comprise the genre—rendered through an equally sweeping range of musical and lyrical dissections—the tradition of *ijārā* helps to fortify the bricolage of pietistic sentiments that must be navigated in performance through its constitutive elements.

<b><u>Gesture</u></b>	<b><u>Physical Characteristic</u></b>	<b><u>Connotation</u></b>
<i>niṣṭhā</i>	two open palms, pressed together in prayer	reverence
<i>dōndō</i>	two index fingers bent, crossed over one another	conflict
<i>bākkō</i>	pointing index finger above head, and slightly behind body	citation
<i>kufōlītā</i>	one open palm covering ear	artfulness
<i>ābeg</i>	one hand raised sideways, with open palm	passion
<i>soundōrjō</i>	one half-fist, moving in circular motion	beauty
<i>jādu</i>	two open hands raised sideways; torso rocking forward and backward	enchantment
<i>ucchās</i>	waving index finger	exuberance
<i>prārthōnā</i>	two open palms, facing performer	supplication
<i>bækkhā</i>	one hand out, palm down; slight up and down movement	elucidation
<i>khed</i>	two hands crossed, holding earlobes	sorrow
<i>fānā</i>	two arms out with clenched fists; wrists gyrating	ecstasy
<i>nimrôtā</i>	one open hand, sideways; wrist and elbow swerving left and right	gentleness
<i>gæn</i>	arms folded, each hand holding opposite elbow	erudition
<i>sōngrôhō</i>	mimicking the act of snatching and picking up by opening and closing fingers in air	accumulation
<i>nirdhārôk</i>	one palm down; thumb to fingers, fingers moving apart while raising hand	definitiveness
<i>āfcôrjō</i>	one hand, thumb to fingers, palm up; slight heading nodding	astonishment
<i>cumu</i>	one hand raised to forehead, and sometimes lips	deference when mentioning saint-composer's name
<i>fōkti</i>	open palm alternating face-down and face-up	endurance
<i>bedônā</i>	two hands crossed over chest; torso rocking sideways	suffering

**Table 4.1. Various gestures incorporated in the production of iḡārā.**

The list of iḡārā mentioned above were enumerated through the process of observing a wide number of bicār gān performances in the adjacent regions of Faridpur and Rajbari in Bangladesh, making note of the most frequently enacted gestures alongside their incorporation into the musical and narrative unfolding. In addition, this list is also informed by general discussions with bōyāti artists on the gestural process and the terminology they have used to describe this process.<sup>5</sup>

These examples not only reflect how gestural performance in bicār gān depicts various intentions—ranging from illustrative markers to symbolic acknowledgements—by the multi-

<sup>5</sup> Regarding methodology, it should be noted here that not all bōyāti artist rely on iḡārā in performance in the same manner, and my focus on gestural performances at bicār gān debates in the regions of Faridpur and Rajbari are informed by my suspicion that iḡārā may also have regionalized consequences of various kinds.

directional distribution of gestures between all who witness and internalize them. A number of acculturated mannerisms such as the widely recognized gesture of *dôndô*—which represents conflict by crossing both index fingers—might be classified as a learned “technique of the body” (Mauss 1973), and immediately draws attention to syntactical or lyrical material in the debate. In other cases, gestures are in fact communicating something more indirectly. For example, the gesture of *nimrôtā*, which connotes gentleness, consists of a serpentine movement through the air with the open hand. This gesture is not directly connoting a symbolic interpretation of gentleness, but concomitantly simulating a fish swimming in water or a comparable analogy. In such cases, the audience is drawn more to the act of listening, to the contours of musical abstraction. Furthermore, additional gestures may seem rather self-evident and redundant—such as a nod to the drummer to initiate an expected rhythmic transition—but even these motions are a crucial part of ongoing performance management which serve to amalgamate and stabilize a comprehensive impression of the event’s unfolding.

### **Situating Gesture in Performance**

Conceptualizing devotion gestures illustrates its ability to add cohesion to a long-form discursive performance by not only routing intensions and expectations but adding a self-referential ambience that further enhances the charm of liminality. The following sections more specifically examine gestures through both their directional and conditional qualities, and how these orientations are critical to understanding expressions of devotionism. Regarding directionality, I consider how gestures can articulate the many “states” of an individual *bôyāti* during a protracted and discursive battle, the manner in which he or she nonverbally communicates devotional or practical information with others on stage (opponents and musicians

in the ensemble), and finally how multifarious reactions amongst audience members are subsequently consolidated back on stage by performers through gestural intervention. In each of these three approaches, I am also informed by Simon Frith's sociological analysis of performance in order to further distinguish gestures through their conditionalized devotional intentions: (1) those concerning thoughts and actions related to the music being performed (historical aspects, theological associations, the material's descriptive content), and (2) those that reflect the occasion itself (the circumstantial parameters of a performance or a particular venue) (1996). Ultimately, gesture distinctively enables the debate's ability to concretize meaning, placate disorder, or otherwise enrich experience through an array of devotional sentiments exchanged on stage and in-between "aisles."

### **Gesturing Inter-Personal States**

In his book *Musicking Bodies: Gesture and Voice in Hindustani Music* (2012), Matt Rahaim examines the complementary relationship between musical sound and the bodies that produce it in Hindustani music. Subjecting the issue of gestural transmission to analysis, he reveals a highly creative sensitivity to contour, movement, shape and texture in Hindustani music, which is expressed in both melody and gesture. In discerning the connection between gestural patterns and the spatial relationship of notes, Rahaim ultimately suggests that "vocalization and gesture seem to act as complementary, parallel channels for melody" (51), although he limits the range of his study to the genre of khyāl within Hindustani classical music, and the scope of his analysis to the vocalist's mannerisms alone.

While gestural applications are not nearly as incessant in bicār gān performance, iḡārā is not only a supplemental act that informs the musical progression of bicār gān, but articulates

situational, logistical, or broader aesthetic components from a personal point of view, emphasizing its role in mediating the many “appointments” a *bôyāti* holds on stage and the demanding, and sometimes surprising, dramatic cadences of an extemporized debate performance. Ultimately, an individual *bôyāti* negotiates both a stage persona (qualified by his spiritual pedigree, the debate template, the specific rhetorical moment) as well as personal and “inner” states (for example, current mood, technical capacity, gradations of mystical experience), which *ijārā* may aid in fortifying. In this way, gesture is critical in drawing “attention” (Clayton 2007) to discrete and often intimate aspects of a devotional *muhūrtô* or “moment,” which might otherwise be overlooked or camouflaged by audiences perceiving the continuous tonal irruptions that inform the debate narrative. In addition, and beyond its ability to clarify, the gestured act itself can be charmingly manipulated to play with the expectations of physical movement, just as sonic or lyrical markers are maneuvered in *bicār gān* song.



**Figure 4.1. Video stills demonstrating *ijārā* in a *bicār gān* debate. On the left, the *bôyāti* Kajol Dewan enacts *cumu*, the gesture of deference, as he mentions his father and guru’s name, Matal Razzak, in the *bhōṇita* verse of a song. On the right, the *bôyāti* Chhoto Abul Sarkar enacts *fānā*, the gesture of ecstasy, as he sings a song in praise of the Prophet Muḥammad.**

In the above debate, the *bôyāti* Kajol Dewan displayed a particularly noticeable use of *ijārā* to spotlight various personal states within the performance, which alluded not only to his deep knowledge of the many song compositions of his famous father, the *bôyāti* Razzak Dewan through the gesture of *cumu* (deference, one hand raised to forehead), but also a general

awareness of his ability to navigate between devotional voices, textual authorities, or historical persona. For example, in one instance, Kajol Dewan delved into an imaginary conversation between two monolithic Sufi personalities in South Asia, ‘Abd al-Qādir Gīlānī (1078–1166) and Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī (1142–1236). In the devotional moment, the saint ‘Abd al-Qādir is personified as a profoundly learned mystic while Mu‘īn al-Dīn is juxtaposed as the recluse ascetic and, as such, the accompanying gestures of niṣṭhā (reverence, palms folded) and gān (erudition, arms folded with each hand holding opposite elbow) are used to differentiate their voices in conversation on stage. Furthermore, Kajol Dewan employs the additional gesture of bækkhā (elucidation, one hand out with palm down) to call attention to his own commentary on the stylized tête-à-tête as an “out-of-body” observational bōyāti.

These three iḡārā—plus frequent gestural reference to Kajol Dewan’s illustrious father, the bōyāti Razzak Dewan—traverse many real and imagined lines between personas, and not only steer the audience through a discursive trajectory of pieties, but draw on the accompanying notions of veneration, pedigree, and musicianship that ultimately fashion the devotional moment. In addition, while these gestures have a more broadly defined use in bicār gān performance as a whole, they are creatively used here to accent demarkations within a specific devotional exchange and are quickly “learned” by the audience through their contradistinction. Rimé and Schiaratura have famously distinguished three general categories of gesture: markers (non-depictive), illustrators (depictive), and emblems (symbolic), which musically align with articulations of musical process or structure, content-related material, or those that have verbal equivalents (such as “well done”), respectively (1991). Kajol Dewan’s incorporation of iḡārā, however, accentuates the fact that gestures, like the many building blocks of bicār gān, can also

evoke contextual-based meaning. As such, standardized categories of gesture are also part of a larger dialectical playing field, and their incorporation may sometimes creatively realign a conventional application of gesture in order to not only illuminate meaning but showcase navigational skill.

### **Gesturing Inter-Performer States**

While gestures that reflect personal states are diverse, the *bōyāti* is somewhat more in control of its negotiation as he or she determines a route for the devotional unfolding through selected songs and discourse. Another level of gestural interaction is further complicated by the *bōyāti* artist's social relationship to the opponent in the polemical battle (a senior or junior contestant, colleague or outsider, male or female performer), thus requiring him or her to negotiate identities with others on stage, ones that are more capriciously situated in the transpiring debate exchange. This volatility is further enhanced by certain *bicār gān* templates themselves—such as *guru-ḥiṣṣō* (“guru vs. disciple”) or *nāri-puruṣ* (“women vs. man”), or even more novelty topics such as *bou mā-ḥāḥuri* (“daughter-in-law vs. mother-in-law”)—that readily promote a range of inter-subjectivities based on actual or supposed relationships through the devotional topic.

For example, the template *guru-ḥiṣṣō*, by convention, almost always necessitates the performance of two *bōyāti* artists who in fact are guru and disciple to one another, or at least senior and junior musicians, in pedagogical terms. The same requirements apply for *nāri-puruṣ*, which conventionally demands the interactions of a male and female *bōyāti*. These templates stipulate a certain kind of devotional relationship through which the two *bōyāti* artists must operate, with gestural enhancements offering a certain kind of lucidity to the identities ascribed

to them. To provide further insight, one might consider the gesture of *khed* (sorrow, two hands crossed while holding earlobes) which, while generally conveying agony or grief, can also connote a distinctively feminine expression of mourning, and lyrical descriptions of despair in Bengali song are typically expounded in the feminine voice, thereby endowing them with a certain poignancy. This gesture can thus have a more gendered application in *bicār gān* when a *bōyāti* wishes to highlight either a feminine polemical stance, or the feminine qualities of a particular metaphysical expression.

Gesturing gender becomes all the more critical when, in the stylistic spirit of *bicār gān*, the male and female *bōyāti* artists engaged in a *nāri-puruṣ* debate alternatively “switch places,” each arguing from the standpoint of the opposite sex on stage, allowing the tradition of gesture to more strikingly intervene. Similarly, the template *bou mā-jāfuṛi* may involve two female *bōyāti* artists—representing a daughter-in-law and mother-in-law respectfully—who, while not literally related through marriage, observe certain customs of deference relating to age and kinship on the debate stage which are visually supplemented and regulated by gesticulations. These positionalities do not involve articulating a more blatant gendered performance through apparel, voice inflection or other such forms of literal reenactment, and gestural signs thus become alternative articulations in the debate’s unfolding, allowing the *bōyāti* to concurrently embody his or her own stage persona(s) and the necessary dramatic personas of the live dialectical exchange.

The implementation of certain gestures between two dueling *bōyāti* artists allows for a complex and realtime navigation on stage, permitting each artist to make certain thematic personifications alongside the performance of song and narration. This process involves the

incorporation of standardized devotional connotations associated with the gestural conventions found in *bicār gān* performance that are ultimately enacted to evoke and differentiate discrete voices (the artist’s persona, the socially delineated relationships stipulated by the debate template, or various legendary personas) that must be confronted and managed through the dialectical unfolding.

### **Gestural Consolidation**

Beyond its musical and circumstantial perspectives, the phenomenon of *ijārā* also exhibits a more logistical consolidation through multitasking, using the body to not only navigate these experiential affairs but to visually communicate notions when the voice is preoccupied with other matters. This can be observed in the gesture of *sōmmān* (“respect”),<sup>6</sup> which is specifically designed to reflect acknowledgment of audience interaction through the ceremonial acceptance of a monetary note from an appreciative spectator. In enacting this gesture, the note is typically taken with the right hand and placed on the forehead, a symbol of gratitude, before being unceremoniously dropped on stage (to be collected later). Usually performed while singing, this gesture, and its rather abrupt termination, allows for the transient and worldly exchange of money to be presented and received through an act of devotion in the performance moment, which would otherwise seem peculiar, incongruous, or obstructive.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, its efficacy is marked both by its conciseness and its effortlessness, allowing the *bōyāti* to momentarily move beyond the musical material on stage through a gestural aside that can be performed in the midst of his or her vocal performance.

---

<sup>6</sup> This gesture is also known as *mōdhukōri* (“nectar money”) or *purōskār* (“reward”).

<sup>7</sup> Similar acts of devotional reception through monetary exchange are present in other forms of South Asian music, most notably the cash-showering gesture of *vel* in *qawwālī*, from which *bicār gān* may draw influence.

## Negotiating Erudition and Piety Through Gesture

From a broader aesthetic perspective with regard to devotionism, the general rendering of *ijārā*, like *kerāmôt*, also seems to visually enable the intermediary capacity of *bicār gān*, with regard to its evolution in the open-air spaces of traditional vernacular performance, and its general reception history in Muslim Bengal. I initially became aware of gestural actions in the debate through a certain aspect of *bôyāti* stage presence: its significant disconnection with dance. In several instances, I have observed *bicār gān* recitals in which a *bôyāti*—notably one indoctrinated into the tradition from another vernacular performance genre<sup>8</sup>—was rebuffed or ridiculed for excessive bodily movement. For colleagues and audience members alike, exaggerated swaying, spinning or significantly moving around stage is considered a superfluous diversion, one that sometimes carries ethical consequences, but is mostly diminishing to the *bôyāti* artist's important stage position as bard and interlocutor. While forms of dance are distinguishable in both religious and secular contexts around the Muslim world, its fundamental lack of presence in *bicār gān* critically informs its function and cogency. Gesturing, like the many building blocks of *bicār gān*, both sets a standard for dialogue and imbibes a liminality that carries the power to insinuate or intensify in the performance moment, while squarely situating the *bôyāti* as wordsmith and a living repository of songs.

The motion required to execute a gesture is seen as refinement or dexterity (*cāturī*) through its subtle corporeality, especially the torso, hands, face, and head. While a *bôyāti* artist's gestures may be embedded in rhythmic qualities, it is less connected to dance (*nāc*) than to rhetorical essence (*tôttô*). The Sanskrit equivalent of *tôttô*, known as *tattva*, conveys a “that-

---

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter Five's focus on pilgrimage networks and *bicār gān* recitals for a detailed discussion of locationality as an overall determinant for the stylized debate.

ness,” “principle,” “reality” or “truth,” which, according to various Indian schools of philosophy, epitomizes an element or aspect of reality and, in some traditions, of a deity. Although the number of tattva-s varies depending on the philosophical school, within Purāṇic literatures and general Vaiṣṇava philosophy, tattva is often used to denote certain categories of energies or types of being or energies (Prasad 1997). In bāul song traditions, tōttō is often used to describe the general character of a composition as it relates to others, as a classification of “sub-genres” for songs. For example, a bāul may speak of a particular song which emphasizes guru worship (*guru tōttō*), love (*prem tōttō*), a corporeal microcosm (*dehō tōttō*), self-inquiry (*āttō tōttō*), or esoteric knowledge (*nigurh tōttō*). For bōyāti artists, tōttō generally refers to the effectiveness of a rhetorical moment, whether in song or exposition. For example, a bicār gān performance might be described as *tōttō rōsāmṛtō* (“filled with the immortal nectar of tōttō”), *tōtte dijāhārā* (“confounded by tōttō”), or containing *guptō tōttō* (“hidden tōttō”). It is with this sense of tōttō that the performance tradition of gesturing is largely understood, its enacted movements adding a sense of finesse informed by the intricate storytelling and elucidation that a performance of bicār gān offers.

As devotional entertainment traditionally situated in a non-urban setting, the delicate balancing act that gesturing enacts in bicār gān may have helped the genre to burgeon in precarious public spaces during the pioneering career of Abdul Halim, its ostensibly elucidatory qualities reiterating scholarly oration as well speculative or non-religious performance (see Chapter Three). Gesture, in the context of Bengali Muslim devotional performance, retains something of the aesthetic and symbolic value of dance through its purposely selected sequences of human movement yet, in its simultaneous disassociation, deflects the complex and

transgressive sentiments often attached to dance in Muslim environments, which range from dismissive secular frivolity to unwarranted emotional compromise (Shay 1999).

The tradition of gesturing in bicār gān, when viewed as a mediation of piety, also seems critical to its sanctioned incorporation of female Muslim artists on the regional outdoor stage, which was hitherto unknown. Other genres of vernacular performance in Bangladesh, most notably *ḵātrā*, has witnessed a rapid decline in overall public support and appreciation as a cultural form due its more direct incorporation of dance, physical interactions and overall histrionics. These factors, amongst others, have increasingly situated the spectacle of *ḵātrā* as a salacious act, despite its well-founded associations with mythological storytelling and devotionalized reenactment. While the inclusion of fakirāni artists—female performers of Sufi persuasion—in bicār gān will be discussed in the final chapter, the act of *ḵātrā* seems critical to legitimating mixed-gender performance by not only dispelling certain misconstructions from the perspective of a varied audience, but allowing the fakirāni, in her own way, to engage with long-standing enmeshments of corporeal femininity (Grosz 1994), colonized and nationalized bodies (McClintock 1995 and Alcoff 2006), or the more nuanced social incorporation of a gendered subjectivity.

## **PART TWO**

### **Negotiating the Performative Elements of a Debate**

*After passing through the makeshift ticket counter, the debate arena slowly came into view: plastic chairs, arranged in tight concentric circles around a square dais. The arena theater itself fittingly resembled a boxing ring in size and shape, just large enough for two standing bōyāti singers and their respective music troupes, who remained sitting in front of low-profile mics. Each bōyāti had an ensemble featuring harmonium, bamboo flute, violin and dotārā lute, as well as a ḍhol drum. A few additional musicians, possibly disciples, sat with the group and kept time with finger cymbals or other percussion—always looking up at the bōyāti during performance, prepared to sing out a song refrain at a moment's notice. Fluorescent tube lighting, attached vertically to bamboo stalks and connected to a large generator beyond the crowd, provided glaring stage light in an otherwise dark and remote locale. As for the audience itself, noticeably dressed individuals in white shawls were accorded special seating up front, presumably judges*

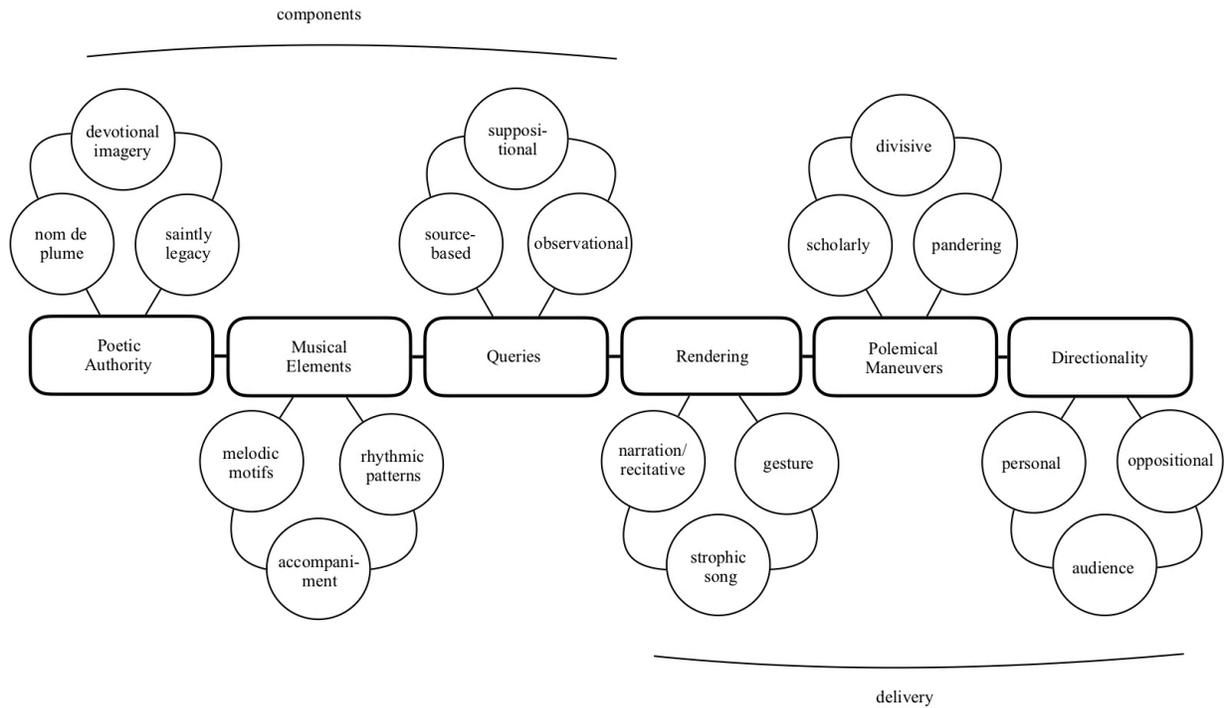
or shrine committee members. The vast majority of the remaining audience consisted of both devotees and casual spectators. While many sat in rapt attention, occasionally raising to jeer or applaud, others were entirely passive observers who often left the concentric seating to smoke or grab a cup of tea from the nearby vendors. A standing audience of local villagers and ricksha pullers watched from the back, stretching their necks to get a glimpse of the action or to examine media from the merchants selling recordings of the *bōyāti* stars on stage.

The debate itself had the rhythm of a cricket match, dazzling moments of impassioned performance interspersed with seemingly anticlimactic segues. Minutes were required here and there for drums to be retightened, *bōyāti* artists to switch place, public announcements to be made, technical problems to be resolved. Both *bōyāti* artists did a great deal of talking and explaining on stage, but their song choices always seemed to enliven the crowd. Faint passages on the harmonium and a wailing bamboo flute fell in and out of earshot, over the rapid, energetic clanking of brass finger cymbals punctuating in time. Along with the supporting singers, the *ḍhol* drummer was clearing the most audible and perhaps salient instrument in the mix. The percussive treble slap of the *ḍhol* was supplemented by its clear and thunderous bass, working together to produce endless rhythmic variations, especially in duple and triple meter, with plentiful interludes of frenzied drum rolls that left the tall, long-haired drummer drenched in sweat. Towards the end of nearly every song, the *ḍhol* drummer invariably increased the overall tempo of the performance, causing the mostly moderately-paced songs to end in a pyrotechnic display of rhythmic virtuosity.

The end of the debate, too, seemed surprisingly abrupt. It was not immediately apparent that there was a winner, but very much a public favorite. Ultimately, the senior *bōyāti* seemed more confident on stage, interacted engagingly with the audience, and had a resounding tenor voice. A committee member arrived on stage at the end, around 3 a.m., and made a few announcements. Publicly, both *bōyāti* artists were ceremoniously adorned with garlands of monetary notes and given a medal and gift, possibly a new watch, for their participation. I left somewhat later but was able to return the following afternoon, and under much more convenient circumstances, to see that the stage had been entirely dismantled, a few promotional fliers and ticket stubs littered on the ground provided the only proof of the previous evening's musical debate. The humble shrine, now markedly visible in the midday sun, seemed oddly immaterial without the distraction and exhibition of the *bōyāti* stage.

The final section of this chapter aims to ground the various complexities of *bicār gān* within the larger ambience of performance. As mentioned in Chapter Three, the materials presented in *bicār gān* coalesce through a series of *pālā*-s, or “episodes,” of performance, consisting of two *bōyāti* artists who alternatively take the stage in segments—with a general duration of fifteen to twenty-five minutes each. The progression of any particular *pālā* might be conceived of as drawing from a kind of rhetorical toolkit, which essentially represents various and strategic entryways into the dialectical performance. With each category providing a number of options, the *bōyāti* artist negotiates a route through the standard format of a particular *bicār gān* episode that he or she is responsible for—this mainly revolves around the elements of: (1) poetic authority, (2) musical elements, (3) queries, (4) rendering, (5) polemical maneuvers, and

(6) directionality.



**Figure 4.2. Negotiating Debate Strategies.**

The options presented in these categories are encompassed by a question-rebuttal premise—the platform through which a particular query is proposed by a *bōyāti* or one from the oppositional *bōyāti* is addressed—the thematic crux of any given *pālā*.

Overall, the performative layers of *bicār gān* suggest that there is potential for tensions between the information contained in the music (song poetry, saintly legacies, compositional imagery, melodies, rhythms), the *bōyāti* artist’s inner and outer states (professional, devotional, and other experiential conditions), and stylized behaviors deployed to communicate to co-performers, audiences, and patrons (accoutrements, gestures, participatory reactions). These tensions, however, are ultimately critical to the charm of *bicār gān* and not only offer a powerful affect, but a fluidity of interaction that opens up complex networks which evince the

interdependence among musical, political, social, and cultural structures. Yet, as the subsequent chapter will explore, the dialectical open-endedness of *bicār gān* also gives rise to tangible, real-life situations that impact the interface of piety with dubiety, a celebrated culture of regionalism, and a collectively imagined sense of Bengali-ness amongst Muslims, especially with regard to stationary institutions of devotionism and the paradoxical fluidity accorded by their sponsored performance spaces.

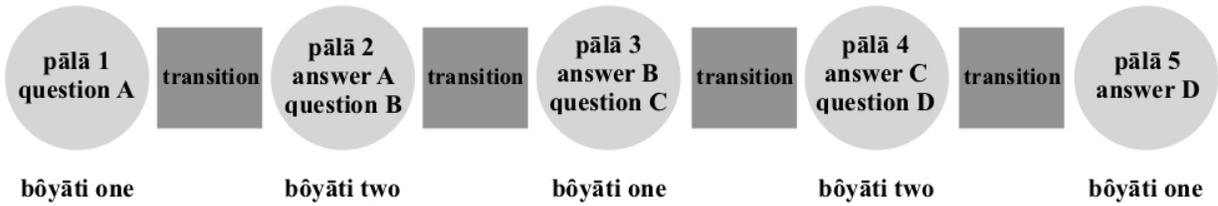
### **Formating *Bicār Gān***

With regard to the overarching format of the debate, two *bōyāti* artists are contracted to engage in a particular dialectical subject matter (*biṣṣy*) through a series of alternate sessions (*pālā*). In each *pālā*, a specific *bōyāti* delivers a short performance (typically fifteen to twenty minutes) which combines the rendering of a particular song—designed to musically encapsulate the argument at hand—surrounded by a certain amount of narrative exegesis and, occasionally, brief recitative, to enliven the discourse.<sup>9</sup> The arrangement of these “building blocks” in performance is not fixed, but rather based on the particular dialectical moment or the *bōyāti* artist’s aesthetic inclinations. For example, the pivotal song may be presented before the narrative, in the course of narration, or after its conclusion. However, the larger rhetorical momentum of a *pālā* is determined by the nature of a submitted inquiry and the persuasiveness of its retort. Therefore, each *pālā* features a new question and answer premise, and an alternation of the *bōyāti* artists on stage. Furthermore, instead of one *pālā* segueing into the next, a series of important transitions (*birōti*) occur in between, offering an opportunity for artists to leave the stage and gather their thoughts, audiences to enjoy a tea break or smoke, and management to

---

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter Two’s discussion of prosodic patterns common to vernacular dramaturgy, namely *pōyār* and *tripôdī*.

resolve technical or logistical issues. Beyond the practicality of such breaks in long-form performance, the presentation of bicār gān as a series of rounds also emphasizes its musical athleticism and polemical endurance.



**Figure 4.3.** The common structure for a sequence of pālā-s in a bicār gān debate. A format of this length would require approximately three hours to complete.

The above figure displays the general progression of a bicār gān debate, with regard to its succession of pālā-s. Notably, a standard event would consist of at least one more, and occasionally a third, sequence of pālā-s, each separated by larger intermission (*bifrām*). A typical two-session bicār gān debate has a total duration of about six hours, from start to finish. Customarily, the second sequence would begin with bōyāti two, allowing him or her the same advantages as bōyāti one in the first sequence (providing the introductory question and answering the concluding one). This aspect of format, which equalizes advantage, also highlights its sportive configuration.

### Queries

The act of presenting a question (*poribefōn*) in a bicār gān debate is an important and relatively formal act. The bōyāti artist will typically employ certain verbal protocol, saying “I will first state my question, which will be illuminated by a song, and humbly ask that my opponent respond with careful consideration.” He or she will further beseech the audience, “if I make any mistakes, I ask you to kindly forgive me for my shortcomings.” This customary tone is even referred to as *kānun* (Arabic: *qānūn*, cognate with the English *canon*), which has

historically referred to legislative laws, especially those unassociated with religious edict, by sovereign Muslim states. The regality and grandeur of the *poribefōn* is thus itself a stylistically authorized and culturally embedded act.

The overall nature of contributed questions in a *bicār gān* debate, which situates its accompanying banter and performance, can be understood from two distinct angles: the variety of the query and the polemical maneuvers utilized in its submission. To provide clarity, I begin by examining the first angle here—the nature of the query—through a series of illustrative questions that suggests three distinct categories: (1) source-based, (2) observational, and (3) suppositional assertions. A source-based query is readily inspired by either scripture (“what book and what verse of the Qur’ān affirms the superiority of men?”) or hagiography (“what saint caused stones to melt away and why?”). An observationally-inspired query is either based directly on the opponent’s situational presence (“my rival is wearing a turban, but does he know why fakirs wear a head dress?”) or the general disposition of the transpiring debate (“this evening’s performance has been so obscure, I therefore ask if you can more specifically address the morality of jinn?”). A third category of query carries a more suppositional tone, putting less demand on a particular type of answer as opposed to the effectiveness of the response. One approach to this category might invite a topical application (“I represent the viewpoint of the Hindu, give me three reasons why I should stay in Bangladesh today”), but another approach might invite a more creative response combining devotional discourses (“I am the creator and you are the created, if you were to change the religion of man what would you do differently?”).

## Polemical Maneuvers

While the nature of a query can be greatly admired—often influencing the overall enjoyment of the debate—a polemical maneuver utilized to support the query is implemented in tandem, through the use of song, narrative, recitative and gesture<sup>10</sup> to further orchestrate banter. This can be validated by the oft-repeated bôyāti phrase *ābeg diye bôle dāo, nôile mōñce āgun jālāo* (“speak passionately, or else light the stage on fire”). This curious expression elicits a somewhat ambiguous meaning, perhaps suggesting *if there is no oomph, then the whole endeavor is futile*, but it might alternatively propose *if you can’t be so persuasive, then polemically dig your way out*. Beyond the nature of the assertion itself, a variety of polemical maneuvers can have equal or more affect on the declaration. I summarize the polemical flavor supporting a query (or rebuttal) in bicār gān along the lines of three distinct categories: (1) scholarly, (2) divisive, and (3) indulging.

A scholarly approach involves an overall attempt to bamboozle (*bekub bānānô*) the opponent or impress (*prôbhābitô kōra*) the audience through a demonstration of the bôyāti artist’s profound understanding of debate topics. This approach is ultimately derived from personal knowledge, and is often based on a semantic argument. For example, a bôyāti might examine the mystical interpretations behind several books of the Qur’ān that begin with non-syntactic Arabic letters. This classical Sufi endeavor might be supplemented by any number of abstruse songs on the subject matter, such as the composition *ālef lām mīm tineri bhed rekhechen sâi gôpôn kôre* (“the master has hidden away the three meanings of the letters ‘alif lām mīm”) by

---

<sup>10</sup> See Chapter Four for a discussion of gesture in mediating personal, inter-performer and audience relations in bicār gān.

Jalaluddin Khan (1894–1972), a saint-composer whose *kerāmôt* is associated with solitary devotion.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, a scholarly approach to confound or impress might alternatively be situated in the chronicled details of religious history. For example, in a larger discourse concerning martyrdom, a *bôyāti* might digress into a discussion of the armed battles and the pivotal slaying of Ḥusayn (625–680), grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad. Drawing from an extensive and detailed body of literature on this account—both in Bengali and broader Shīʿa writings—this approach might easily involve a spontaneously-rendered form of recitative by the *bôyāti*, itself inspired by traditional *puthi* compositions in Bengali<sup>12</sup> that are replete with recounted tales of the martyrdom of Ḥusayn, and written in simple prosodic patterns such as *pôyār*.<sup>13</sup> Unlike a more standardized operatic recitative, *bôyāti*-style recitative is neither fully inspired by the rhythm of ordinary speech nor is restricted to a melodic range of a few notes. Rather, recitative has a distinct pattern of meter and intonation to which traditional melodies are commonly assigned, as is evidenced by the associated *bôyāti* sur, or melodic motif, also known as *puthi*. The end result still produces a vocal rendering that is recitative-like, since it is neither fully sung text nor stylized speech, but something in between. In the world of *bicār gān* debates, however, the sonic performance of the *puthi* sur immediately evokes the literary genre of *puthi*, specifically its

---

<sup>11</sup> For example, the three letters *الم* (ʿalif lām mīm) are found in the first verse of Sūrat al-Baqarah, the second book in the conventionally-bound Qurʾān. The traditional exegeses of such verses invoke the expression *اللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ* or *allāhu ʿa ʿlim* (“only God knows the meaning”).

<sup>12</sup> See Chapter Two for a discussion of Muslim *puthi* literature and its performance in Bengali vernacular dramaturgy.

<sup>13</sup> The typical structure of a basic *pôyār* meter, as used by *bôyāti* artists, is a couplet of fourteen syllable lines divided by the following sequence of feet: 8 + 6, 8 + 6. It is often accompanied by a simple, commonly recognized folk melody. For more information, see Chapter Two’s discussion of vernacular dramaturgy.

complex and lengthy descriptions of Islamic war chronicles, and thus offers an opportunity to demonstrate scholastic knowledge through historical asides.<sup>14</sup>

If scholarly polemics inspire a sort of shock and awe strategy through a showcasing of personal comprehension, a second and more divisive used to supplement a query is primarily aimed at the opponent through alienating or schismatic tactics (*bicchinnô*). For example, a cheeky song by the poet Abdus Sattar Boyati (d. 1981) entitled *bāṅgālider ôtibinimoye āmi otimugdhô* (“I’m eternally grateful for such a delightful exchange with the Bengali people”) sarcastically exposes an underlying pettiness and ignorance in everyday conversations with Bangladeshis. Alternatively, the song *bôrtômāne nāri jāti e defer kōlōngkômçy* (“today’s women are the unchaste of the nation”) by Latif Sarkar (n.d.) is clearly meant to incite vexation in the opponent and chuckles from the audience through its pompousness.<sup>15</sup> While such discourse can be salacious or controversial, irreverential comments, diatribe, and similar ad hominem attacks on the opponent’s character are not meant to divert arguments as much as invigorate the performance’s atmosphere, particularly when a bôyāti wishes to veer away from a debate’s incessant weightiness. Such a divisive approach, however, can clearly get under the skin of a novice or temperamental opponent, and thus also provides an opportunity to *ākrômoṅ* (“attack”) and weaken the challenger’s scheme by subterfuge.

---

<sup>14</sup> In a number of instances, I have heard impromptu recitations in the puthi scheme and melody recited in secularized environments outside of performance venues or similar vernacular settings. For instance, the puthi approach to recitative has been used in political rallies, book fairs, and religious sermons to add eloquence to public speech, demonstrating its highly pervasive and identifiable quality.

<sup>15</sup> To invalidate this argument, the opposing bôyāti might perform any number of compositions by Abdul Halim Boyati, such as the song *māiyār chôbi deikhā nōbī sṅpnôjoge āfek hçy, sei meyeṭi bibi āyṣā couddô hājār hādis kçy* (“through the power of dream, the Prophet was smitten with a woman; that woman was ‘Ā’isha (a beloved wife of Muḥammad), a thousand narrations confirm this.” In the Sunni tradition, ‘Ā’isha is commonly portrayed as scholarly and inquisitive, and is known for relating over two thousand ḥādīth commentaries, unusual for a female narrator in Islam (Esposito 2012).

While a scholarly approach to polemics draws on the bôyāti artist’s achievements in individualized study, and a divisive approach to supplementing a query draws on his or her ability to enfeeble an opponent, a third tactic of indulging (*nāi deowā*) represents an approach that accommodates audiences’ perspectives. Such a tactic might be explored through a demonstration of musicianship (either through vocal performance or virtuosic playing on the violin or sārindā fiddle), and may even involve a number of raga-inspired sur-s (such as *jhijhiṭ* or *bāgefrī*), which often provoke a general admiration for classicism.

In addition, accommodating a composite audience sometimes involves incorporating an image, lyric or idea that is suddenly extracted from well beyond the boundaries of the traditional song canons of bicār gān, which effectively functions as a kind of subliminal musical pandering. While this technique does not occur regularly, its ability to surprise and charm can potentially succeed in wooing the crowd. For example, a devotional lyric can be arranged to the melody of a popular and toe-tapping cinema song, or a well-known tune associated with *jāgôrṇer gān* (“songs of awakening”), a vast body of defiant protest songs that have a deep and sentimental reception history amongst Bangladeshis. Additionally, traditional references to seasonal poetry and motifs, with its abiding depictions of Bengali seasons and the unspoiled countryside, may have comparable effect, and perhaps dates back to Rabindranath Tagore’s own successful campaign to nationalize the celebration of the Bengali New Year (in Spring) through a variety of songs catered to its popular observance through communal performance.

Lastly, on one occasion, I witnessed a curious debate in which a bôyāti unexpectedly recited the *darūd*, an Arabic prayer arranged to a specific melody, which is often associated with *milād*, the custom of celebrating the Prophet’s birthday. Upon hearing the first line *yā nabī salām*

*‘alayka* (O Prophet, peace be unto you!), the entire audience arose in deference, and this cunning placement of one devotional sentiment into another drew attention to the *bōyāti* through the ritualized reaction to the prayer’s sonic rendering. While this element of surprise can run the risk of sounding kitschy or contentious, its discerning placement nonetheless highlights the extent to which an impartial view toward appropriating aural allusions can find space in *bicār gān*.

### **Conclusion**

The notion of *ijārā* visualizes the sonic map of a *bōyāti* artist’s impromptu debate performance, differentiating devotional voices or states that are produced or interact in the discursive unfolding. However, *ijārā*, while a non-musical component of *bicār gān*, is also another layer of the dialectical material to be sublimated and realigned to express devotional creativity.

The overall format and polemical maneuvers used in *bicār gān* might be summarized with three concluding ideas, beginning with the manner in which the combined musical elements of *bicār gān*, while pietistically-centered, conjure an eclectic range of emotive impressions that are galvanized by a kind of devotional athleticism and musical endurance crucial to the debate’s overall structure. Secondly, dynamic interchanges in the dialectical setting uniquely invigorate *bōyāti* musicality with compositional agency, allowing the canonic and the experimental to converge in a creative devotional space that moves between interrogative, suppositional, and deflective tones. Lastly, these collective components also critically articulate the genre’s in-betweenness for the audience by subtly negotiating piety through the perceived boundaries of oratory and scriptural rhetoric, the reception history of sonic allusions, and the debate’s entertaining capriciousness.

## Chapter Five

### Enshrining Debate: Sacred Spaces, Sonic Terrains, and the Teleologies of Tombs

This chapter assesses the ambience of the staged debate at shrines through evaluations of geography, pedagogy, pilgrimage, patronage, and arbitration. I argue that the bôyāti community's alliance with shrines as musical venues in Bangladesh provides them with a strikingly productive platform for performance. On the one hand, local shrine committees who aim to find relevance in a bewildering array of disparate pilgrimage networks in Bangladesh—as well as non-shrine based devotionism—are increasingly open to the prospects of solemnizing bôyāti performance at their shrines. On the other hand, bôyāti artists themselves are drawn to the musical impermanence of shrine stages, which allows them to experiment and broaden their skills at these somewhat more discrete locales, with little hindrance from disruptive crowds or the demands of larger shrine bureaucracies.

The first section examines two Sufi brotherhoods that have traditionally been associated with bôyāti spirituality, making note of a dual allegiance which defies the standard criteria that typically informs the relationship between shrine and shrine performer. I suggest a subtle alliance between bricolage and burial chamber by turning to indoctrination in the bôyāti world and making the claim that bôyāti spirituality, livelihood, and musicianship are creatively attached to the peculiarities of saintly culture and etiquette in Bangladesh, imbibing ideas of consecrated corporeality and posthumous deference that importantly articulate and legitimate the art of bôyāti discursiveness.

In order better to situate the evocative ambiguity attached to sacred edifices in contemporary Bangladeshi piety, a second section considers the architecture of national

monuments that memorialize fallen heroes and the liberation struggle, suggesting how physical representations of pathos and longing juxtaposes cultural notions of Bengali Muslim-ness with a pervasive Bangladeshi ethnolinguistic secularism. This discussion is meant to situate a subsequent examination of contemporary Muslim shrine culture in Bangladesh, one that inculcates various elements drawn from the legacies of heroic saint figures, the spiritual objectives of Sufi brotherhoods, and the ambience of open-air performance spaces.

After discussing the structurally-evoked tensions of sanctified space in contemporary Bangladesh, a third section panoramically surveys the greater sacred landscape of vernacular performance in Bangladesh by evaluating both the traditional movement of itinerant musicians in venerated spaces and a certain system of ever-expanding shrines. Here, I aim to emphasize the interdependencies between coteries of specialized vernacular artists traditionally tied to seasonally-based performance circuits and a vast network of increasingly ubiquitous shrines that constitute a flowing spectrum of saintly religious orientations.

Reincorporating a discussion of *bôyāti* musicianship with regard to this geography, a larger section four concentrates on *bôyāti*-based venues through a certain expanse of shrines that are critical to *bicār gān* performance, which I refer to as the *bôyāti* belt. Here, I consider a complex relationship between, on the one hand, shrines within the belt that thrive on a regionalized decentralization that ultimately fortifies *bicār gān* through a type of devotional prevarication and, on the other, dissociated shrines outside the purview of such venues, which threaten or trivialize its performance. To elucidate this point further, I reflect on the ramifications of the belt's borders with religious, topographical, and cultural or metropolitan centers that are integrated or surrounded by it. These prominent features of the terrain allow for a better

understanding of the belt’s environmental devotionism, the various strengths and challenges that suffuse bicār gān performance through a series of distinctive way stations and peripheries.

Localizing the discussion further, the remainder of section four considers specific types of shrines within the bōyāti belt, and suggests that sub-classifications of shrines promote and preserve the performance of bicār gān and its devotional surroundings by supporting a series of contingencies. Specifically, I make the claim that important facets of mausoleums within the belt—not only their size, renown, and location, but also the quality of individual saints interred therein—are axiomatically connected to their function for staging bicār gān performance as public, private, stopgap, or inauguration affairs. The constitution of a debate performance, its vicinity to a particular shrine, and the extent to which it is promoted as “visible” or “hidden” to the public, reveals a curious symbiosis between the dispositional legacies of bōyāti and non-bōyāti saints, further provoking issues regarding the nature of the debate genre’s musical bearing on structures of entombment and the subsequently viable contributions of such spaces as sites of pilgrimage. The constituent parts of this architectural and spiritual divisionalization are ultimately critical to the robustness of both bicār gān performance and the resilience of Sufi mausoleums within the belt, highlighting and sustaining various elements of their jointly-inspired devotionism in an otherwise sprawling, competitive, and sometimes contentious shrine arena. I argue that the construction of both bicār gān performances and Bangladeshi shrine-building establishments are open-ended phenomena that uniquely sanction the mutually advantageous relationships between them.

In the final section, I offer a glimpse of the promotional and administrative components that function “behind” the stylized debate, determining to what end conveners and arbitrators influence or expand on the ambience of a *bicār gān* performance.

### **Binary Brotherhoods in Bôyāti Culture**

This section examines the Sufi brotherhoods which provide a spiritual foundation to shrines (Bengali: *mājār*, but also *dôrgāh*, *dôrbār jôrif* or *roujā mobārôk*<sup>1</sup>) in Bangladesh, concentrating on two significant orders through which the bôyāti community connect spiritual authority with musicianship. Sufi shrines are compelling sites for understanding lived Islam in historical and contemporary South Asia. They serve as portals into South Asian Islam’s complex textual histories, devotional rituals of dance and music, as well as theologies of mediation and transcendence. Yet, modern Sufi shrines must also be studied in relation to a slew of pervasive pietistic ideologies that move through them, catalyzed by both the demands of nation-making projects and public pilgrimage customs. As such, they themselves are a microcosm of officially endorsed and popularist conceptions of Islam that circulate in Bangladesh.

Unlike in other parts of the Muslim world, the everyday Bangladeshi mosque is little more than an *ibādôt khānā*, a “house of worship” where sermons are given and prayers are led. For all other activities, musical and non-musical, the shrine has traditionally provided the platform for Bengali Muslims to engage with one another, promote certain ideologies, and draw correlations with the larger Muslim community abroad through largely non-Bengali brotherhoods that have developed in Bengal. It is with this angle in mind that I turn to a

---

<sup>1</sup> The word *dôrgāh* is synonymous with *mājār* for “shrine,” the latter being more popular, while the more formal term *dôrbār jôrif* literally means “noble court” and *roujā mobārôk* means “blessed tomb.” All words are derived from Perso-Arabic, and can be compared to more traditional Bengali words, such as *sômādhi* (“tomb”), *tīrthô* (“pilgrimage site”), or even *môth* (“monastery”), which all designate non-Muslim spaces of burial or meditation. In the case of the shrine of Lālôn, however, the Sanskrit term *ākhrā* (“hermitage”) is used.

discussion of Sufi brotherhoods through their traditions of saintly lineage, the approaches that govern their ritualized practices, and the location-based relevance of their shrines. Specifically, I seek to articulate how these factors relate to the musical agencies accorded to shrine-based performers such as the bōyāti community, shedding light on both the meaning-making practices of shrine-based religious actors and how the Sufi shrine as an institution relates to broader cultural trends that shape lived religion in Bangladesh.

The vast majority of bōyāti artists are indoctrinated into one of two major Sufi brotherhoods, the Chishtī or the Qādirī orders. Their intriguing either-or relationship to these distinct brotherhoods allows one to reconsider the particularity of their allegiances to them which, like bicār gān, is greater than the sum of its pietistic parts. Furthermore, the bōyāti community's distinctive bond with Sufi institutions in Bangladesh reveals a much more symbolic relationship between shrine etiquette and debate performance, one that subsequently provides a more contemporary angle through which to view the relevance and patronage of shrines in the Bangladeshi devotional landscape.

Both the Chishtī or the Qādirī institutions of Islamic mysticism developed unique characteristics regarding theological issues and devotional practice that exerted profound influence in various South Asian cultural environments over centuries, and constitute two of the four main Sufi orders that would dominate North and East Indian traditions of *taṣawwuf* or Islamic gnosis, the other two being the Suhrawardī and the Naqshbandī brotherhoods. Why has the bōyāti community seemingly embraced a dual fealty to equally formidable institutions of mysticism—the Chishtī or the Qādirī brotherhoods—even though these institutions have traditionally maintained incongruous outlooks regarding the relevance of ritualized musical

performance? Furthermore, why have the other two principle traditions of Sufism in Bengal—the Suhrawardī and the Naqshbandī brotherhoods—not been as critical to bōyāti spirituality? These are questions I seek to elucidate in remainder of the the present section.

In contemporary Bangladesh, the Chishtī and Qādirī orders are widely recognized and celebrated through a direct relationship with prominent saint-figures in their *silsilah*, or spiritual chain of authority: the distinctive South Asian lineage of the Chishtīyya through Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī (1141–1236) and the legendary status of the Qādirīyya through its founding figure ‘Abd al-Qādir Gilānī (al-Jilānī in Arabic, 1078–1166). The Chishtī brotherhood, while initially developing in modern-day Afghanistan, significantly matured and expanded in the Indian Subcontinent through a succession of locally-situated spiritual heirs, initially at key centers in the Punjab and Rajasthan (Begg 1977). The Qādirī Brotherhood, alternatively, is unique in being one of the most widely distributed Sufi institutions throughout the Arab and non-Arab Muslim world, enjoying a largely decentralized leadership that is instead spiritually consolidated by the revered life and achievements of its progenitor ‘Abd al-Qādir Gilānī (Qadri 2000). In contrast to the evolution and propagation of the Suhrawardī and the Naqshbandī brotherhoods in Bengal, the proliferation of both the Chishtī and Qādirī orders have thus been strongly attached to the foundational figures of their respective spiritual pedigrees. In the case of the Chishtīyya, a distinctive heritage of torchbearers based in the Subcontinent give the brotherhood its unique advantage as a homegrown Sufi institution.<sup>2</sup> In the case of the Qādirīyya, a network of autonomous administrative centers throughout the Muslim world stimulate their pervasiveness

---

<sup>2</sup> Especially the definitive early masters of the Chishtī order in India, namely Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī (1141–1236), Qutb al-Dīn Bakhtiyār Kākī (1173–1235), Farīd al-Dīn Ganj-i Shakar (ca. 1175–1266), ‘Alā al-Dīn Ṣābir Kaliyārī (1188–1280), and Nizām al-Dīn Awliyā (1238–1325).

across cultural landscapes, with emphasis on a pioneering architect and saintly persona whose acclaim seemingly traverses complications actuated by space and milieu.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to the Chishtī and Qādirī, the Suhrawardī order became prominent in South Asia through personalities such as Bahāʿ al-Dīn Zakarīyyā (ca. 1170–1262), who helped to introduce the Baghdad-based brotherhood into medieval South Asia in the city of Multan (Razavi 1997). The Suhrawardī brotherhood later reached Bengal with the arrival of notable missionaries such as Makhdūm Yaḥyā Manerī (ca. thirteenth century) who settled in adjacent Patna, Bihar (Ohlander 2008). However, in popular piety, the order’s legitimacy and preservation in the Indian Subcontinent has not been as clearly built upon the legacy of a founding saint or critical innovator. This is striking, considering that the Suhrawardī chain of authority begins with the Persian mystic Abu al-Najīb Suhrawardī (1097–1168), who himself was connected through spiritual genealogy to the figure of al-Ghazālī (ca. 1058–1111), the exceptional saint-scholar that contributed significantly to the development of a systematic view of Sufism and its integration and acceptance in mainstream Islam (Khalafallah 2017). Despite this profound lineage, the growth of the Suhrawardī brotherhood in South Asia is more accredited to the order’s distinctive doctrine, one built on a novel form of conservative piety through mystical discourse (Razavi 1997). The same is similarly true for the Naqshbandī brotherhood, founded by Bahāʿ al-Dīn Naqshband (1318–1389) in Bukhara, an order that was further solidified in the South Asian environment through the lasting achievements of Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī (1564–1624), an Indian Islamic scholar, Ḥanafī jurist, and a prominent member of the Naqshbandī Sufi order that

---

<sup>3</sup> The Qādirī order, with its many offshoots, is widespread, particularly in the Arab world, and can also be found in Turkey, Indonesia, Afghanistan, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Balkans, Russia, China, as well as East and West Africa (Makdisi 1997).

emphasized the inter-dependence of the Sufi path with sharī‘ah jurisprudence (Buehler 2011). Therefore, both of these brotherhoods were less established in popular piety through the lifework of a particular saint, but more so by the impulse to systemize Sufi theory through a series of prominent South Asian acolytes-scholars and the particularities of their milieu (Baldick 2012). In the cases of both the Suhrawardī and Naqshbandī brotherhoods in Bengal, neither order officially endorses musical performance in ritualized context.<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, one might view the unique and advantageous connections between the bōyāti community and the Chishtī and Qādirī brotherhoods as threefold. Firstly, both orders’ lasting impression amongst everyday Bengali Muslims has emphasized piety through an aforementioned cultural inclusion rather than the consolidation of somber religious renewal brought on by prevailing sociopolitical leanings and theological apologetics. With irony, the early implementation of Chishtī Sufism in Bengal was fostered primarily by bureaucratic patronization. For example, the Ilyās Shāhī dynasty, the first independent Turkic Muslim regime in late medieval Bengal (fourteenth to fifteenth centuries) was endorsed by the Sufi saint ‘Alā al-Ḥaqq Paṇḍavī (n.d.), which prominently forged a relationship of mutual patronage with the Chishtī order (Taneja 2003). Later, the Bengal Subah, a subdivision of the Mughal Empire which encompassed much of the Bengal region (sixteenth and eighteenth centuries), further instilled Chishtī religious practice and sainthood within the contours of Bengali Muslim piety through the

---

<sup>4</sup> A curious example of the Naqshbandī brotherhood’s presence in Bengal can be seen in its most famous Bangladeshi shrine, the mausoleum of Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 874–5 or 848–9), commonly known as Bayazid Bastami, located in the port city of Chittagong. However, according to many scholars, the Bengali shrine of Bayazid Bastami is a mock tomb, and no documentation exists to suggest that al-Biṣṭāmī ever traveled to Bengal (Nurbakhsh 1994). Furthermore, several other shrines of Bayazid Bastami exist, one in his hometown of Bastam, Iran, and another in Kırıkhan, Turkey (Ernst 1996). Despite being an extremely popular pilgrimage site in Bangladesh—with the figure of al-Biṣṭāmī thoroughly integrated into the the Bengali Sufi imaginary through tales of miraculous deeds and personal austerity—his connections with the Naqshbandī brotherhood are relatively inconsequential to overall shrine popularity.

order's longstanding bureaucratic allegiances with foreign Muslim powers that presided over the area (Jafri and Reifeld 2006). In more recent centuries, however, Chishtī and Qādirī shrines in Bengal, especially the less-known ones, can be readily contrasted with Suhrawardī and Naqshbandī shrines because of their relative indifference to state-sponsorship or theologically-centered *da'wah*, or proselytization.

Many scholars have attributed the large-scale introduction of print culture in vast parts of the traditional Muslim world in the nineteenth century as a pivotal and hermeneutical challenge for Sufi institutions, who were until then self-sustained through their safeguarding of a largely manuscript-centered culture of mystical knowledge interpreted via close discipleship (Aquil 2010). Notwithstanding Muslim Bengal's own angst over revivalist forms of Islam, the Chishtī and Qādirī orders seem to have increasingly retained a stronger presence amongst pilgrims and followers in the agrarian domain, insisting on the qualities of spiritual intimacy and guidance through pedigreed authority. As such, a vast expanse of Chishtī and Qādirī shrines in contemporary Bangladesh are less urban-centered, and in fact enjoy a thoroughly-implemented regionalization throughout the nation. For the bōyāti community, this institutional connection has fostered a productive alliance that has remained localized and amiable to their musical experimentation.

Secondly, this particularly resilient approach to coalescence that both the Chishtī and Qādirī brotherhoods have exhibited in Bengal has fostered a spiritual interface with various local and often peripheral communities. More generally, the commingling of ideas through different *ṭarīqah* ("road" or "path," in Arabic), or different schools or traditions of Sufism, is not

uncommon in South Asia.<sup>5</sup> In the case of the Chishtī and orders, their extensive development within various devotional environments of the Indian Subcontinent has particularly allowed for the absorption of spiritual frameworks and imagery from antinomian coterie of Islamic asceticism, from so-called dervish groups including the *faqir*<sup>6</sup>, *qalandar*<sup>7</sup> and *malang*<sup>8</sup> communities in North India.<sup>9</sup> Strikingly, this co-mingling has not trivialized saintly focus, but has rather produced a remarkably vibrant panegyric expression of Chishtī and Qādir sainthood. As such, both bāul and bōyātī artists have developed an interest in Chishtī and Qādirī shrines as performance opportunities in Bangladesh, and both communities include songs honoring Chishtī and Qādirī saints in their repertoire. For the Chishtī and Qādirī brotherhoods, bōyātī initiation has specifically allowed for a group of musical specialists not previously tied to any particular

---

<sup>5</sup> Despite a long and pervasive allegiance between Mughal administration and the institutions of Chishtī Sufism, the sixth and last of the effective Mughal emperors, Muḥi al-Dīn Muḥammad Aurangzeb (1618–1707), embraced Naqshbandī Sufism. Inspired by the vast reforms within Naqshbandī mysticism through the works of Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī (1564–1624), which emphasized the inter-dependence of the Sufī path with sharī‘ah jurisprudence, Aurangzeb commissioned a massive compilation of documents known as the Fatāwa-i ‘Ālamgīrī. The contents of the Fatāwa-i ‘Ālamgīrī became the reference legal text for implementing sharī‘ah in colonial South Asia from the eighteenth through early twentieth centuries (Dahnhardt 2002). This striking account reveals the contextualized manner in which presiding Muslims monarchs in South Asia approached mystical practice in accordance with their own administrative and personal convictions, and sometimes over the conventional loyalties of their forefathers.

<sup>6</sup> Various fakir groups in India have had a long and influential relationship with similarly hermitic traditions of holy men indigenous to South Asia, including the gosāī, sādhu, sanyāsi, yogi and bhikkhu traditions of asceticism (Ernst 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Starting in the early twelfth century, this decentralized movement of initially wandering ascetics gained popularity in Greater Khorasan before entering the Indian Subcontinent. While they are somewhat more structured and sedentary in contemporary times, the nature of their established practices or social composition varies from group to group, and across India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (Green 2006). Their poetically-rich tradition of indifference and even derangement, with regard to spiritual practice, is commonly reiterated in the lyrics of qawwālī, the devotional music associated with Chishtī shrines

<sup>8</sup> The particularities of this group in contemporary times are unclear, though traditional qawwālī lyrics also associate them with the same characteristic sense of nonconformism and spiritual rapture.

<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, as the Chishtī order has branched off into sub-traditions over the centuries, masters from within the tradition have willingly initiated disciples from other major orders as well. In recent times this has been complicated by other Islamic movements which have selectively appropriated Sufī discourse or ritual practices. For example, the famous Chishtī-Nizāmī branch, indebted to the legacy of Nizām al-Dīn Awliyā (1238–1325), arguably the most renowned Sufī of the Indian Subcontinent, who was spiritual guide to Amīr Khusrau (1253–1325), the eminent architect of qawwālī poetry and music. Other examples include the Chishtī-Ṣābirī branch, or the somewhat further extended ‘Ishq-Nūrī brotherhood.

religious institution or mystical practice to honor its shrine heritage, and to aid in promoting its larger Sufi objectives amongst a broader network of ill-assorted shrine cultures in the rural landscape. For bôyāti musicians themselves, attachment to Chishtī and Qādirī heritage is a sensible and productive platform for their longtime discursive and aggregative approach to performance. The bôyāti community have not been pedigreed guardians of a specifically shrine-developed form of devotional performance, and qawwālī—the genre associated with hereditary specialists at Chishtī shrines in North India and Pakistan—has a nominal presence in Bangladesh.<sup>10</sup> Instead, Chishtī and Qādirī shrines in Bangladesh have allowed for the further nurturing of Bengali-language song and discussion through the bicār gān debate, giving both shrine and genre a mutually advantageous space for sustainment.

Thirdly, the Chishtī and Qādirī brotherhoods accentuate the bôyāti community’s discursive piety through various spiritual or administrative dimensions unique to each order. Tellingly, neither the Chishtī and nor Qādirī brotherhood are indigenous to Bangladesh, nor does either tradition of Sufism claim dominion over a musical area through a particular set of performance traditions. In addition, interactions with both brotherhoods have provided two sets of thematic or ideological impressions that have further shaped bôyāti dialectics and showmanship, as is evidenced by the standardized debate topic in bicār gān known as “Baṛā Pīr

---

<sup>10</sup> The sound and legacy of the qawwālī tradition exists across a wide variety of traditional and popular forms, from decades of “filmī music” in Bollywood to modern arrangements of Muslim devotional music from the Deccan and beyond, such as those composed in the Dravidian languages of Tamil or Malayalam. Chapter Two discussed the importance of qawwālī and Urdu-language devotional poetry as a modality embedded in bôyāti musicianship, from which certain independent musical and poetic features are sometimes conjured to evoke a qawwālī-like performance. Overall, however, as a genre of music, the tradition of qawwālī has a limited and less cultivated place in Bangladeshi devotional performance. Some Urdu-based qawwālī singers do exist in Bangladesh, and the unique shrine-based performances at Māijbhāṅḍār in Chittagong is particularly indebted to the general sound of qawwālī. However, its ultimately non-Bengali expression has not translated fully in the contemporary devotional music landscape, owing perhaps to both the dubiety of Urdu poetry in the post-independence era and its incongruity with traditional Bengali devotional song forms.

vs. Khwājā Bābā,” a musical parley over the merits of ‘Abd al-Qādir Gilānī versus Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī, the legacies around which the two brotherhoods were popularized in South Asia.

The Chishtī order, ultimately unique to South Asia in its historical development, brings to bōyāti culture a readily acknowledged set of ritual practices and a related body of popular saint figures known throughout the Indian Subcontinent.<sup>11</sup> The Chishtī brotherhood not only enjoys an extremely pervasive presence throughout a large portion of South Asia, but is quintessentially associated with premier Sufī music-making communities and professional artists. Chishtī hagiography and conventions help to legitimate bōyāti performance through this familiarity, and are thus easily wrapped in the trappings of Sufi mysticism. The Qādirī order’s relationship to the bōyāti community appears to be a less straightforward one. Traditional Qādirī ritual does not incorporate musical performance beyond stylized singing or recitation of litanies, which are usually unaccompanied or occasionally performed with limited percussion. However, the leadership’s more decentralized organization, allowing various Muslim world has more freely adopted their own interpretations and practices, is a striking feature of its preservation.<sup>12</sup> This type of administrative structure mirrors the bōyāti community’s organization as a loose network of bards. Lastly, the overall legacies of both brotherhoods are strongly maintained through saintly biographies and the kerāmôt of its founding figures, giving bōyāti artists ample material for the performance of bicār gān.

---

<sup>11</sup> Especially the definitive early masters of the Chishtī order in India, namely Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī (1141–1236), Qutb al-Dīn Bakhtiyār Kākī (1173–1235), Farīd al-Dīn Ganj-i Shakar (ca. 1175–1266), ‘Alā al-Dīn Šābir Kaliyārī (1188–1280), and Nizām al-Dīn Auliya (1238–1325).

<sup>12</sup> Notably, Qādirī ritual practice does not typically involve musical performance and the polyglot ‘Abd al-Qādir Jilānī, for which the brotherhood was eponymously named, was not just a mystic, but a Ḥanbalī Sufi theologian and jurist.

## **Indoctrination in Debate: Shrine-Centered Discipleship**

This section briefly examines bôyāti indoctrination, its relationship to shrine culture and space, and its incorporation of ascetic traditions, saintly commemoration, and pilgrimage practice in order to reify integral aspects of bôyāti musicianship and spiritual belief. For many devotional communities in South Asia, initiation into an order is not only a deeply personal act of deliverance, but also a highly symbolic ritual performance. In Bangladesh, bāul and bôyāti communities regard indoctrination as both a communal and intimate moment in which an acolyte is officially bound to a habitual pedagogical relationship with his or her master, and one fashioned as a public inauguration amongst peers. In both communities, this initiation is also very much tied to the broader notions embedded in the Indic concept of *guru śiṣya paramparā* (“the succession from guru to disciple”)—its dimensions of intimacy, deference, commitment, and austerity—as found through the Indian Subcontinent, or wherever the traditional arts of South Asia are disseminated and flourish. As a ritual signifying the beginning of confidential and rigorous immersion, this process naturally takes on devotional qualities that signify the single-mindedness required for the journey, itself a form of worship.

A striking form of liminality expressed through bodily dialogue is performatively exemplified in the initiatory ritual of Lālônī bāul-s, which is positioned between Bengali Hindu and Muslim realms of spirituality with regard to notions of worldly renunciation and domestic life. Entrance into bāul-hood through partnership remains so crucial that often, if an initiate is single, he or she is usually paired with a mate, or else postpones initiation until a mate can be adequately obtained. Thus, the neophyte members simultaneously acknowledge an abandonment of customary societal governance while making a pledge to one another as domestic partners.

For followers of Lālôn, bāul-s are almost always dressed in white (as opposed to the saffron-colored robes of Vaiṣṇava saints and many West Bengali bāul-s), and this apparel intentionally resemble the *kāfôn*, or Muslim death shroud, symbolizing the death of one’s previous social identity. This notion is known as *jānte môrā*, the obtainment of spiritual liberation through “killing” the vices of the soul, “dying before living.”

The pair of inductees undergo a series of private rituals in close consultation with their guru where, amongst other ritualistic matters, they are often counseled on traditional forms of contraception. This particular matter is of clear importance since, as bāul doctrine regards the body as the ultimate vessel of sacrality, all that abounds within the body, including its life-giving fluids, are also sacred and must be safeguarded and constrained. This is why, in many of Lālôn’s songs, the vocabulary used to describe the mystical attainment of knowledge frequently includes verbs such as *dhōrā* (to apprehend) or *pākṛāo kōrā* (to seize). Lālôn’s adherents further state that the release of semen or the secretion of related fluids, due to its specifically procreative ingredients, is detrimental to the soul—indeed, the self is then seen as *khôṇḍitô* (“divided” or “fragmented”). Such an act of reproduction—*punôrjônôm*, as the Lālônī bāul-s refer to it—is further elucidated in many compositions.

The inductees are blindfolded and led into a mock funeral procession, usually staged at the guru’s hermitage or the burial chamber of a important guru in the respective lineage, which they circumambulate several times, a practice which is strikingly similar to the circumambulation (Arabic: *tawāf*) of the cuboidal Ka‘bah structure during the ritual pilgrimage to Mecca. In the concluding ceremony, all members of the congregation, including the guru, deferentially bow to the new members with head and hands firmly touching the ground. The

symbolic act of man-worship, while having blasphemous repercussions in traditional Islamic theology, is often justified by Lālônī adherents with the following verse:

*dhōrā ājājīl rekheche sejdā bāki konkhāne  
kōr re mōn kōr sejdā sei jāygā cine*

*o mind, seek out the place where the spiteful 'Azāzil dared not prostrate  
and bow your head*

The reference to 'Azāzil is, of course, that demonic personage in biblical cosmology and the fire-born embodiment of the righteous jinn named Iblīs in Islamic lore, and that he subsequently earned the name Satan (Arabic: Shayṭān) when, out of hubris and jealousy, refused to bow down to the clay-shaped man Adam, made in God's image, and was thus ousted from heaven.



**Figure 5.1. A blindfolded bāul couple, in the midst of their initiation, begin their circumambulation.**

### **Bōyāti Indoctrination**

Since spirituality and musicianship are important but somewhat autonomous facets of bōyāti identity, a formalized pedagogical relationship with two distinctive gurus is maintained: a

*dīkkhā* or “initiation” guru (i.e., a pedigreed religious guide from one of the Sufi brotherhoods), and a *ḥikkhā* or “instructive” guru (a senior bôyāti artist who takes on disciples).<sup>13</sup> While his or her official indoctrination may occur separately with both gurus, the *dīkkhā* guru is typically present at the *ḥikkhā* guru’s *bāyāt* (Arabic: *bay‘ah*, “initiation”) ceremony, in which case the entire function is referred to as a *ḥugôl brātô* (“twin vows”) ceremony. In the standard scenario, a room is designated in which the initiation is to take place, such as the guru’s home, which is referred to as the *môkām ghor* (Arabic: *maqām*, in this case, a “consecrated space”). This room is decorated with flowers, incense, and other paraphernalia, including a miniature *roujā* (Persian: *raużā*, in this case, a “mock tomb”). The guru and disciple conjoin hands, covered by a *rumāl* (“handkerchief”), representing the sacred and intimate transference of knowledge. Several prayers are recited together, including the *fāhādôt* (Arabic: *shahādah*, a cardinal Islamic creed professing faith in Allah and the Prophet Muḥammad), and a more cryptic *damer dowā* (Arabic: *du‘ā*, literally “the prayer of breath”), a specially-designated mantra which is whispered into the ear of the disciple. With an *āfā* (scepter) in one hand, the guru will confer upon the acolyte a new *sārindā* fiddle (or sometimes, a violin), symbolically instigating the musical pedagogy. The disciple acknowledges this bestowal by lighting a candle and making a *kôbul* (Arabic: *qabul*, “acceptance”, in this case “promise”) of steadfastness. This particular word also has nuptial connotations in Bengali Muslim culture, and is typically uttered by the bride when she accepts a marriage proposal during the *nikā* (Arabic: *nikāḥ*, the ceremony of matrimony).<sup>14</sup> The guru

---

<sup>13</sup> Bengali pronunciations of the Sanskrit *śikṣā* (“instruction,” “lesson,” or “study”) and *dīkṣā* (“preparation” or “consecration”), which are deeply tied to traditional Indic pedagogy and ritual.

<sup>14</sup> In one instance, I have even heard of this sacred bond described as connecting the *mukh līngô* (mouth-phallus) of the guru to the *korṇô joni* (ear-vagina) of the student.

announces that his student is no longer a *sālek* (Arabic: *sālik*, “follower”), but instead an official *murid* (Arabic: *murīd*, “initiate”), and the two embrace.

The initiatory rites of neophyte *bôyāti* artists thus strikingly resemble both the Vaiṣṇava renunciatory ritual known as *bhek*, as well as the ceremony of allegiance known as *bay‘ah* in Sufi brotherhoods. For example, the bifurcation of their musical-ascetic lifestyle introduces the inductee into multiple spaces of mystical practice and knowledge dissemination—both in the Indic notion of isolated austerity as embodied by sadhus, and in the pedigrees of Sufi saints—which legitimates the artist’s juggling of spaces, an act that spans the social structures of Bangladeshi society, a complex network of shrines cultures and performance circuits, and streams of devotion.

Like the *bāul* inductee, the *bôyāti* disciple also experiences ritual indoctrination as a form of death. This liminal act is likened to the “greater” or “inner struggle” (Arabic: *al-jihād al-akbar*), which refers to the killing of the *nôfsi* (Arabic: *nafs*, in this case, the debased ego) and a reconnection with *phitrā* (Arabic: *fiṭrah*, or mankind’s innate disposition towards goodness). To this end, a *bôyāti* may invoke the following expression: *reowāj kôrô bhed kôrô, môrār āge ækbār môrô* (“nurture an ability to discriminate, and die once before death”). Likewise, the ambiguous overtones of love that are cultivated between master and student are intentionally suggestive, and *bôyāti* songs frequently amalgamate words such as *mohôbbôt* (Arabic: *maḥabbah*, “affection”) and *kām* (Sanskrit: *kāma*, “desire”). These imageries are not specific to Bengali Sufism, but are cherished for their strong allusions to unparalleled intimacy, allegiance, and solicitude.

At the same time, this pseudo death ritual not only shares metaphysical characteristics with the aforementioned *bāul* concept of *jaente môrā* (“living death”), but also seems to betoken

bôyāti musicality in striking ways. At the end of the *bāyāt* ceremony—before a communal soirée concludes the event with song, discussion, and prayer—the newly-initiated student places a *gilāp* (Arabic: *ghilāf*, “casing,” in this case, a decorative casket cover) over his own mock tomb, and then waves a *cômôr* (“fly-whisk”) over it. This fanning of the “tomb” with a decorative whisk has both regal and shrine-based associations through South Asia,<sup>15</sup> and is done in deference to the dead. In this case, the act of presiding over the burial procedures of one’s own funeral suggests an out-of-body experience which is akin to the creative undertaking of *bicār gān* composition, the manner in which the bôyāti artist dissects, rearranges and makes addenda to musical, poetic and thematic material. As one initiate once put it, while the bāul considers *āpôn khôbôr* (“self-knowledge”) within the *tôn bhubôn* (“body-universe”), the bôyāti uses a *chôddôbef* (“disguise,” “masquerade”) to interfuse *hṛdṛy* (“heart”), *kôlôm* (“pen”), and *tônu* (“body,” but perhaps here “persona”). This type of analogy is meant to articulate bôyāti debate maneuvers, which necessitates its own type of corporeal severance.

### **Ambiguous Memorials of the Victorious Dead**

Before examining shrine-centered bôyāti performance in detail, this section complicates a discussion of shrines as sacred structures in Bangladesh by examining a variety of state monuments that commemorate nationhood and the aftermath of the Bangladesh Liberation War. I reflect on these mausoleums or memorials, the sites built around them, and the manner in which certain structural features concretize their attraction and representation as public spaces of pilgrimage, alongside correlating yet ambiguous sentiments of grief, angst, and pride.

---

<sup>15</sup> For example, the *chauri* is a similar type of fly-whisk used to express Sikh ritual deference to the tradition’s central text, the *Guru Granth Sahib* (Gill 2007). The *cômôr* is also utilized in a variety of Bengali vernacular dramas (Ahmed 2001).

National holidays in contemporary Bangladesh today, more often than not, are solemn affairs, such as Victory Day and Independence Day, in December and March respectively, which ceremonially bookend the beginning and end of the historic struggle for independence. In addition to this, February twenty-first pays homage to the members of the Bangladesh intelligentsia who were martyred during the precursory Language Movement of the early 1950s.<sup>16</sup> These important dates regularly encourage Bangladeshis to reflect on the meaning of martyrdom, and reconnect with the monuments and sites of pilgrimage that catalyze this introspection.

For Bangladeshis, veneration of the independence movement is an acknowledgement of being the underdog, of instigating an act of defiance that had little possibility of triumph in the Pakistani conflict. Its victory, supported entirely on the unity-through-language rhetoric that gave it credence, was subsequently critical to providing the emerging nation with a grounding philosophy through which to justify its existence (Islam 1994). Notably, the success of this operation was possible because the region of Bangladesh—compared to other important regions in South Asia including India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, or Nepal—is rather uniquely comprised of

---

<sup>16</sup> International Mother Language Day (IMLD) is a worldwide annual observance held on February twenty-first to promote awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity and promote multilingualism. First announced by UNESCO in 1999, it was formally recognized by the United Nations General Assembly in a resolution establishing 2008 as the International Year of Languages. The idea to celebrate International Mother Language Day was initiated by the Government of Bangladesh.

one ethnolinguistic group of Bengali speakers.<sup>17</sup> It was also a necessary deflection from Pakistan's more religiously-aligned sense of national unity, which continues to be seen as the delusions of a failed nationstate amongst Bangladeshis today. More than four decades later, the discourse of nationalist struggle in popular culture is so ubiquitous that others, including Indian Bengalis, are often puzzled by its persistent reference and sacred admiration in Bangladesh, which seems to border on chauvinism. For Bangladeshis, the fight for sovereignty also provides a rationale for which to define a distinction between contemporary Bengali-ness in Bangladesh, and the existence of Bengali-speakers in India. Bangladeshis almost never use the Anglicized term "Bengali" to define themselves or their language, but instead use the more native terms *bāngāli* and *bānglā*, and these terms invoke the tropes of loss and memory that substantiate ethnic pride.<sup>18</sup>

Chapter Three alluded to an entire collection of writings and songs, known as *ekufe sāhittô*, literally the "literature of the 21st," which form a canon of patriotic works that are memorized and performed each year in public spaces and on television, venerating fallen heroes and significant events in the independence movement which punctuate the Bangladeshi calendar.

---

<sup>17</sup> Despite its unusual ethnic homogeneity, Bangladesh has faced a number of issues regarding various non-Bengali citizens within its borders. Bangladesh is home to many Indigenous peoples, belonging to both the Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic groups, whom Bangladeshis refer to as *upôjāṭīyô* (a term comparable with the more commonplace *ādivāsi*). In the 1990s, the Chittagong Hill Tracts conflict was a political and armed conflict between the government of Bangladesh and several *upôjāṭīyô* communities over land rights (Mohsin 2003). In addition to this conflict, the Bangladesh government has repeatedly had to address to the on-going dilemmas of other non-Bengali residents, especially small pockets of Hindustani-language communities who were left stranded by the Pakistani government after the war, and have faced significant ostracization and discrimination by the public (Rahman 2003). In more recent times, Bangladesh has received a large influx of Rohingya refugees fleeing an ongoing struggle with a conservative Buddhist regime in Myanmar, prompting new discussions in Bangladesh regarding its own responsibility to provide wartime sanctuaries (Farzana 2017).

<sup>18</sup> This has been complicated recently by the state of West Bengal, and the longstanding maintenance and irregularity of its name, despite the disappearance of any correlating area named "East Bengal" since 1947. In 2019, led by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, the state assembly passed an unanimous resolution to change the name of West Bengal to simply Bangla (Mitra 2014). This largely politically-inspired change, however, has been met with significant resistance, especially since its claims to sever certain ties through name with the memory of partition, and yet still sounds remarkably similar to the name Bangladesh.

Many of these poems and songs display a ubiquitous regionalism through their particular use of melodic style, folk song forms, and the regional dialects of their lyrics, while also drawing on the longer history of song and social protest in greater Bengal.<sup>19</sup> A verse from *āmār bhāier rôkte rāngāno* (“the color of brethren’s spilt blood”), a cherished *ekujer gān*, perhaps best encapsulates this poetic disposition:

Arouse the serpents, provoke the summer thunderstorms  
Let the world rise up in anger and protest against the massacre of innocents  
They’ve tried to crush the demands of the people by murdering our golden sons  
Can they succeed at this hour, poised for radical change?  
No, no, no! Our history is reddened by blood  
Yet the final verdict has already been given by the twenty-first of February

This quintessential song from the broader tradition of *ekufe sāhittô* also pays homage to the victorious dead with a noticeably agitated tone, its usual arrangement confirms this with an amalgamation of doleful melodic phrases rendered by fiery choral voices, and backed by the heterophonic texture of traditional bamboo flute juxtaposed against militaristic marching patterns on the snare drum. Decades later, the “final verdict” of this anthem retains its profundity, in a time perpetually “poised for radical change.”

According to popular belief, the song was initially written as a poem at the bedside of an injured language movement activist who was shot by the Pakistani military police. One of the cultural secretaries of the Jubo League, the youth wing of the nation’s leading independence campaign, gave the poem to the famed melodist and activist Abdul Latif (1927–2005) to put to tune. Subsequently, various students at Dhaka College (a central political arena, and part of the University of Dhaka) also sang the song when they attempted to build the first Shaheed Minar, a

---

<sup>19</sup> A larger musical discussion of this phenomenon might begin with the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), formed in 1943 in pre-independence India, during which it promoted themes related to the Indian freedom struggle. It served as the cultural wing of the Community Party of India, and featured many predominant Bengali artists from across the board, including sitarist Ravi Shankar (1920–2012) and singer-songwriter Salil Chowdhury (1922–1995).

monument commemorating the martyrs of the Language Movement on campus. Finally, Altaf Mahmud (1933–1971), himself a renowned composer and a martyr, recomposed and reworded the song again, the version that is now a quasi-official tune (Islam 1994).

The compositional history of *āmār bhāier rôkte rāngāno* thus represents a pastiche of activists and martyrs engaged in the liberation movement, and is itself a musical soundtrack that inspired the erection of the Shaheed Minar, Bangladesh’s first and most cherished war monument. Tellingly, both the song and the monument faced various complications and underwent numerous reinterpretations that were rooted in the spirit of insurgency. As such, both melody and memorial have integrated various ideas of personal and shared memory, internalized and externalized trauma, perceived traditions and documented histories.<sup>20</sup>

These sentimentalizations can be seen in the design of national monuments throughout Bangladesh that have been erected to commemorate various stages of the independence struggle, and such structures are quite numerous and continue to be commissioned in new locales. The vast majority of these memorials seem to conjure an atmosphere of gratitude by blending honor with anguish, a patriotic pathos through cold stone and marble. For example, tall, singular obelisks are commonly surrounded by an architectural void or intentionally unfinished objects in the monuments’ peripheral spaces; bodies of water—traditionally admired as reflections of the country’s riverine pastoralism—are often incorporated into such memorials too, not through glistening fountains or elaborate cascades but stagnant, pristine pools that encircle fragmentary sculptures with stark poignancy. Thus, many of these monuments are simultaneously celebrations of language heritage as well as unmistakable cenotaphs—the festive calligraphy of the Bengali

---

<sup>20</sup> The tradition of *ekufēr gān* in fact belongs to larger genre of patriotic and protests songs, which are simply known as *jāgôrṇer gān* (“songs of awakening”).

language is painted across its beams and columns, while busts and plaques of martyrs disrupt these seemingly celebratory contours at pronounced and devotional angles.



**Figure 5.2. Four national monuments in Bangladesh.**

Figure 5.2 includes an image of the Shaheed Minar in the top left, that commemorates those martyred during the Bengali Language Movement. Situated on the central dais is a half-circular arrangement of window-like structures representing the mother and her fallen sons, with a red sun in the background (which is also a symbol on the Bangladesh flag). Marigold wreaths decorate the dais throughout the year, similar to what might be seen at a national cemetery or tomb of a war hero, though no grave is a part of the structure. In contrast to this representation of lament, the open courtyard in front of the Shaheed Minar is thoroughly painted with *ālpônā*, colorful and circular motifs painted by hand that are traditionally made from rice flour and dye. This custom, similar to what is known as *rangoli* throughout many parts of India, has roots in

Bengali Hindu folk art drawn by women on auspicious occasions in front of the home. The top right is an image of a make-shift miniature of the Shaheed Minar built at a girls' school. Hundreds of thousands of such miniatures are fashioned each year on the twenty-first of February, and then beheld in a manner that mirrors the devotional act of *darśana*, the propitious act of “seeing” a deity or holy person.

On the bottom right, the newer National Martyrs' Memorial, inaugurated in 1982, commemorates the fallen veterans of the Bangladesh Liberation War, which was constructed on the outskirts of Dhaka to allow for the empty vastness around the monument (evoking the promise of the future). Designed by Syed Mainul Hossain (1952–2014), this monument reflects the diversification of modern Bangladeshi architecture in the decades after independence, perhaps instigated by the tubular designs of structural engineer Fazlur Rahman Khan (1929–1982), whose seminal achievement is often considered to be the Willis Tower (née Sears Tower) (Khan 2003). Each of the seven pairs of walls coiled together to form a peak point represent seven significant chapters in Bangladesh history: the Language Movement in 1951–52, the Election of the United Front in 1954, the Constitution Movement in 1956, the Education Movement in 1962, the 6-Point Movement in 1966, the Mass Uprising in 1969, and finally the Liberation War of 1971.

On the bottom left is an image of the Martyred Intellectuals' Memorial, an even more recently erected war monument funded by the children of martyrs to memorialize journalists, *littérateurs*, scholars and philanthropists who supported the independence effort. The main element of this monument is a long curved brick wall that represents the original brickfield at Rayer Bazaar where intellectuals were shot execution-style. The wall is broken at both ends to

symbolize the destruction of free thought, and in front of the wall stands a black granite column in a body of still water, representing eternal grief. An opening in the middle of the wall exposes a calm body of water in the distance, inspiring somber reflection.

The above examples of some of Bangladesh's most well-known war memorials are not only significant as architectural commemorations of the past independence struggle, but as ongoing reflections of Bangladeshi patriotism that are always-already situated in the plight of nationhood. This latter idea is evidenced by the continued construction of new and significant memorials, and the manner in which these spaces are made meaningful by both those who visit and behold the physical structures and spaces, and the everyday lives of Bangladeshis who remember them through associated customs of song and miniature replica that are evoked from beyond. Additionally, these memorials continue to strongly connect the sacred and non-sacred through structural qualities that combine the tones of a quasi-spiritual reverence with lofty humanitarianism—a phenomenon not diminished by the process of time—and further complicated by a mediating utility in and around the memorials that inspires certain expectations about social behavior in revered public spaces. Lastly, Bangladeshi war memorials are not just erected in bustling metropolitan centers but increasingly also throughout the nation, in the outskirts of cities and semi-agricultural expanses. While serving a more practical purpose, these locales are also deeply informed by the landscape of memory through the ambiguity of unadulterated space. As such, they are not so much specifically-positioned monuments at the regional sites of historic struggle but instead meant to generally convey a provincialization of pride that celebrates and recalls the quandary of a disadvantaged and grass-roots freedom operation which thwarted oppositional control by localized revolution.

## **Moving Musicians, Stationary Shrines**

Returning to performance, this section introduces and situates traditional open-air performances of vernacular devotional song and shrine-based venues. I look more broadly at both the localized movement of regional artists through certain sacred performance spaces as well as regional shrine centers in Bangladesh. Both these artists and these spaces bring contextual shape to the contemporary *bôyāti* stage.

Firstly, a circuit of itinerant musicians that regularly perform at large, open-air venues during the cooler and drier months between Durga Puja<sup>21</sup> and the monsoon season. These performers readily display a form of commentary through song, dance and recitative, sometimes speculative and other times satirical (see Figure 5.3). These genres also highlight the spontaneity so critical to a peripatetic performance style rendered in front of a largely rural and comparably shifting body of audience members. Moving between a potpourri of musical forms and devotional tones on a whim, the capriciousness of Bengali folk dramaturgy is also clearly a stylistic focus, one which enables multiple or conflicting dialogues to be part of a larger discursive performance. Lastly, the didactic and exegetical qualities of these folk performances have historically allowed for a casual intermingling of mythological and doctrinal accounts with commentary on topical issues of day, from quotidian sociopolitical points to broader national concerns.

---

<sup>21</sup> An annual Hindu festival in the Indian subcontinent that reveres the goddess Durga, and the most popular of such celebrations in Bengal



**Figure 5.3. Three itinerant troupes that have been traditionally governed by the seasonal shape of outdoor vernacular performances in Bengal.**

In figure 5.3, at the top left, concentric circles of audience members intently watch an evening performance of *jātrā*, a type of epic folk theater consisting of a specialist troupe of actors and musicians. The genre of *jātrā* is led by a main performer, traditionally known as *bibek* (“wisdom” or “knowledge”), who liberally intersperses dramatic dialogue with song and dance routines. While *jātrā* was originally centered around Indic mythological narratives with minimal props and situated in a neutral performance space around concentric audiences, it began to incorporate female actors and also served as a vehicle for political satire and protest as it gained entry into urban proscenium theaters during the Bengal Renaissance.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> See Chapter Two’s discussion of *jātrā* and its rise in popularity amongst middle-class theater-going audiences in nineteenth-century Calcutta.

The top right image features a modern stage performance of *kôbigān*,<sup>23</sup> a dialectally-shaped performance led by two specialized artists (called *sarkār-s*; in the picture, one is standing and one sitting on stage left). The genre of *kôbigān* features a unique and structured progression of semi-autonomous song forms that were born out of a synthesis of various vernacular performance genres previously prevalent in different regions of Bengal. While *kôbigān* has traditionally been rendered through song interspersed with occasional stylized oration, *bôyāti* artists (who may also take the surname *sarkār* on stage) usually focus on a delivery style which incorporates narration and recitative followed by a single song to encapsulate the argument at hand.<sup>24</sup>

Lastly, the bottom image features a performance of *kīrtôn*,<sup>25</sup> which in Bengal is an umbrella term that refers to a wide variety of responsorial Vaiṣṇava devotional forms. Bengali-style *kīrtôn* generally combines song and stylized drama, in varying degrees, to produce emotive states that are designed to enrapture the audience through impressions of mystical love. This image is of a performance of *nām kīrtôn*, which is known for its musical repetitions of simple mantras performed by a standing troupe that slowly rotates together in place on stage (typically adjacent to the Hindu deities Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa) in order to address and interact with a concentric arrangement of listeners.

If this first circuit is a collection of mobile artists, the second refers to stationary edifices, the larger array of Sufi shrines in Bangladesh, and the many pilgrimage networks which are

---

<sup>23</sup> See Chapter Two's discussion of the dialectical style of *kôbigān*.

<sup>24</sup> See Chapter Three's musical discussion of *bicār gān*.

<sup>25</sup> See Chapter Two's discussion *podābôlī kīrtôn*, a sophisticated and increasingly urbanized *kīrtôn* style that combines song, acting, recitative and storytelling, particularly known for its complex manipulation of long-cycle *tāla* on the *khol* drum.

shaped by them. In West Bengal, dispersed and widely publicized bāul festivals are the mainstay of this community's musical interface with the public at large, and are the principal venues for mystical song performance, such as the Pous Mela at Shantineketan, the Jaydev Mela at Birbhum, or the Fakiri Utsav at Nadia. In Bangladesh, such festivals are largely limited to a particular place and poet, commemorations hosted at Sufi shrines. In these popular points of congregational and individual experience, the broad spectrum of religiosity amongst Bengali Muslims can be readily observed: some mausoleums are large complexes funded by national endowments, others are little more than dilapidated relics in the countryside; some advocate the orthodox beliefs of the mainstream, others are detached from nearly every aspect of conventional Muslim piety (see Figure 5.4). The many routes of pilgrimage which connect to these shrines are correspondingly complex, competing with one another through the spectacle of liturgical service,



**Figure 5.4. Four major shrines in Bangladesh.**

music-making, commodified paraphernalia, and their popularization through specific performances.

In Figure 5.4, in the top left, is an arched gate leading to the shrine of Shāh ‘Alī Baghdādī (ca. 15th century) in Dhaka. The shrine is situated the area of Mirpur—an older and crowded *thānā*, representing one of Dhaka’s forty-four major subdivisions—known for its many historical sites and the nation’s central bus terminal. Known for its proximity to the High Court rather than the legacy of its interred saint, this shrine represents an urban Chishtī tomb, and thus one with an open attitude toward musical performance. However, the bustling and inclusive neighborhood that surrounds the High Court shrine perhaps contributes to its mixed-genre musical platform, which combines specialist and non-specialist performances. Such “open mic” events can be witnessed each Thursday night, considered to be auspicious time in the Sufī tradition, as it is the evening before the congregational Muslim prayer of *ṣalāt al-jumu‘ah* on Friday afternoon.

In the top right is an image of the shrine of Lālōn (d. 1890) in Kushtia, the poet-saint of the bāul community in Bangladesh. While Lālōn’s legacy is celebrated through his own distinctive canon of song-poems and speculative metaphysical rhetoric, his modest-sized shrine is nonetheless a clear representation of conventional Indo-Islamic architecture, especially noticeable through its bulbous dome and the elaborate archways that surround the central tomb on all sides. However, the Lālōnī bāul community does not refer to this shrine as a *māzār*—a common term used throughout North India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh to refer to Sufī shrines—but an *ākhrā*, a more Indic term that carries the connotation of monastery. This is principally because the site of the mausoleum was erected where Lālōn established his own hermitage in his lifetime, a place that, upon his passing, became increasingly memorialized as a Sufī shrine.

Pilgrimage to the ākhṛā also confirms the dual traditions which celebrate both Lālōn’s established life practices and his posthumous memorialization. The Lālōnī bāul community throughout Bangladesh converge at the ākhṛā biannually, once during the spring celebration of Holi—known as Dol Purnima in Bangladesh—reflecting a tradition established by Lālōn himself), and once at his death anniversary in autumn, which follows the Sufi tradition of death commemoration known as *‘urs*. The architecture of the shrine and its public use is further complicated by on-going and government-sanctioned expansion and accommodation, including a number of buildings in and around the area such as an auditorium, library, museum, and open-air enclosure.

The bottom right of the above figure features the shrine of Shāh Ṣufī Aḥmad Allāh (1826–1906) in Chittagong,<sup>26</sup> the founding saint figure of the Maijbhāṇḍār order of Bangladesh. This newly remodeled and distinctively contemporary shrine is one of many collectively representing an indigenous hybrid brotherhood in Bangladesh, known for its lively musical style which incorporates both Bengali folk music and Urdu-based qawwālī-style poetry, and its significant non-Muslim body of devotees.<sup>27</sup> Notably, while maintaining a strong grassroots base, the Maijbhāṇḍār brotherhood has been actively involved in the affairs of prominent businessmen, politicians, and affluent devotees living abroad. Although the shrine featured in the image here is itself a newer shrine in comparison to other similar shrines found throughout Bangladesh (Aḥmad Allāh died in 1906), its recent and more expansive renovation combines traditional Islamic architecture common to the region with a sort of modern opulence (Harder 2011). The

---

<sup>26</sup> Popularly known as Qiblāh Ka’bah, the “direction of the Kaaba.”

<sup>27</sup> The Maijbhāṇḍār tradition has its origins in combined *ṭarīqah*, or schools of Sufism, including the Chishtī and Qādirī traditions, in addition to others.

spacious indoor accommodations are air-conditioned and invite barefoot pilgrims to rest and pay respects on its cool, marble floor. The central dome above rests, somewhat peculiarly, on a facade which is shaped and painted on all sides to resemble a large and bounded Qur'ān. The shrine also receives continuous online donations through various ULRs maintained by the Maijbhāṇḍār complex.

Lastly, on the bottom left, is an image of the decorative entranceway leading to the shrine complex of Shāh Jālāl in Sylhet (1271–1346). Regarded by many as the unofficial patron-saint of Bangladesh, Dhaka's main airport is accordingly named after him, the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport. As a shrine of the Naqshbandī order, a brotherhood that originated in Central Asia, this shrine is known for its somber, non-musical atmosphere. The shrine and its ambience, however, largely remain pivotal in the Bangladeshi devotional psyche due to the widely-revered hagiographical material that elaborates on Shāh Jālāl and his miraculous deeds and bravery. These cherished accounts describe the arrival of Shāh Jālāl in the larger regional of Sylhet, today in western Bangladesh, which would come to become both an important hub of Sufi heritage in Bengal, and a region known for the cultural contributions of its historically endogamous Sylheti Muslim community. According to the hagiography, the independent ruler of Bengal at the time, Shāms al-Dīn Firoz Shāh (d. 1322) had made several failed attempts to oust a particularly malevolent Hindu ruler of Sylhet named Gauṛ Govinda (n.d.). Eventually, Firoz Shāh would dispatch his commander-in-chief Sayyid Nāṣr al-Dīn (n.d.) to the region, alongside Shāh Jālāl and his three hundred and sixty soldier-disciples (Eaton 1993). Through a lengthy but ultimately successful series of battles, the conflict between Gauṛ Govinda and Shāh Jālāl would

lead to the legendary conquest of Sylhet, and the narratives lionize Shāh Jālāl as *ghāzī*, or an ennobled saint-warrior.<sup>28</sup>

The above discussion examines two distinctive phenomena. On the one hand, traditional groups of vernacular performers move through a series of consecrated performance spaces in Bangladesh, and are bounded by season and popular destination routes. On the other hand, stationary shrines, pseudo shrines, or enshrined personas compete for the sacred landscape, while maintaining various degrees of interest or condemnation of musical performance. In the first case, one is introduced to a long-standing heritage of specialists known for their musical exegesis of mythology and devotional poetry, and who subsequently gain stature through movement between the hallowed spaces of assemblies and congregations in a loose network of towns and villages. In the second case, one is introduced to an equally venerable yet ever-expanding series of shrines, or tombs engulfed by a ubiquitous shrine culture, which increasingly become the musical portals through through which such itinerant musicians must navigate.

The interconnections of these sounds and spaces has produced a layered performance tradition. Itinerant musicians represent a layer of indigenous song, theater and storytelling in East Bengal that is speculative, dialectical, and aggregative. Mausoleums represent a layer of Islamic piety situated by the historical shrines of regional saints, and their representations of Bengali Islam. The combination of these two phenomena essentially set the stage for modern-day vernacular performance in Bangladesh, reflecting both the demands of open-air spaces that are

---

<sup>28</sup> An account of Shāh Jālāl was recorded by the famous Moroccan scholar and traveler of the Muslim medieval world, Ibn Battuta (1304–1368 or 1369). According to his own writings, Ibn Battuta reached the port of Chittagong in modern-day Bangladesh in order to travel from there to Sylhet to meet Shāh Jālāl, who had presided over the area after the rājā Gaur Govinda was deposed. Shāh Jālāl had apparently become so renowned, that Ibn Battuta made a one-month journey through the mountains of Kamaru (most likely Kamarupa, an adjacent and historical kingdom of Assam) (Eaton 1993).

affected by time, climate, and pilgrimage season and the teleologies of tombs and their ultimate viability as performance venues. However, the nature of saintly veneration in Bangladesh has been extensively informed by both the national monuments of political martyrs since the 1950s, and the ongoing appropriation of shrine culture to represent a variety of pieties that align or misalign, in varying degrees, with traditional Sufi practice. This third layer complicates the memorialization of heroic personas and the structures built to honor them, simultaneously fostering the promotion and expansion of a shrine culture, yet infiltrating it with non-religious or religiously incongruous ideologies that produce a serpentine network of pilgrimage routes and associative devotional perspectives.

### **The Bôyāti Belt: A Shrine Nexus for Bicār Gān**

This section examines a critical geographical expanse of bôyāti performance shrines central to this dissertation, and elaborates on the nature and significance of its boundaries.

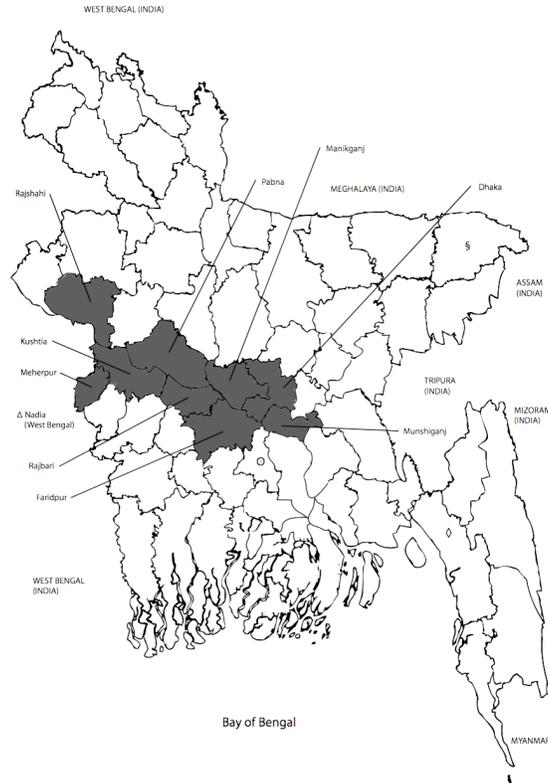
Unsurprisingly, the musical routes of bôyāti artists are governed by a delineated space, and the bulk of this community is concentrated in a performance belt that stretches from Dhaka in Central Bangladesh to Greater Faridpur in the east. The connected small towns and villages which comprise the bôyāti belt are particularly significant because they collectively form a region which critically bypasses many of the larger shrine locales in Bangladesh, those associated with unique musical traditions of their own or promote an institutionalized form of Sufism that threatens or else trivializes bôyāti livelihood. Notably, pockets of traditional bôyāti communities exist elsewhere in Bangladesh, such as in regions between greater Mymensingh in north-central Bangladesh, and greater Sylhet in the west. Yet, while the contours of the belt have also not prohibited some bôyāti artists within the region to venture beyond—sometimes

masquerading as other types of specialist performers—the districts within the belt function as a sort of safe haven for traditional bicār gān acts which, while constrained by its geographical terrain, still encompasses a remarkable territorial expanse that is rich in regional flavor and enthusiastic in its patronage.

Strikingly, the east-west ends of this performance belt are critical stations for bôyāti artistry and livelihood—one being Dhaka, the metropolitan hub of the nation, and the other Kushtia, the region which houses the shrine of Bangladesh’s bāul doyen, Lālôn, and is the epicenter for Lālônī bāul-s (see Figure 5.5). The Padma, a large river system in Bangladesh which lies just east of Dhaka, has essentially functioned as a natural barrier between the mega city of Dhaka and the confines of the bôyāti belt’s regional anonymity, as evidenced by the lack of a bridge or overpass at Arichat Ghat, the state-maintained river port connecting Dhaka with the eastern provinces at the bank of the Padma by ferry.<sup>29</sup> The belt’s close physical proximity to Dhaka, yet simultaneous isolation from its suburbanization, has allowed promising bôyāti artists to gain notoriety through record contracts and other media ventures in the urban music scene, while maintaining the bucolic integrity of traditional bôyāti performance on the other side of the boundary.

---

<sup>29</sup> The Padma River approaches Dhaka from the east, wrapping around the city before heading south toward the Bay of Bengal. Currently, a Padma bridge is under construction, which began in 2015. It will eventually serve as a multipurpose road-rail bridge, though its main objective is to allow easier movement for goods and people between Dhaka and the southern regions of Bangladesh separated by the Padma. Therefore, its construction will ultimately be of little consequence for the bôyāti belt, which lies east of the Padma.



**Figure 5.5. Central districts in the bôyāti belt.**

In contrast, the opposite end of the belt is bound by Kushtia and the nation’s border with West Bengal in India. This topographical feature is equally telling, as it reinforces the bôyāti community’s deep poetic affinity with bāul performance and ideology. As the shrine of Lālôn is based in his hometown of Kushtia, it is the country’s undisputed focal point for artists and practitioners from within the bāul world, many of whom permanently reside in the area around his shrine or return frequently for the biannually celebrations that occur there.<sup>30</sup> The bôyāti artist’s robust repertoire has long benefited from Lālôn’s liminality within the larger nexus of shrine cultures in Bangladesh, drawing from the poetic potential of his under-appreciated Sufi

---

<sup>30</sup> In 1963, a mausoleum—known as an *ākhrā*—and research center were built at the site of the original hermitage of Lālôn, in Kushtia. Major celebrations are held there twice a year, during Dol Purnima in the month of Falgun (February to March) and in October, on the occasion of the death anniversary of Lālôn. The Dol Purnima celebration is related to the celebration of Holi, but also marks the birthday of Chaitanya Mahapraphu (1485–1533) in addition to being in honor of Kṛṣṇa. This celebration was supposedly instigated at the *ākhrā* site by Lālôn himself.

style while also tapping into the more general bāul-ness with which Bangladeshi devotional song is pervasively infused.

### **Belt Shrines**

As for debate centers within the belt, three types of shrines are essentially found in bōyāti performance spaces: the original consecrated shrines of Sufi saints that have represented the traditional infrastructure for bōyāti performance; the coexisting shrines of particularly famous bōyāti artists whose death anniversaries are also marked by the debate performance; and a continually expanding collection of newer (or revamped) shrines previously unassociated with the bōyāti world, but whose committee members seek to attract pilgrims through the spiritual authority procured by contracted performance (see Figure 5.6). The original shrines of Chishtī and Qādirī saints represent the foundation venues for the events, while the shrines of esteemed bōyāti artists of the past represent more private performances by bōyāti artists and their colleagues. Newly-erected shrines, belonging to various brotherhoods, are yet to establish their relevance in the pilgrimage routes, and frequently hire bōyāti artists to aid in this process, essentially given them artistic license to musically envision the interred saint's legacy, and in fashioning an accompanying debate style.

From the images below in Figure 5.6, the top left features the courtyard of the traditional bicār gān shrine of Hazrat Nūr al-Huda in Narayanganj. The fairly large-scale space for debate performance is behind the shrine, where the lights and sound of the venue draw the crowd. In the top right, the somewhat more obscure shrine of bōyāti saint Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Salīm in Rajbari enjoys promoting bicār gān performances specifically designed for the larger bōyāti community and its supporters. The location features a spacious field just left of the shrine, which



**Figure 5.6. Three types of shrines as venues for bōyāti performance.**

is conjoined with a local park. At the bottom is an image of the newly-erected shrine of Sayyid Abu al-Faḍl Sulṭān Aḥmad in Faridpur which has recently begun promoting bicār gān performances in the cleared space around its parameters. Performances of bicār gān are more intimate here, occurring not on a raised platform but the *uṭhān læpā*, a traditional mud floor.

### **Death Anniversaries**

The following sections examine the different types of debate shrines with the belt in more detail, including the occasions which give rise to their accommodation as venues, and the nature of bicār gān performances at them. Central to all bicār gān performances is the occasion of the death anniversary, or *urōf mubārōk*<sup>31</sup> (Arabic: ‘*urs*, “wedding”), of the interred saint. As previously mentioned in this chapter, metaphorical descriptions of death are critical to both bāul and bōyāti communities in Bengal in order to describe spiritual renewal and to sanction artistic

---

<sup>31</sup> A nuptial euphemism which symbolizes a final union with the beloved.

rearrangement, both of which are likened to a termination with the previous self or a separation from corporality. In addition, Bengali Muslim customs are permeated with various depictions of death, ones that are not seen as morbid reminders of life's impermanence, but a joyous return to the Creator.<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, the bôyāti community refer to death as both *entekāl* (Arabic: *intiqāl*, “demise”) and *ābirbhāb* (“advent”). Just as the commemoration of a loved one on the day of death might include a night of prayers and solemn reflection, the urôs of a Sufī saint at Chishtī and Qādirī shrines in Bangladesh incorporate bicār gān as a part of religious service that annually memorializes the interred holy man or woman.

### **Private Shrines: The Debate as Soirée**

If the customary shrines of the bôyāti belt allow for the performance of a wide selection of traditional material, the more private shrines of past bôyāti doyens display a more curated collection of rare or idiosyncratic songs as they relate to the musical legacy of the interred saint or the two performing bôyāti artists' relationship to that saint. Amongst an audience of colleagues and gurus, this type of soirée—often called *sādhu sōṅgō* (“gathering of sages”)—retains the dialectical ambience of bicār gān, but is simultaneously an act of admiration that comes from within the bôyāti community. The staged debate thus unfolds as a benediction to the bôyāti saint's discursive legacy, a musical competition which aims to epitomize and eulogize the saint's polemical style on the occasion of his death anniversary.

With regard to the institutions of Sufism in Bangladesh, a *sādhu sōṅgō* performance of bicār gān reifies the bôyāti community's deep, if not experimental, relationship with the Chishtī

---

<sup>32</sup> For example, when a child is born, the *āzān* (Arabic: *ʾadhān*, the call to prayer) is performed by the father and this call is actually announcing the child's *janāzah*, or funeral service, at the end of his or her life. Accordingly, the eventual *janāzah* service at the end of one's life skips the performance of the *āzān* in place of the *ʾiqāmah* (a second and briefer call to prayer which announces the immediate commencement of the funeral).

and Qādirī brotherhoods. Therefore, when a renown bōyāti of the Chishtī lineage, for example, is honored in passing with the erection of a shrine, that shrine then becomes part of the devotional landscape of Chishtī shrines in Bangladesh. As such, entrance into the bōyāti world begins with Sufi indoctrination and, after a promising career, may end with Sufi entombment. The spiritual status granted by this empowerment is regarded by bōyāti artists as unparalleled, for its equates devotional musicianship with the austerities of a holy man and, in so doing, strengthens the bōyāti artist's compositional achievements for posterity and further enriches the traditional performance circuit for bicār gān.

The utilization of parallel compendia for bicār gān that were mentioned in Chapter Three—canonized bhāb sōṅgīt compositions and more specified repertoire from within the community—critically reflects a compositional consequence of bōyāti-s and their shrine-based sponsorship that can be readily appreciated at a sādhu sōṅgō performance. Such performances substantially incorporate compositional material that is more specific to the bōyāti canon—which would not produce the same result in a publicly-catered shrine performance—through the prism of the departed bōyāti saint's musical career.

In one particular venue, I witnessed two bōyāti artists, both disciples of the same deceased bōyāti guru, who performed at his urōf mubārōk celebration. While the two bōyāti artists worked within the confines of a standardized debate template, their song choices and narrative style entirely reflected the repertoire of their guru, which was further embellished with lengthy personal asides that often had the congregation of colleagues, followers, and family in tears. Furthermore, other artists attending the event would occasionally rise and take the place of one of the two contestants in the debate, making the dialectical exchange a collaborative group

performance (cf. Figure 5.7). The *sādhu sōṅgō* style is ultimately not concerned with concise replies or debilitating retorts, but rather uses the *bicār gān* format as a leisurely offering of



**Figure 5.7. The artist Ripan Dewan at the *bōyāti* shrine of Shah Sufi Dewan Malik Chand. Devotees and family members share the stage with the singers and musicians in this more intimate setting.**

deference and an opportunity to share memories of a musical legend through the debate style.

### **Inaugural Shrines: The Springboard Debate**

Inaugural shrines further reflect the striking manner in which shrine patronage itself is often a distinguishing factor that dictates the spiritual or productional need for, and balance between, various types of songs and their authors in the *bicār gān* debate. Unlike *qawwālī* singers, who are torchbearers of a perhaps more pervasive form of shrine-centered Sufi music in South Asia, *bōyāti* artists in Bangladesh are not simply promulgating a saintly heritage, but are also sonic architects of the burgeoning shrine cultures which commission them. Newer shrines that emerge in the *bōyāti* belt, especially ones associated with the *Chishtī* and *Qādirī* brotherhoods, face a particular challenge. One the one hand, as mausoleums of fledgling saint

figures, they typically enjoy less popularity as pilgrimage sites, but still must compete with the plethora of debate and non-debate shrines that are scattered throughout the belt. On the other hand, such shrines also do not house the tombs of bōyāti artists, and therefore belong to a third category of unfamiliar and under-supported shrines in need of promotion.

The types of bicār gān performances that occur at these locations are typically shorter and less engaging than the standard format for the debate. In addition, bōyāti artists who perform here do so under more modest circumstances, and for smaller, less initiated audiences. However, these venues ultimately serve an entirely different set of criteria. For shrine committees, the bōyāti debate—even less lavish versions of the debate—can bring much-needed publicity by attracting crowds of music goers. However, committees are not only looking for ways to make the shrine a more viable pilgrimage site, but also to honor the interred saint in song. As such, bōyāti artists are also commissioned to compose new pieces that incorporate the saint’s hagiographical content and kerāmôt, and to include them in the debate’s unfolding, when appropriate. This opportunity brings the potential to advance the new saint’s legacy further into the bicār gān performance circuit in time. For artists themselves, such shrines have increasingly become spaces for the bōyāti to hone his or her craft as an original composer. Mixing conventional material with newer ones in this environment, the bōyāti is able to insert his own compositional style more prominently into the debate without risking over-ambitiousness. As such, these obscure venues function as springboards for debate development, and are often organized not on the death anniversary of the newly-interred saint, but rather more conveniently

in the weeks leading up to a major performance elsewhere (see Figure 5.8).



**Figure 5.8.** The unenclosed tomb of the recently-deceased saint figure Hazrat Shah Abdul Aziz, its modest structure already weathered by rain and sun. As construction for a finished shrine continues, plans for a bicār gān performance are already underway.

### **Phantom Shrines: Dissension, Debate, Dismantling**

In August of 2005, during a preliminary fieldwork trip, an estimated 500 bombs were detonated in almost every district of Bangladesh within one hour. Within days, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB)—an elite paramilitary anti-crime task force—detained Siddique ul-Islam, known popularly as Bangla Bhai (“Bengali Brother”), a Bangladeshi terrorist and military commander of the Al Qaeda-affiliated radical organization Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (“The Awakened Muslim Masses of Bangladesh”). Bangla Bhai gained nationwide notoriety for these bombings, the scope of which had hitherto been unheard of in Bangladesh. As time elapsed, and the conviction and execution of Bangla Bhai passed, tensions about Bangladesh’s

potential radicalization decreased, but would resurface on occasion, such as during the 2001 Ramna Batamul bombings, the 2004 grenade attack, the 2016 Dhaka hostage crisis, and a series of violent public attacks assaults and murders of liberalist bloggers.<sup>33</sup>

While bicār gān shrines enjoy a wide variety of platforms, certain shrines belonging to any of these categories are occasionally forced to restructure their entire operation on a whim, giving rise to phantom performances of bicār gān, venues that start and end with unusual precision in order to avoid potential disruptions from unruly and often conservative crowds who come to admonish performers and uproot shrine traditions through force. With remarkable resilience, both shrine committees and bōyāti artists employ a variety of techniques in promoting, staging, and sounding the debate in order to conjure an unassuming atmosphere that is designed to confound antagonists by relying on regional ingenuity. These defiant tactics, remolding the very pliable structure of a bicār gān debate, ultimately provides the venue with an opportunity to continue without complete cancelation or shutdown.

To preface a discussion of “phantom” shrine performances, I turn to Syed Waliullah’s *Lalsalu* (1948), a classic novel of modern Bengali literature, which provides a particularly striking account of modern shrine legacies in Muslim Bengal. The novel’s central character, Majid, unexpectedly arrives in a quiet village and begins to publicly condemn the local community for failing to maintain the grave of a nearby holy man. Over the course of the novel, Majid manages to convince the villagers to restore the shrine, build an adjacent madrassa, and

---

<sup>33</sup> The 2001 bombings occurred during Bengali New Year celebrations arranged by Chhayanaut, a leading cultural organization in Dhaka, and the Islamic fundamentalist group Harkat al-Jihād al-Islāmi later confessed their involvement in the attack; the 2004 grenade attack unsuccessfully targeted Awami League president Sheikh Hasina during an anti-terrorism rally; the 2016 hostage crisis occurred at a bakery in the upscale residential neighborhood of Gulshan, Dhaka; the string of attacks against secularist bloggers and religious minorities in the mid-2000s were largely orchestrated by the Islami Chhatra Shibir, a student wing of the political organization Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest college and university-based Islamic organization in South Asia.

provide housing for him as the shrine's caretaker. After acquiring much wealth, and several wives, Majid begins to encounter opposition to his initiatives, but manages cunningly to avoid persecution each time with his quick-wittedness and expertise in allocution.

While Majid's behavior becomes increasingly immoral in the novel, the ultimate nature of the shrine is ambivalent. The reader is allowed to postulate whether the new shrine was actually built on the grounds of a decrepit one, or if an entirely fabricated shrine was constructed from Majid's colorful imagination. Furthermore, while the novel explores the idea of local shrines as dubious spaces of piety, it concurrently sheds light on the open-endedness of shrine legacies, especially ones which have been forgotten or obscured by generations of religious reorientation. Ultimately, the power of Majid's shrine is formulated through the extrapolation of pietistic sentiments he impresses upon his subjects which, like a derelict shrine's predicament, is built on a fragmentary foundation made evocative through ambivalence.

Institutions of Sufism in contemporary Bangladesh, especially through its most conspicuous edifices of shrines, have long been complicated by the deep humanism of Bangladeshi patriotism—itsself historically shaped by the failed governance of Pakistan in East Bengal—and increasingly by conservative mainstream Sunni beliefs which place the weight of the pilgrimage experience entirely on the *hajj* at Islam's holiest shrine. Over the decades, authors and members of the Bangladeshi intelligentsia alike have often drawn attention to the “superstitious” nature of shrine culture through their celebration of the miraculous deeds of dead saints, as well as the profiteering of living “poser fakirs” who seem to commodify spirituality with blatantly unscrupulous tactics. Similarly, the general public maintains an equivocal position regarding the legacies of Sufi shrines, largely championing their historical place in the spiritual

landscape while interacting less with shrine-based activities in place of more somber religious experiences which are dressed in the trappings of modern Muslim devotion, such as the mass evangelical sermons known as *wa'az mahfil*.<sup>34</sup> These sermons, whose increasingly large-scale production values cannot be accommodated by most mosques or shrines, are entirely separated from physical spaces of sacredness—often held in open fields or less crowded spaces beyond the borders of metropolitan centers—and focus instead on Qur'ānic exegesis and formal discussions of the *sunnah* (the “teachings” or “manners” of the Prophet) through stylized oration.

While shrines within the belt are generally hospitable and innocuous spaces for *bicār gān* performance, certain shrines occasionally face backlash from reactionary groups or community members, typically in the form of unorganized demonstration meant to sabotage the lure of shrine culture in the public eye. However, novel techniques are utilized by shrine committees and *bôyāti* performers alike in maintaining venue and performance through more transitory approaches. Given the already robust relationship between shrines and *bôyāti* performers, both entities sometimes use their combined resources to diffuse contentious counterblast through rearrangement of the genre's promotional, configurative, and expressive parameters.

Major publicity for a *bicār gān* event usually begins a month in advance, especially through the use of large banners and colorful fabricated structures known as *pandal*-s that are erected in nearby towns, bazaars, and busy thoroughfares. Major disorder, though rare, does

---

<sup>34</sup> Max Stille's examination of *waz mahfil* in Bangladesh focuses on its code-switching, the manner in which religious speech switches between different registers and codes, expanding its possibilities. Stille argues that this is characterized by a stress on oral performance and communal experience, and that the performance of *waz mahfil* specifically switches between individual words (mostly from Arabic, Urdu and Bengali), to the binding together of several sentences by various vocal techniques. From the perspective of code-switching in performance, “formal” translation mechanisms in the sermons—most prominently translations from the Qur'ān—can be evaluated anew. As opposed to a point of view that argumentation and persuasion of the sermons are derived from the Qur'ān as a “scripture,” the inclusion of Qur'ānic quotations into the dynamics of multilingual code-switching and its aesthetic effects emphasizes a poetic form of evidence building on word-play and dramatic script (2018).

occur from time to time at bicār gān events, and is typically orchestrated by outside individuals coming from other towns or villages. If organizers or the public catch wind of potential disruptions being coordinated, a venue is sometimes made *bātil*, a word which literally means “canceled.” Instead of canceling the event, however, the act of *bātil* effectively relocates the bicār gān performance in a separate, undisclosed, and non-shrine space. This process typically begins in the days leading up to the event, with smaller fliers announcing the debate being posted within the vicinity of the venue. These fliers contain images and texts that are practically identical to older promotional material. However, such notices, known as *ghoṣṭhā* (“announcements”), are commonly printed on bright color card stock and typically contain additional information in smaller font. This critical piece of text essentially divulges the actual event location, at a familiar landmark or location known by locals, such as *lāl miār boṭ gāch* (“Lal Mian’s banyan tree”) or *purātṇ fib mōndir* (“old Shiva temple”).

Given the debate genre’s open relationship to shrines, occasionally moving a bicār gān performance away from the physical surroundings of a mausoleum is fairly inconsequential to its function and is typically done so with minimal effort. A proxy location is obviously not the most ideal situation for bicār gān debates, and its typically arranged with bare essentials—less lighting, no raised platform, fewer formal announcements—in order for the entire event to be easily dismantled afterwards. However, in the few such programs that I have witnessed, audiences and artists also delight in the incognito performance, the “scavenger hunt” required by locals to reach the venue’s true address, and the satisfaction that hostile retaliation has somehow been thwarted by this regionalized enterprise.

## Territorial Conventions and Transgressions

While regionalism is integral to the charm and sustainment of bicār gān performances at shrines, there is a tenuous yet mutually beneficial relationship between shrine and artist, which is embedded in its celebrated provinciality. The shrines of the belt receive popular attention through the debate, which is also a source of revenue since they are ticketed events. At the same time, the open-ended debate style which is a specialty of bōyāti performance finds its home at such shrines, amidst a larger and impenetrable network of shrine cultures in Bangladesh that is ultimately unconcerned with bōyāti musicianship.

However, each local shrine within the belt often has a regional disposition of its own, promoting certain debate themes while excluding others, further promoting an acutely regional flair to the debate venue. Tellingly, bōyāti artists often risk the chance of “losing” a debate when venturing into an unfamiliar sub-regional territory of the performance belt. In recent years, some bōyāti artists have even garnered enough attention to be featured on television programs not simply as traditional performers, but rather as purveyors of regional-ness, their interviews and concerts interspersed between investigative reporting and drama serials, all of which are frequently situated in the regional (see Figure 5.1).

<u>Saint</u>	<u>Region</u>	<u>Frequent Debate Styles</u>
Shāh Ṭariq Ghafur	Faridpur	doctrine vs. gnosis
Sulaymān Chishtī	Faridpur	doctrine vs. gnosis, female vs. male
Jangli Shāh	Rajbari	doctrine v. gnosis, guru vs. disciple
Pāglā Subḥān	Rajshahi	doctrine vs. gnosis, light vs. form, female vs. male
ʿInʿām al-Ḥaqq	Madaripur	light vs. form, death v. resurrection
Shāh Munṣif Khān	Shariyatpur	jinn vs. mankind, man vs. angels, adam vs. satan
Maḥbub al-ʿĀlam	Manikganj	adam vs. satan, hindu vs. muslim
Shaykh Waḥīd	Munshiganj	Hindu vs. muslim, Chishtī v. Qādirī brotherhood
Shafīʿ al-Islām	Pabna	prophet vs. companions, prophethood vs. sainthood
Nuʿmān Bābā	Natore	Creator vs. creation, believer vs. atheist

Table 5.1. Some shrines and their associated regional debate styles.

One the most most common ways a bōyāti “loses” a *bicār gān* debate results from agreeing to a shrine performance outside one’s own “comfort zone,” which often incapacitates a bōyāti due to pronounced regional approaches to the stylized dialectical exchange and its accompanying audience expectations. Particular debate themes and associated poetic legacies, varying degrees of pedantic, humorous, or sentimental exposition, the ratio of dialogue to music, and popular preferences for discrete melodic or rhythmic content can all define the regional nature of a particular *bicār gān* performance.

### **Debate Management**

How are the various aesthetic dilemmas that are informed by geography and shrine heritage managed in the world of *bicār gān*? Throughout South Asia, Sufi shrines are overseen by an official caretaker, hereditary administrator and sometimes elected trustee, a *sajjādah nashīn*, who is typically a living descendant of a *pīr* (“saint”), or a person related by *talīm* (“spiritual instruction”) through one of the saint’s disciples, and is charged with the maintenance of the shrine and the management of its regularly-occurring activities. The *sajjādah nashīn* is usually the chairman of the board as well, someone who heads the shrine committee in determining and arranging policies and programs. In broader administrative terms, the shrines which stage *bicār gān* performances are typically not large enough or significant enough to be a *waqf*, an Islamic mortmain property or inalienable endowment under state law, which would normally provide assets for religious purposes, usually held by a charitable trust. Neither do *bicār gān* shrines consist of a larger conglomerate of separate centers—as seen in the more sizable shrine complexes in Bangladesh—which may contain a large array of services beyond the shrine itself, through an adjacent mosque, library, museum, homeopathic dispensary, ablution pond, retreat

center (*khānqāh*), guest house (*ôthi fālā*), or soup kitchen (*langar khānā*). In fact, some bicār gān shrines even lack the economic or regulatory capacity to hire a *khādem* (Arabic: *khādim*, “servant” or “attendant”), a general on-site priest tasked to oversee daily shrine rituals. For some, these shrines have historically sustained modest monetary assistance from spiritual services alone, through personal funds or the random donations of pilgrims (Arabic: *hadiyah*, sometimes *ṣadaqah*).

Arild Engelsen Ruud’s work on the *môstān*, or political bully, in Bangladesh examines the manner in which these individuals engage in muscular political brokerage, racketeering, politically motivated crime, and violence, and derive legitimacy and protection from the patronage they receive from political parties, which in turn rely on them to navigate the murkier and violent sides of Bangladeshi politics (2014). Regarding the history, persistence, and moralities of patronage in South Asian political life, Anastasia Piliavsky subsequently argues that patronage is best approached as a “living moral idiom” that operates in a complex moral multiverse in which “relational principles” and values of munificence, mutual dependencies, and hierarchical reciprocity create political bonds and loyalties that last (2014). With this perspective in mind, it is not surprising to learn that the sajjādah nashīn of a bicār gān shrine resorts to certain tactics that might be considered unusual or even ethically questionable, given his responsibilities in perpetuating the overall reputation and conservation of a mausoleum. The sajjādah nashīn of a bicār gān shrine, however, constantly works within a larger socioreligious landscape in which a hierarchy of shrines must seek various opportunities through benefaction or self-sustainment in order to retain support and meaning amongst pilgrims, hired help, and the general public. The predicament of bicār gān shrines, with regard to sponsorship, is particularly

noteworthy given their inability to fall within the purview of government-funded heritage shrines, or financially to function as a “mega-shrine,” whose vast network of operatives and services secure significant capital through the pilgrimage experience.

In actuality, the *sajjādah nashīn* of a *bicār gān* shrine acts more as an impresario of sorts—a regional talent scout, producer and middleman for the staged debate—with *bicār gān* serving as the shrine’s primary source of income and attraction. As such, the *sajjādah nashīn* may routinely carry out a sort of “devotional reconnaissance” by visiting other shrines in order to witness a variety of *bicār gān* performances, determining which *bōyāti* artists are the best fit—musically, economically, spiritually—for debates at their home shrine. As such, their negotiations can considerably affect the ambience and success of a *bicār gān* performance, especially since their preferences for artists, debate forms, and overall promotional strategies, while designed to best fit their own shrine headquarters, are simultaneously cognizant of trends, results, and mishaps in the surrounding shrine performance circuit. Like *bōyāti* artists, a talented *sajjādah nashīn* may have a flair for creativity or display a subtle understanding of risk assessment, and sometimes make calculated choices that involve potentially volatile interactions with other shrine committees or leveraging critical funds in the hopes of producing a desired outcome.

Amongst the *bōyāti* community, the *sajjādah nashīn* is more commonly referred to as *ustād*, a general term used by Muslims throughout South Asia to confer upon a maestro. In Bangladesh, the term *ustād* is not only used by musicians, but in a variety of other fields. Bus conductors in Dhaka, for example, who are tasked with collecting tickets and announcing stops, are subordinate to the bus driver, who must negotiate bewildering traffic patterns, severe weather conditions, and rapid-fire time schedules. As such, the conductor addresses the driver as “*ustād*.”

In the world of *bicār gān*, the *sajjādah nashīn* as *ustād* is the liaison or broker between mausoleum and performer, mediating the musical world of *bōyāti* artists and the bureaucratic regulations of shrine management. However, the work of the *sajjādah nashīn* also articulates the various regionalisms that inform this relationship, and an appreciation for their complex interconnections: the individual devotional ambience of a particular shrine, the spiritual ecologies of other debate shrines in the belt, and the larger machinations of Bangladeshi shrine culture throughout the nation.

### **Debate Moderation**

Although the rhetorical flair of *bicār gān* performances would seemingly negate the need for arbitration, a particularly curious feature of most debates is the inclusion of a judging panel that typically consists of members of the relevant shrine committee and, occasionally, respected *bōyāti* performers and composers. These *bicārōk* (“judges” or “arbiters”), or sometimes *mōhōtgōṇ* (“esteemed individuals”), are tasked with the somewhat superfluous act of formally evaluating live performances. Comparable to contemporary reality television competitions, where judges themselves may not be experts in the field but respected celebrities, the proclivities that govern such arbitration seem to be an important aspect of their purpose.

The commonly-attached celebrity status of judges brings a visible sense of regularity and accountability to *bicār gān* performance, especially through deference. It is notable to mention that judges are also determined by the *sajjādah nashīn*, and their names may even feature prominently on promotional material, after the names honored saint figures and the *bōyāti* performers themselves. While comments from judges are typically minimal, partly due to the excessively long format of standard *bicār gān* performance, their stage-side presence is quite

noticeable by the crowd, and they are usually given table accommodations and a microphone. In some ways, the presiding debate judges do in fact supply the venue with an authoritative source, and some spectators even refer to them as *pourôsbhā*, a reference to village councils throughout rural Bangladesh who fulfill the task of maintaining law and order, especially with regard to adjudicating local disputes, due to their area being out of the jurisdiction of regional police. As such, a certain regard is given to the *bicārôk*, which can aid in pushing a *bicār gān* performance along, or making a formative call, when necessary.

With regard to their vocal reactions, the panel of judges attached to debates are not so much assigned the burden of appraising the dialectical unfolding, as they are called upon to provide perspective through commentary, which ultimately fortifies the ambience of *bicār gān* as a devotional and intellectual endeavor. Typically, a *bicārôk* will make brief comments after a *bôyāti* artist's performance, and before a break between *pālā*-s, but will occasionally intercede to subdue a rowdy or unsatisfied crowd. The nature of comments are naturally varied, but are usually related to matters of song choice, musicality, or devotional knowledge. Notably, the *bôyāti* artists are not expected or invited to respond to commentary, as such an act would disparage the reputation of the *bicārôk*. These remarks, therefore, display the judges' intimate knowledge of *bicār gān* but also instill certain impressions in the audience as they are left to ponder the quality of performance while the *bôyāti* artists exchange places on stage. This element of the performance situates the judges as narrators, offering brief criticism, analysis, and sometimes attention to the future progression of the debate.

Lastly, judges themselves may collectively represent the general audience as intermediaries, as the voice of reason. In this manner, they are delegates between what transpires

on stage and what is perceived by the crowd. Throughout much of a bicār gān performance, this type of conciliation is not necessary, as artists and audience members frequently engage directly or indirectly with one another, through a series of vocal exchanges or stylized gesticulations (see Chapter Four). However, the judging panel may occasionally use the power of commentary allotted to them to articulate a consolidated feeling which emerges from the crowd, especially in moments of heightened response. During such interventions, the position of judges subtly moves from maven to spokesman and, as such, briefly transforms the debate from a stylized confabulation to a consequential exchange of ideas.

### **Conclusion**

Shrines strikingly reveal disparate views regarding both traditions of Islamic reverence and music-making as a devotional act in Bangladesh. The vast disparity found in coexisting devotional performance spaces at burial sites, and the subsequent geographical boundaries of piety which they delineate, generate a heightened sense of spiritual competitiveness. While this phenomenon accentuates the incongruous and sometimes volatile interactions of varying religiosities, it also encourages and conflates the boundaries of traditional sacred space and its experimental promotion through sound. While beyond the scope of this chapter, a certain mobility is sometimes accorded to bōyāti artists who fare well in the debate setting, which sometimes leads to promising recording contracts. To be sure, commodified bicār gān has enjoyed its own dynamics when performed in the confines of a studio, which has been further shaped by the medium of cassette, VCD, satellite television, and the introduction of 3G or 4G cellular service through music streaming platforms, social media apps, and a YouTube listenership. Recorded bōyāti performance very much exists outside of the format of bicār gān as

well, as such artists have been quick to separate and de-compartmentalize the many song styles in their repertoire to conform to album themes or the discretion of devotional music producers (see Chapter Six). In many cases, the regional recording company itself, or its prominent associates, replace the shrine or interred saint as spiritual benefactor, an act which is symbolically integrated into the debate performance. Videos of studio recordings are sold in the marketplace, where bôyāti artists in headphones and in front of pop filters stand amongst a variety of props and decorations meant to artificially represent the shrine performance. Interspersed footage of real shrine performances, especially audience members, are edited into the video, further promoting this particular quality. Further separation from the sites of tombs, despite the seemingly symbolic relationship between bôyāti and shrine, thus remain persistent in the studio, ultimately suggesting a more compelling, if not, perplexing, alliance between the two.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Mothers of In(ter)vention: The Fakirāni in Bangladesh**

This concluding chapter aims to situate and examine the rise of the fakirāni, or the female Sufi musician in Bangladesh, emerging from her prominent place in the bōyāti community. While critical fakirāni artists have been mentioned elsewhere in this thesis with regard to bicār gān or bāul music—Hajira Bibi (1913–2006) in Chapter Three and Kangalini Sufia (b. 1958/59) in Chapter Four—I begin here by focusing on several historical snapshots over the twentieth century that have critically shaped the salient features of a Bengali Muslim feminism. This backdrop then allows for a discussion of women bōyāti artists and their negotiation through various notions of womanhood and motherhood—as shaped by state propaganda and the music industry, but also the cultural environment surrounding rural village piety—that ultimately converge and move beyond the world of bicār gān and vernacular Bengali performance.

Despite various “misalignments” over decades of Bangladesh’s history, I argue that the broader appearance of bōyāti music in popular culture can be traced to the flair and promotion of the fakirāni since the early 2000s. The remarkable yet precarious political climate of this era of Bangladeshi history has provided an exclusive space for female bōyāti artists to approach or recalibrate distinctively institutionalized conceptions of femininity with the more inherently regional disposition in which Bengali Muslim women have been situated. Less a conflation of a perceived urban-rural dichotomy, I instead suggest that the fakirāni has come to represent an image or impression that reflects the experiences of a large and shifting demographic of Bangladeshis who have embraced a conservative piety that has reflected their intensified interactions with expatriate Bengali Muslims and the greater Islamic world, and an ironically

concurrent interest in safeguarding the ethnolinguistic contours of Bangladeshi humanism from a rising fundamentalist threat. The fakirāni has increasingly served as a medium for this somewhat unarticulated sensibility, functioning as both a contemporary manifestation of the Bangladeshi transglobal experience and an enduring and innate power steeped in the resilience of village women's affairs.<sup>1</sup> However, and perhaps due to this precariousness, fakirāni artists themselves have also endeavored critically to articulate their own sense of musicality and femininity, sometimes at the risk of undermining their inherent identity as members of the bôyāti community.

### **The Fakirāni**

More generally, situating the female fakir in Bangladesh brings to light a particularly dynamic relationship between Sufism as a broad collection of mystical practices and the feminine performance of Sufi song, a phenomenon whose aesthetic value has been refashioned in the public eye over time. To be sure, the two are indelibly linked, but are just as linked to numerous other parameters that qualify stage etiquette, religiosity and sound production, as well as an overall perception of the feminine voice in the national consciousness. Just as Sufism is not a singular expression of pietism, the female voice negotiates a range of notions, both personal and communal, which are strikingly situated in the Bangladeshi psyche.

---

<sup>1</sup> On her examination of the tsunami in Bengali folk art, Roma Chatterji argues that an innate idea of devastation as a form of divine play (see a discussion of *lilā* in Chapter Four), critical to rural Bengal conceptions of the power of water, is different from the Judeo-Christian idea of disaster as retribution visited on humanity as a form of transgression. Rather, Chatterji notes that affliction is viewed as a form of grace manifested in historical events such as floods, epidemics, and famines through interventions of the mother goddess (Chatterji in Hadj-Moussa and Nijhawan 2014). My own discussion of the premodern literary genre of mangalkavya (Chapter One) or the Bengali boatman's song known as bhāṭiyāli (Chapter Two) touches on this subject, further aligning ecological devastation to a more politicized sentiment in Bangladesh, where notions of violent atmospheric conditions or unpredictable erosion evoke the unresolved desires of a transitioning and increasingly dispersed nation.

There is a pervasive manner in which femininity and musicality are aligned with disconnections of the voice and body, or the endeavor to qualify feminine agency as series of dance-like deflections of masculine hegemony. In addition, the feminine voice and Muslim music making have conventionally been defined as embracing certain qualities, one that articulates a musical refinement and restraint, favors vocal capacity over instrumentalism, and distances itself from associated activities that promote sexual explicitness. Yet, in the context of South Asian Sufi poetry, as with much Indian poetry, the expression of longing has conventionally been rendered from the feminine viewpoint, and often erotically so, and further, in many Muslim shrine cultures, women pilgrims constitute a significant portion of those who physically embrace the abiding authority of saintly intercession. While both of these notions have been examined with some detail elsewhere (Doniger 1982, Pemberton 2010), I wish not only to connect them to a sense of musical agency and resistance, which ultimately remains a teleological approach, but also to connect them to one that more acutely positions the impact of the feminine voice in the Bangladeshi psyche, where it retains a musical significance of its own.

As expansive and complex as feminine devotionality is in Bangladesh, its particularly musical dimensions are strikingly intertwined with larger themes shaped by the pioneering literary achievements of fin-de-siècle Bengali Muslim writers and activists, a subsequent liberation-era ethos that espoused progressive regionalism with language-based national pride, the gradual implementation of Muslim decorum in the arts as newly articulated pieties fused with middle class expansion and progress, and the rising spaces for women involved in the entrepreneurial aspects of music making, reconfiguring the labor force, and general social change.

Saba Mahmood's engaging work on the *Politics of Piety* posits that the relationship between Islamism and liberal secularity is "one of proximity and co-imbrication rather than one of simple opposition, or for that matter, accommodation; it therefore needs to be analyzed in terms of the historically shifting, ambiguous and unpredictable encounters in which that this proximity is generated" (2011: 34). I would argue that the female voice is not only tapping into the power of devotional themes of Bengali mysticism, or certain pop music sensibilities, but also into an always-already embedded notion of femininity within the discursive space of Bangladeshi nationhood, which has itself transformed from past to present. This is not to trivialize the singer's plight in a male-driven performance context, or the compelling social commentary rooted in such performances, but rather simultaneously to recognize a more innate and alluring charm in the hearts and minds of a Bangladeshi listenership. In recent years, the feminine voice is more strongly associated with the voice of consciousness, and while striking a chord with the long-standing disquiet concerning a certain cultural sabotage and retributive justice, it is subsequently a powerfully creative catalyst for the inception of new musical ideas into popular song.

The first four sections of this chapter provide various snapshots of feminist discourse in Muslim Bengal in the twentieth century. In the first section, I summarize the life and writings of Begum Rokeya, an early twentieth century novelist whose milieu is situated in the largely male-dominated arena of fin de siècle Islamic revivalist movements in Muslim Bengal. Strikingly, Rokeya's creative approach in depicting a feminist utopia is not simply a subversion of male hegemony, but rather one that retains an evocativeness through its concurrent ennoblement of the place of women in Islamic history. This unique approach to feminist writing (which she

composed in both Bengali as well as English and Urdu) suggests an early attempt to embrace rather than reject piety as a vehicle for feminist discourse in Muslim Bengal.

In the second section, I reexamine concepts of femininity in the early independence era of Bangladesh, noting that in the formative years of nation-building, women seem to have assumed two concurrent identities in the nationalist enterprise: as both agents and victims (d'Costa 2011). At once ostracized and celebrated, the figure of the female war hero allows for an investigation of the convoluted relationships that exist between political actors and the implicit silence of marginalized groups. Here, I suggest that a deliberate sense of uncommunicativeness by certain women personally involved in the war efforts deeply reflects a nationalist angst in the formative years of independence that struggled to honor women as either the unsung victors of genocide and rape, or chaste exemplars of Muslim devoutness.

The third section incorporates a more detailed but broader discussion of musicians, noting that early Bengali Muslim women that were professional artists of stage and studio, while often fashioned to be urbane singers, were curiously detached from a promotion of musical vernacularism, which was largely seen as a male-driven undertaking. Even as some female artist began to do so, they were constantly negotiating not only the complications of Bangladesh's liberation movement and its ideals, but also the simultaneous authorities of the Indian Bengali music industry as well as the state-sponsored values of Pakistani-controlled media.

In the fourth section, I slowly broaden discussions of femininity with regard to the sociopolitical backdrop of Muslim Bengal, and briefly examine the place of the *pīrānī*—living female saint figures—in the uniquely regionalized environment of Bengali Sufism, a setting that is significantly distanced from larger popular discourses on femininity. The local Bangladeshi

mosque is not only exclusively designated for worship, but also for male worship, and represents a place where men can offer their five daily prayers through a communal service that denies the participation of women practitioners. In contrast, the common Bangladeshi shrine serves as a place where a range of other activities that express Muslim identity might be encouraged, including the activities of women. While the phenomenon of the *pīrāni* seems to be extremely small and highly localized, popular female saint figures in Bangladesh have used ideas of spiritual power through supernatural engagement as a way of articulating pietistic status, in contrast to the saintly power of male counterparts, which are often conceived as an attribute of the individual (Callan 2008). In addition, the *pīrāni* simultaneously complies and resists negotiations with patriarchal and Islamic ideologies (Torab 1996), which itself may be an act of resistance against the monologic discourse of the dominant order (Bakhtin 1981, Knauff 1996), yet it is also legitimated and deflected as an polysemic engagement in piety for piety's sake (Mahmood 2005).

In the fifth and final section, I consider the *fakirāni* or female Sufi artists in Bangladesh. While not an ascetic *pīrāni* (saint), the professional *fakirāni* (especially one that is a *bôyāti*) and her performance of *bicār gān* at popular and mid-level Bangladeshi shrines demonstrates a critical juncture where female Bengali Muslim artists negotiate both larger discourses that inform the idea of a feminist performance as well as the more experimental routes of agency accorded by regionalized Sufism, through the stylized *bicār gān* debate. In addition, the recent and unprecedented entrance of women in the Bangladesh workforce—through gender-focused NGO initiatives, the bustling garment industry, and revolutionary microcredit loans predominantly issued to village women—in conjunction with the contours of a popular folk revivalism—

espousing a “vernacular cosmopolitanism” (Stokes 2008) nestled within Bangladesh’s liminal empowerment as a developing economy—has provided a distinctive setting for the rise of the female bôyāti artist, many of whom have enjoyed widespread commercial viability beyond their outnumbering male counterparts. To investigate this issue, I examine the career of Momtaz Begum (b. 1974), a bôyāti artist commonly known as “Music Queen.”

### **Sultana’s Dream: The Phantasmagoria of Begum Rokeya**

This section offers a biographical and literary overview of one of Bengal’s first female Muslim novelists, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain (1880-1932), examining her pioneering literary style in an era of precarious Bengali Muslim liberalism in the early twentieth century. Like the vernacularly-based bôyāti community of her milieu, Rokeya’s artistic endeavors went largely unnoticed by the literati. However, her approach to creative writing and social reform—notably fortified by the unique personal environment in which her publications took shape—introduced feminist writing as a valuable pursuit of the Bengali Muslim intelligentsia. Particularly, Rokeya’s unique literary sensibilities playfully articulated the relevant place of turn-of-the-century Bengali Muslim women, one that meticulously straddled the growing tensions between religiously-centered campaigns and various sociocultural initiatives circulating in popular discourse. Furthermore, while the presence of Bengali Muslim artists on stage and in the studio began to emerge in the 1960s, Rokeya’s heritage seems to have adumbrated the remarkable space increasingly negotiated by female bôyāti artists in contemporary Bangladesh.

Begum Rokeya is perhaps South Asia's most important and overlooked feminist writer in the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> She was a pioneering educationalist and human rights campaigner in the British era, establishing one of the first known schools aimed at serving Bengali Muslim girls, in Kolkata. Rokeya also founded the *Anjuman-i Khawātīn-i Islām* (The Islamic Women's Association), which was active in holding debates and conferences regarding the status of women and education in notable public spaces (Joarder 1980). She thus advocated reform, particularly for women, and believed that parochialism, draconian social customs, and excessive conservatism were principally responsible for the relatively slow development of Muslim modernism in British India. Rokeya's contributions to this field seem particularly important, for many male Muslim counterparts in her time—such as Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), a figure who innately understood the need to include women in the promotion of a Western empirical education in Bengali Muslim society—did not articulate these issues, for fear of it thwarting larger agendas (Begum 2011).

Notably, Rokeya did not correlate her convictions with a need for sweeping Islamic reformation or more secularly-derived initiatives, but rather was very much inspired by the exposition of the Qur'ān with regard to gender relations, believing that contemporary appropriations of Islam had misapprehended or else distorted these truths (Joarder 1980). Fundamentally, this somewhat nonpartisan approach to social change through prevailing socioreligious leanings and semi-fictional publications epitomized the breadth of her hallmark disposition, as she aimed to reach men and women aligned to various religious and temporal

---

<sup>2</sup> For a concise and informative summary of Begum Rokeya's life and works, and two fine English translations from Bengali, see *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag: Two Feminist Utopias*, translated with an introduction by Barnita Bagchi (2005).

viewpoints, rather than to unnerve her audience as a firebrand. However, realizing the daunting scope of her ambitions, Rokeya simultaneously encouraged the revival of handicraft industries, which women could successfully carry out at home, remarkably foreshadowing the pioneering work of grassroots NGOs nearly a century later.<sup>3</sup>

What is perhaps most fascinating about Rokeya's life and work is that, on the one hand, her private world as a young girl was very much situated in the typical social conditions of her milieu: literacy was not emphasized by her family, she was expected to remain largely indoors and observe *pardah* (female segregation from non-family members), and to adhere to the division of labor that customarily demarcated domestic and vocational spheres for men and women.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, she married young to an Urdu-speaking deputy magistrate, who was an English-educated Muslim aristocrat twenty years her senior, but also a liberal-minded individual who, while primarily serving as Rokeya's muse, greatly encouraged and facilitated her writings in English, Urdu and Bengali (Begum 2011). This unprecedented position gave Rokeya the ability to speak candidly and intimately about the plight of Bengali women, while articulating her beliefs in a style and medium that carried prestigious and pervasive weight. As such, she was an exceptional individual in an era where few Bengali Muslim women, let alone Bengali Muslim men, were widely recognized as being at the forefront of political, literary or cultural change.

---

<sup>3</sup> Building Resources Across Communities (BRAC) is an international development organization based in Bangladesh, and is one of the largest non-governmental development organizations in the world, in terms of number of employees (Hossain, Kairy, and Bayes 2016). Established by Sir Fazle Hasan Abed (b. 1936) in 1972, BRAC operates in all sixty four districts of Bangladesh, as well as thirteen other countries in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. BRAC is partly self-funded through a number of enterprises that include a dairy and food project, a chain of retail handicraft stores, and various localized agricultural initiatives.

<sup>4</sup> After Bangladesh's independence, the Begum Rokeya College was established in her home region of Rangpur, which continues to be a government-funded women's institution representing the Muslim liberalism that fueled the struggle for sovereignty during the Pakistani regime. The government of Bangladesh observes Rokeya Day on December 9, and annually confers the Begum Rokeya Padak, a prestigious award, to women throughout the nation who have attained exceptional achievement in literature, journalism, education, social welfare and the arts.

Rokeya's literary career stretched three decades (1902–1932) and her work spans major literary genres. Amongst her notable contributions are *Matichur* (“A String of Sweet Pearls,” 1904 and 1922), a collection of essays in two volumes which elucidate her feminist philosophy, *Padmarag* (“Essence of the Lotus,” 1924), depicting the harrowing lives of betrothed Bengali girls, and *Abarodhbasini* (“Captive Women,” 1931), a spirited attack on the extreme forms of *pardah* which endanger women’s existence. But perhaps her most memorable literary piece is *Sultana’s Dream* (1905), an English-medium feminist utopian science fiction novella set in Ladyland, a trippy alternate-universe nation in which the workforce is streamlined and enterprisingly ruled by women.

Playfully and satirically written, *Sultana’s Dream* is a strong espousal of women’s personal journeys towards emancipation, and is resonant with autobiographical undertones, but ultimately shines as both a powerful indictment of male oppression and a celebration of a more universalist society, offering keen insight into the psyche of a largely self-taught and unassuming social activist. *Sultana’s Dream* is situated in the mirror-dimension of Ladyland, where the latent talents of working women are aided by futuristic technology that enables labor-less farming and flying cars, and female scientists have discovered how to capture solar power and control the weather. In this role reversal, the domain of men is trivialized and, as a result, crime is virtually eliminated, a religion of love pervades, and the office day is reduced to an efficient two-hour time frame.

Generally, the ambitiousness of *Sultana’s Dream* is very hybrid. It is a free-flowing narrative, and a novella with generous dashes of melodrama and romance, with disasters, coincidences, and stock topoi abounding in its plot line. Yes, it is also a polemical, passionate

and intellectual treatise on feminism, social welfare, and education. Strikingly, cohabiting with the melodrama of *Sultana's Dream* is a contrasting strand that is realistic and gritty, particularly in its depiction of a female-administered school and institution, richly and wryly endowed with Rokeya's own experiences of running a pioneering school for Muslim girls (Joarder 1980).

While the idea of utopia has been used with great richness by feminist writers (Gallop, Hirsch and Miller 1990, Caraway 1991, Faludi 1991, Steinem 1995, Denfeld 1996, Chesler 1997, Baumgardner and Richard 2000, Kavka 2001, Butler 2001), it is typically concerned with the embodiment of a dream. Lise Shapiro Sanders has argued that utopian feminism rejects the past in favor of a vision of future perfection, while realism in its pragmatic self-reflexivity emphasizes the value of contingency and change. This distinction leads her to conclude that “[i]f utopianism maps uncharted territory, then realism functions mostly in the known, pluralistic, confusing, and inevitably imperfect world. It is immersed in history” (23: 2002).

Rokeya's utopia, arguably, is a realm of highly amalgamated spiritualism, with respect for all religious traditions, particularly those aspects beneficial to women's education. This idea is also found in many of her other works. For example, in *Padmarag*, Rokeya reveals the oppression of women in all communities, irrespective of their distinctive faiths and social customs. In this novel, women from Hindu, Muslim, and Christian communities take shelter in a home set up by a Brahmo Samaj reformer. In one of her essays in *Matichur*, entitled “Gæn Phal” (“The Fruit of Knowledge”), Rokeya questions the conventional reading of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic parable of Adam and Eve. The writer explains that Eve was so passionate about knowledge that she convinces Adam into eating the fruit with her. Thus, they gained knowledge

and descended to earth in tandem, to establish human civilization. But it is the ungrateful and impulsive Adam, not God, who ultimately condemns Eve rather than thanking her.

In the book *Contradictory Lives*, Lisa Knight proposes that bāul women seem to conform to normative social expectations, but actually “draw on the very tools of their encumbering in order to create a better life and society” (2015: 9). Furthermore, “in negotiating their social identity, [bāul women] engage in and manipulate the very structures and discourses that encumber them and jeopardize their social standing” (26). This encumbering leads Knight to recognize the fluidity of women’s positions, and the possibility of a single individual having more than a single agenda for negotiating through the world.

The genius of Begum Rokeya’s social and literary objectives reflect many such encumbrances, not the least *pardah*, as it had become a prevailing custom across much of South Asia in her time, and for both Muslim and non-Muslim women. Despite her marriage to a supportive non-Bengali nobleman, or the intellectual liberties afforded by her relocation to the cultural heart of Kolkata, Rokeya also remained beholden to deeply ingrained views regarding the social, spiritual and cosmological status of women in the course of Islamic history. However, her macaronic writing style and polyglotism, exclusive first hand experiences, and ability to fancifully sublimate enduring religious tropes and scriptural narratives produced an unparalleled literary style. In an pre-independence era where male Muslim thinkers and statesmen increasingly expressed their communal identity in divisive or schismatic terms, Rokeya sought to articulate women’s entitlements through a reimagining of consecrated beliefs and canonical doctrine—the foundational properties of Bengali Muslim devotionism—through larger themes of solidarity and common struggle. As with bāul song, Rokeya’s writings tap into the penetrating

combination of moral and faith-oriented discourses, produced through a medium that is meant to be both edifying and enjoyable.

### **Bīrōṅgōnā: War Crimes and Gendered Nation-Building Narratives**

If Begum Rokeya’s literary style introduced a unique feminist narrative in a era of political infighting during the waning decades of colonialism, the subject of womanhood would resurrect its presence again in the independence era, uneasily aligning itself to various notions of nationhood.

In January of 2018, the Bangladeshi writer Rama Chowdhury (b. 1936) was laid to rest with state honors, at her birthplace in Chittagong. Perhaps best known for her war memoir *Ekattorer Jononi (Mother of ’71)*,<sup>5</sup> Chowdhury, who lost her husband and two of her children during the Liberation War, was also a *bīrōṅgōnā* (“war heroine”)<sup>6</sup>. While this word is accorded to those women who fought and defended themselves and others selflessly during the struggle for independence, the moniker more specifically designates women who were raped and violated by

---

<sup>5</sup> This publication, along with the compilation narrative *Ami Birangana Bolchi* by Nilima Ibrahim (English trans. *I Am the War Heroine Speaking*, by Nusrat Rabbee), are perhaps the two most widely recognized Bengali-language works dedicated to giving voice to the nature and repercussions of female torture during the Bangladesh Liberation War. In more recent times, the Bangladesh American author Farfia Faizullah has also written *Seam* (2014), a poem anthology that lyrically connects war atrocities and struggle with family migration, subsequent cultural gaps, intergenerational discord, and personal loss.

<sup>6</sup> Officially, the term *bīrōṅgōnā* is a civilian title awarded by the Government of Bangladesh. It is commonly estimated that somewhere between 200,000 to 400,000 women were raped and/or physically abused by the Pakistani Army and their collaborators (d’Costa 2011). In the immediate aftermath of the war, President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman began a campaign to locate, rehabilitate and honor such women, though the situation was confounded by the fact that many *bīrōṅgōnā* committed suicide, immediately left the country to seek opportunities abroad, or died at the hands of unskilled midwives during attempted births or abortions. Eventually, the government set up clinical support centers for *bīrōṅgōnā*, with international humanitarian support, and even vocational training and social programs to increase their prospects for remarriage. Later, backlash ensued from social activists who believed that the government was trying to quietly expunge the residual *bīrōṅgōnā* community or whitewash their plight, as they were increasingly ostracized by family members and the larger community in the post-independence era, especially due to condemnations of rape carried by cultural notions of shame and chastity. Several groups in Bangladesh today advocate for the entire eradication of the term *bīrōṅgōnā* in place of *mukti bāhini* (“freedom fighter”), the title awarded to male veterans of the ’71 war. This campaign remains contentious.

the Pakistani army through a series of brutal, state-sponsored fearmongering tactics that played out during the height of the nine-month conflict.

The subjugation of women and their sexuality is often a dominant coercion tactic of oppressive nationalist projects, including in the Indian Subcontinent.<sup>7</sup> Recent works tying theories of nationalism with state-formation have critically examined various aspects of state control with new insight, but frequently fail to investigate the convoluted relationships that exist between political actors and the implicit silence of marginalized groups (Fredrickson 2008, Mylonas 2012). In her recent book on the resolution of violence towards women in the post-conflict nation-building of Bangladesh, Bina D'Costa states that “exploring the links between micro- and macro-narratives that contribute to the creation of an ‘imagined’ community are vital to gaining an understanding of the construction of a nation-state’s identity” (2011: 5).

Bengali-language publications within Bangladesh have more recently begun to highlight some of these exclusions (Kabir 2000 and 2008, Mamun 2008 and 2009, Hasan 2001 and 2002), but the palpable nationalistic undertones of these works have contributed to extreme polarization between domestic actors or interest groups that are pressing for justice, and those actors who deemphasize such issues in an attempt to address the more contemporary crises of a post-independent state. This more recent phenomenon exists alongside prevailing exacerbations from earlier decades, including immediate postwar reactions to the *bīrōṅgōnā* community, who were increasingly rebuffed as a type of dishonored pariah, as well as the ineffectual reactions of the Pakistani government (which eventually opened a judicial commission to investigate the crimes in the early 1970s, but never made the findings public) (Mamun 2008, d’Costa 2011). This

---

<sup>7</sup> Consider, for examples, the regions of Gujarat, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Kashmir and Bangladesh in the last decades.

predicament, compounded by the damage of elapsed time and the frustrations of legislative unresolvedness, broadly but intensely catalyzes an overriding angst in the Bangladeshi psyche with regard to state or civic justice, which has been central to the articulation of many national struggles over the decades.

Reaction to Rama Chowdhury's recent death in Bangladesh has had ambiguous undertones. While she received a burial with state honors, many private news outlets and topical radio and television programs in Bangladesh remained noticeably reticent to delve into the details of her life struggle. Layers of political and cultural discourse over the decades have aggravated her memorialization with sentiments of ignominy and trivialization. Yet, for Chowdhury herself, the predicament of being a *bīrôṅgônā* was not without purpose or expression. Although she was a Hindu woman, two of Chowdhury's children, including a third who died in a road accident after the war, all received a ceremonial ground burial in lieu of a traditional cremation, as per her wishes. In an act of grief, Chowdhury would also spend the rest of her life walking barefoot, so as not to "trample on the bodies of the beloved, underneath the sacred soil" (Eckart 2018: 46). This poignant pledge of deference and sorrow exemplifies a particularly emotional trope that evokes Bangladeshi nationalism, one that conflates motherland with motherhood.

While the feminist scholarship of nationalism has articulated a failure to include women in such discourse, it has not seemed to approach the question of why gender has remained undesirable as a significant identity marker in postcolonial South Asia, despite its obvious importance in national image-making. In the post-independence politics of Bangladeshi nation-building, women have assumed two concurrent identities in the nationalist enterprise: as both

agents and victims. A peculiar yet sweeping amnesty was issued by Bangladesh in 1974, marked doubly by mass famine and death in the same year due to excessive flooding in Bangladesh. This humanitarian crisis replaced the post-warfare issue with an ecological one, and painfully initiated what would become the nation's long and difficult endeavor to seek out justice for, or in some way redress, war crimes over the subsequent decades.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, the state's formal history has since been written and revised by a string of major regime changes, further complicated by the infamous disruptions of martial and religious elites. Thus, Bangladesh's modern history consists of separate and parallel chronicles, an expanding and ever-changing official discourse, and others that exist in the micro-narratives of remembered and lived experiences (see, e.g., Figures 6.1 and 6.2). Ultimately, the sanctioning and perpetuation of ideas such as *bīrôṅgônā*, while certainly excluded in much of the official constructions of Bangladeshi history-making, are the result of many other complex forces: an intergenerational web of cultural values concerning women and sexual abuse, the state-sponsored stifling of narratives in history, the deliberately silent choices of key figures, and the negotiated survival of individual women in rehabilitation.

The Bangladesh government itself has repeatedly mishandled the marginalization of religious and ethnic minorities over the decades (for example, Urdu-speaking Bihari

---

<sup>8</sup> Natural disasters have repeatedly caused mass destruction in the Bay of Bengal, and have frequently diverted attention away from the resolution of larger social issues, while painfully highlighting further political ineptitude with regard to relief efforts. The Bhola cyclone, which hit in 1970, remains one of the deadliest tropical cyclones ever recorded (Bass 2013). The government's mishandling of the relief efforts helped exacerbate the bitterness felt in East Pakistan, swelling the resistance movement there, and the ensuing Liberation War. In 1971, George Harrison, at the behest of his East Bengal-born colleague Ravi Shankar, was inspired to organize The Concert for Bangladesh, in part due to the 1970 Bhola Cyclone, and due to the Bangladesh Genocide and Liberation War. Although it was the first benefit concert of its type, it was extremely successful in raising money, aid and awareness for the region's plight. American involvement in these Bangladeshi crises quickly took a turn, however, as the Nixon administration became further involved in Vietnam.



**Figure 6.1. A poster produced by the then-nascent Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, which originally circulated during the war era (reprint, Liberation War Memorial Museum, n.d.). The caption reads, “*The Mothers and Daughters of Bengal are all Freedom Fighters.*”<sup>9</sup>**

Bangladeshis who were Pakistan supporters but later deserted by them, the 90s-based Chittagong Hills Tract conflict with the Shanti Bahani armed coalition of indigenous peoples, and more recent complications with Rohingya refugees from Myanmar). However, in 2008, the founding Awami League party reclaimed power with a key promise to hold an extensive war-crimes tribunal. Within months, however, a mutiny occurred with the paramilitary wing known as the Bangladesh Rifles<sup>10</sup> against the armed forces, resulting in eighty senior army personnel dying

<sup>9</sup> Many such posters have been archived at the International Institute of Social History, an independent scientific organization in Amsterdam. A variety of these posters focus on the role of women in real and imagined scenarios, from politics to paddy fields. Furthermore, other posters—issued by trade unions, peasant organizations, student associations, and political parties or government agencies—offer a rich visual impression of various aspects of the sociocultural and political conditions of Bangladesh’s formative years, and often demonstrate a noticeable left-wing orientation to slogans and iconography, which would later diminish in the subsequent years of state propaganda.

<sup>10</sup> After the conflict, this organization was subsequently reconfigured to become the contemporary Border Guards Bangladesh. Under the Ministry of Home Affairs, it is the oldest uniformed force in Bangladesh, and tasked with national border security.



**Figure 6.2.** The reverse of the U.S. picture sleeve to George Harrison’s song *Bangla Desh*, released at seven-inch vinyl single in 1971 by Capitol Records. The song was written for The Concert for Bangladesh, a series of two benefit concerts held at Madison Square Garden in August of 1971.

during the conflict (Sufia 2010). It was alleged, but ultimately not verified, that this mutiny was also linked to the concurrent war-crimes movement in Bangladesh. While the Bangladesh liberation movement ended over four decades ago, the repositioning of the war criminals issue within the state’s power structure remains a key strategic focus of factions vying for control.

Disparaging inter-Muslim warfare, the unretributive aftermath of a genocidal campaign, subduing ethnolinguistic nationalism, and a course of maladroit administrations in Bangladesh’s formative years ushered in a deep malaise for many of those who were labeled *bīrôṅgônā* casualties. Earlier in the century, the seminal writings of Begum Rokeya would inspire a long line of women intellectuals,<sup>11</sup> but the consequences of war and liberation would further

---

<sup>11</sup> For example, the poet Sufia Kamal (1911–1999), journalist Nurjahan Begum (1925–2016), educationalist Akhtar Imam (1917–2009), physician Zohra Begum Kazi (1912–2007), singer-activist Husna Banu Khanam (1922–2006), philanthropist Sultana Sarwat Ara Zaman (n.d.), and fashion designer Bibi Russell (b. 1950), all of which have received the Begum Rokeya Padak award.

complicate lines between an abiding maternal nationalism evoked in state-sponsored initiatives and conventionalized notions of the urbane Muslim woman that would come to be associated with Bangladeshi impressions of modernity.

### **Urban Prosceniums, Female Singers, and the Bengali Muslim Imaginary**

Despite much political uncertainty in the formative years of nationhood, both state initiatives and popular sentiment in Bangladesh shared a natural interest in looking toward institutions, public programs, and various specialists to affirm the promising victory of war efforts, and advance a future vision for the young nation which recapitulated the freedom movement's secular humanism and an unwavering ethnolinguistic patriotism. Dubiety over the *bīrôṅgônā* dilemma in some ways foreshadowed an important issue that would surface decades later, as a more Muslim-centered propriety would come to symbolize middle-class stability and diplomatic prospects with the larger Islamic world, complicating national and societal views of progressiveness and musical value with regard to the female performer.

However, Bangladesh's incipient cultural landscape in the early decades moved in concurrent directions—which, in the process, was articulated by a particularly gendered tone of its own—in an attempt to reconcile the bucolic wonder of its sacred geography with the modish trappings of a modern bureaucracy. While the works of notable male figures such as the folk poet and writer Jasimuddin (1903–1976) and agrarian painter Zainul Abedin (1914–1976) epitomized pastoral realism, plebeian strife and quotidian richness, notable women musicians who emerged in the foreground would contribute to the nation's celebration of tolerance, development and contemporaneousness. On the one hand, this surprising bifurcation inverted a commonplace paradigm that typically venerates women through ideas of domestication and vernacularism. On

the other hand, the image of the fashionable Bengali Muslim woman on stage was confronted with numerous state-building ideologies—including the dominance of Indian Bengali media in the early post-independence era, the rising cultural and linguistic clashes exacerbated by Pakistani jurisdiction, and the socio-literary backdrop of Bangladesh's liberation movement—which presented a slew of ontological positions for the promotion of women and music making.

Bangladesh moved quickly to recognize talented men and women in various vocations and with diverse expertise—including on the concert stage—to sustain this critical component of its national ethos. Several women performers, in particular, became emblematic singers of a style that would conventionalize the sound, appearance and ingenuity of the professional Bengali Muslim female singer. Their lives and virtuosity reflect an evolutionary trajectory that begins in the East Pakistan years, into the early decades of post-liberation, and would influence generations of female musicians afterwards. In particular, the artistic endeavors of singers Firoza Begum and Farida Parveen would explore an uncharted space that drew from an array of modernist impressions with regard to musicality, etiquette and femininity—from the cultural dominions of both Lahore and Kolkata, and an increasingly Dhaka-based perspective.

The female voice in South Asia has been strikingly examined through the myriad epistemological encounters that would articulate the metamorphosis from colonial rule to sovereignty, and from the domain of courtesan cultures and a fading system of feudal patronage to the institutionalization and democratization of music making. In these works, the female voice has been studied through tropes of modern subjectivity, national identity and cultural authenticity, but also the manner in which technologies of print and sound complicated the relationships between aurality and orality (Post in Koskoff 1989, Qureshi 2001, Bakhle 2006,

Weidman 2006, Schofield 2015). As in other parts of South Asia, when the idea of musical training eventually began to be perceived as a virtuous trait of the educated and modern woman (and particularly with regard to her ability to secure an honorable marriage), the interface between *ustād* and pupil remained an entirely intimate one, but with amateur objectives at best. In Bengal, the so-called *master mōfāy*—almost always a Hindu male music tutor—instructed the young female student at her family home, introduced her to devotional compositions and urbane love poems, and emphasized the qualities of vocal control over passionate interpretation. Therefore, the burgeoning female artist was learning music from behind closed doors (as opposed to being out and amongst “strangers”), her training was casual and not necessarily predicated upon professional ambitions, and she was performing dignified song in a rather impartial manner. These confines allowed her to make an association with music, while limiting the potential for deplorable sentiments to be attached to that association by others.<sup>12</sup>

While the first successful Bengali Muslim recording artists of the early twentieth century were male specialists of folk music, female singers—and especially performers—were virtually invisible. By the second half of the twentieth century, Muslim Bengali women finally began to appear in professional music scenes—particularly promoted through recordings and media, as opposed to live concert venues—though they were always presented as upstanding and restrained individuals with a notably urbanite demeanor, conspicuously trained in semi-classical music while emphasizing their forte as solo vocalists. All of these qualities, while perhaps not surprising individually, defined the newly created space for the female performer, whereby her

---

<sup>12</sup> Novel shorthand notational systems, such as those devised by Marathi musicologist Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande (1860–1936) and the *swaralipi* innovations of the Tagore family in Bengal, were instrumental in the domestication of music learning, providing an illustrated, structured and ultimately veritable experience for such dissemination.

image was continually nestled in between socially-acceptable parameters: she was a musical traditionalist with a fashionable outlook, the companionless focus who was accompanied by unobtrusive yet dissimilar instrumentalists, a voice habitually heard in an indirect fashion through media once-removed from the audience's experience.

One of the most significant of these early singers was Firoza Begum (1930–2014), who specialized in *nazrul gīti*, the compositions of the modern Muslim poet Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899–1976). Daughter to the aristocratic lineage of Khan Bahadur Khan Ismail, Begum is widely acknowledged for introducing *nazrul gīti* to the Indian subcontinent as a semi-classical song form. Her direct contact with the poet himself is also telling, as she initially learned music from Chitta Roy, a close associate of Nazrul Islam, as well as from her husband, famed melodist Kamal Dasgupta (1912–1974), who himself set to music many of Nazrul's compositions (Johnson 2000). As one of the first singers to release a long-play record of *nazrul gīti* in Pakistan as well render such songs during the inauguration of Pakistan Radio's regional office in Dhaka, Begum's fame also spread across borders, both national and linguistic.

At a chance encounter, Begum met both Nazrul and her future husband through a spontaneous request to sing. She recalled that incident, which occurred at a rehearsal room at the HMV music production company in Kolkata:

I rendered [the song] *jōdi pōrāne nā jāge ôkul piyāsā*. Then [Nazrul] become more interested and wanted to know about my family. He found me quite interesting and again requested me to render another song. He asked [Kamal Dasgupta], who was working in the next room, to listen. Then the latter asked me to present the song on a harmonium. In fact, that was a double-reed harmonium, which I was not used to. I refused to play that harmonium, considering it broken, since every time I pressed one key, another key from another octave [was played] (B. Kibreah, personal communication, 2004).

What is most striking about this encounter, as she has remembered it, is that both of these famous men, whose influential positions in the world of music would propel Begum's career, became

curious about her through a sort of casual musical interrogation. Questions regarding her social background, and possibly her study of music, arose only after a demonstration of vocal style. Furthermore, it is striking to learn that Begum's style was such that she was neither familiar nor pleased with the fancier, louder studio harmonium that was given to her to play. One can additionally surmise that this episode confirmed Begum's form of musical expression, one befitting a young Muslim women, since she appeared to be a dilettante instrumentalist who favored a softer and more solemn timbre.

Being unmarried, and later having both a Hindu husband while bearing the responsibility of raising children, thereby balancing career and family, Begum further states:

At the beginning of my professional career as a singer, I faced huge obstacles from my family. They told me to quit music and to go back to Faridpur. They tried to marry me off, since they considered that an unmarried Muslim girl should not be allowed to continue artistic career far from home. But I could not agree with them. For three years I had to struggle with my family. And then a new door was opened when Pakistan radio launched its regional office in Dhaka after the partition. I managed to get them to allow me to perform in Dhaka (Ibid).

As a privileged female musician who moved between recording opportunities in Hindu-dominated Kolkata and Pakistan-governed Dhaka, she mentions in retrospect:

The scenario in Dhaka radio stations was totally different from that of Kolkata. On Dhaka radio, the authorities always insisted that we render qalām-e Iqbāl (the poetry of Muhammad Iqbal, often referred to as the "Spiritual Father of Pakistan") and we were not allowed to render rabindra saṅgīt, and they even used to censor words such as 'shyam' in nazrul gīti.

I had to refuse many lucrative offers from Kolkata after the partition. In fact, the partition became the main obstacle to nurture my music career. For my family and three sons, I sacrificed the golden era of my life for six years. My husband did not tell me to do so, however, as I considered taking care of my sons my first priority.

In 1962, HMV [in Kolkata] gave me an offer to record two songs for the puja celebrations, and due to popular demand. Getting the offer, I told them that I would do it, however, songs in the record would feature nazrul gīti. They refused. But, I stuck to my position. Ultimately, HMV came to an agreement, I could record two nazrul gīti for the puja (Ibid).

The above accounts reflect the dynamical conceptualizations of music with which Begum's poignant voice negotiated capacity, within the Urdu-based dominion that had supplanted Bengali

song in her homeland, as well as the non-Muslim music dominion that provided remunerative opportunities in Hindu Kolkata. Despite the poet Nazrul Islam's own cross-cultural dexterity, it was primarily Begum's favored voice and personal resolve that could withstand and substantiate disparate modalities for music-making across regions. Yet Begum's eventual and final return to Bangladesh is marked with dubiousness, which has led her to question the fate of music and her own offspring's musical future there:

I do not consider Bangladesh an ideal place for nurturing talents. The government has not been supportive at all, nor has it ever given much thought to patronizing cultural activities, which is why I discouraged my sons to take music as professions. They play music as a passion, but not as a profession. More shocking to me is that [Bangladeshi] artists are jealous and don't have any respect for others. We don't have many quality singers, since obtaining popularity has become so easy. Here everybody considers himself or herself the best, but can't do anything meaningful (Ibid).

The juxtaposition presented by the Muslim musician living in Bangladesh—a decision fueled by both social necessity and patriotic obligation, and the image of Indian Bengal as being the foreign yet idealized environment for artists—is a particularly striking one. In Firoza Begum's heyday, the feminine voice was thus acutely enshrouded by Pakistan's foreign and state-sponsored protocols regarding music and media forms, which trivialized the place of Bengali-language song and questioned the inclusion of non-Muslim poetry. This was further complicated by a post-liberation predicament in which musicians such as Begum were particularly impeded by a perceived sense of infighting and pettiness in the nascent Bangladeshi music industry, provoking a longing for an alternative and idealized space for creativity that grew increasingly out of reach: the urban center of non-Muslim Bengal in Kolkata. Finally, Firoza Begum's phenomenal rise to fame, despite its many negotiations with past and future, curiously sidelined Muslim Bengal's folk traditions as central to the nation's musical imaginary, if only for a transitional moment in time.

The singer Farida Parveen (b. 1954) also began her career as a performer of *nazrul gīti* and similar styles of popular song. Eventually, Parveen became the chief urban exponent of *lālôn gīti*, the compositions of East Bengal's principal bāul poet Lālôn (ca. 1774–1890). As with Firoza Begum, Parveen's eventual career track was not simply mobilized by a personal epiphany, but rather a serendipitous meeting with influential men in the music world:

I met Mokshed Ali Shah, a Lālôn devotee who spent 60 years at his *ākhṛā* (hermitage), and he guided me in singing Lālôn songs. In the early days I did not like Lālôn, specially those rendered by the fakirs at the *ākhṛā*. Guru Mokshed Ali Shah was acquainted with my father, and he insisted that I become a devotee of Lālôn. After the [Bangladesh] Liberation, I first rendered the Lālôn song *sôttô bōl supōthe cōl* at the Dol Purnima celebration (at Lālôn's shrine). From then onwards, I have become an exponent of Lālôn songs. It is the will of Allah that I have earned a name as a Lālôn singer. I do not want anything more on this earth. To this day, I render songs at the three-day Dol Purnima celebration (B. Kibreak, personal communication, 2005).

Like Begum, Parveen eventually married the man who instigated her musical training, an informant from within the tradition and with whom she no doubt spent considerable and intimate time honing her skills. This relationship was also solidified by the fact that Mokshed Ali Shah was not only an established musician in his own right but a friend of Parveen's family, thereby bridging the gap between the thresholds of *zanānā* and *mardānā*, the social domains of Muslim men and women. Parveen's rise to fame was further enhanced by both this direct immersion into the heritage of Lālôn, as well as the subsequent national promotion of the poet and his shrine in the formative years of Bangladeshi sovereignty. It is also noteworthy that, after becoming an authoritative singer of Lālôn songs, Parveen maintained a relationship with the shrine and local performance, while acknowledging Allah for the success she has enjoyed. Her close proximity to the traditional followers of Lālôn fortifies her image as a genuine artist in the service of the poet and, by association, her advocacy of his heterogeneous and humanistic outlook. Yet she is also a Muslim, and this alignment affirms her continued cultural bond with a general religious mass

sentiment. Accordingly, the raw and exuberant vocal form at the shrine, *those rendered by the fakirs*, was never appealing to her and, in fact, left her with an unfavorable first impression of the music.

Regarding proper technique and musical style, Parveen continues:

Theoretical knowledge is not enough for rendering a song. The melody has to be in perfect accordance with the singer's voice and rendition. This is particularly true of Lālōn songs, music sense [alone] cannot create a quality Lālōn singer. Rather, one has to imbibe Lālōn's philosophy and Sufism. One has to love human beings and other living beings, and overcome all kinds of desire. This does not mean that one has to live like fakirs at the ākhṛā. They also sing Lālōn songs in their own style. My emphasis is on the classical aspect, to give it a more polished form (Ibid).

With regard to those fakirs at the ākhṛā, she further states:

Obviously, I have respect for those who have made an immense contribution in preserving Lālōn songs. However, some of them are not torchbearers of the spirit of Sufism. Some of them have [drug] addictions, and some are responsible for blending the doctrine of Vaishnavism [within] Sufism. For instance, the practice of [wearing saffron-colored] attire and bearing a few musical instruments by the bāul-s at the ākhṛā have come from Vaishnavism. But, a true devotee of Lālōn is not supposed to do [this]. Like my guru Mokshed Ali Shah, true Sufis at the ākhṛā do not use [such] attire. Instead, they wear white (Ibid).

And finally, in response to a series a newly erected, state-sponsored buildings at the shrine, Parveen is strikingly cynical of commercial ventures around the tomb of Lālōn:

I do not support the idea of building a [commercial complex near the ākhṛā], and I have pointed this out to the authorities several times. The Sufis should be allowed to live in the midst of nature, not under artificial structures. A complex could have been built near Lālōn's māzār (Sufi mausoleum), but definitely not at the māzār (Ibid).

From these accounts, these is a conflation of the ideas of humanism which pervade both the poetry of Lālōn and Bangladeshi nationalist discourse (particularly in urban Dhaka, where Parveen has settled), and the idealized spirit of Islam through Sufism, which is not at odds with these sentiments, and is perceived as untainted, in harmony with nature, and unpretentious. She also associates with the purity of the ākhṛā, a word which is specifically attached to the shrine of Lālōn, but later refers to it as a *mājār*, a general term used to describe the tomb of any Sufi saint. Also, the additional buildings recently added to the compound are *artificial* or incompatible with

the spirit of Lālôn and his message. This image is particularly useful to Parveen because it reinstates an impeccability, even sterility, regarding her relationship with the shrine and thus, the characteristics of the righteous, urban female singer of popular Bangladeshi music. Besides training in music (which is not enough to qualify a good musician), one must love *other living beings* and *overcome desire*. In other words, one must be morally upright and, apropos musical rendition, perform for the sake of art while severed from emotional attachments or the desire for commercial gain. Earlier in the interview, she emphatically states that she does not want *anything more on this earth*. In fact, Parveen is widely applauded for being an honorable and unostentatious artist, despite her undisputed success in the music business.

Concurrently, Parveen expresses both a reverence for Lālôn and his shrine, while detesting the “poser” fakirs who gather there, who are a misinformed and adulterated copy (i.e., through drug abuse and intermingling concepts of Hindu mysticism) of the credible Sufis (who wear only white garments). This belief is supported by the fact that her own guru-husband, Mokshed Ali Shah, was a *true* devotee who imbibed these qualities. Yet, in recognizing certain inherent contradictions to her philosophy, Parveen also assertively mentions that one need not *live like fakirs at the ākhrā*. Unsurprisingly, during performance, Parveen does not wear the white garments of the true Sufi (which most male *and* female followers of Lālôn don), but rather the attire of an educated, urban woman in Bangladesh—in her case, the classic muslin *jāmdāni* sari of Dhaka.

In addition, while occasionally playing the harmonium on stage, and less so in the recording studio, Parveen’s focus is again on the purity of voice, which emphasizes the *classical aspect* of the songs, that are more *polished* than the equally salient devotional and folk qualities

of *lālôn gīti*. The Parveen-esque musical rendition is, naturally, concise and moderately paced, eschewing both overtly virtuosic and protracted elaborations. While traditional pan-folk instruments, such as the *dotārā* and *khol*, as well as the ubiquitous harmonium and the bamboo flute, are frequently incorporated in the arrangements, they seldom highlight the standard instruments of the Lālônī performance heritage, such as the *æk tārā* and *ḍugi*, which provide the idiosyncratic accompaniment to most bāul singers and produce a more raw and visceral sound. In addition, the *sitār* and violin, instruments introduced through the North Indian or Hindustani art music tradition, are commonly blended into the master mix, providing a noticeable classical backing to Parveen’s exuberant yet institutionally-trained voice.

In fact, the universally recognized *æk tārā*—very much associated with the traditional followers of Lālôn—according to Parveen, is considered an innovation of the Vaiṣṇava ascetics. It is with regard to this statement that she specifically uses the word bāul, which is not mentioned otherwise, to refer to the tradition upon which Lālôn is based. The bāul, however, is not necessarily a representative of the true tradition for Parveen, indeed the heritage of Lālôn is elevated above and beyond this term. Interestingly, for many scholars, Lālôn himself is quintessentially known for not incorporating the term bāul into any of his known compositions, which number over seven hundred in total, though this curious fact is not universally recognized by either his large amalgamation of devotee-practitioners or in popular opinion. The complex reception history of bāul-ness aside, claiming Lālôn as a bāul, or else refuting such as claim, accentuates a particular teleological orientation, as these concepts have entered the Bangladeshi psyche in enduring ways. Parveen’s stance is neither a wholly emic nor etic perspective but a sensible deflection, she is not speaking from within the confines of the traditional community nor

validating broader nationalistic appropriations. Her standpoint is also not ambiguous (for neither of these alternatives are considered to be bona fide), yet she cannot be the abrasive bāul “junkie” nor the bureaucratic “sellout.” Instead, she adjudicates an entirely personalized acclimation, that she must be a self-sufficient third construct: a refined and modish representative of the Muslim woman and professional that happens to sing *lālôn gīti*.

Though there is a substantial revivalism of bāul culture and *lālôn gīti* thriving in contemporary Bangladesh, Parveen’s distinctive career in this genre promoted a musical style that was not yet in vogue amongst educated and urban audiences in early post-independence Bangladesh. This is critical because, in speaking of her artistry, she mediates between commonly held yet fragmentary notions of what the bāul or fakir is, and what government sponsorship has officially consecrated with regard to the Lālônī tradition (most of her comments are reiterations of these random perceptions, which continue to circulate today). Suffice to say, she gently avoids the insinuations of amorality or bastardization whilst reverting attention to herself, a sensible approach since common definitions of Lālôn and his heritage, while formidable, are often vague and contradictory, but Parveen’s performance demeanor is not. She openly acknowledges some musical liberties that have been taken, and carefully justifies them too, while her receptive audience is ultimately captivated by her behavior through a musical style, one that had already been established through the comportment of Firoza Begum and others.

While the image of the proper female musician in Bangladesh is itself fashioned by multiple layers of religiosity and propriety, Parveen’s era of success has been largely influenced by her ability to avoid marginalization, despite the precarious musical and structural roots of her adopted performance tradition. Parveen’s approach separates Lālôn’s music from its practitioners

in three ways: as a regional tradition, a musical style, and as devotional poetry. As a regional tradition, Parveen's relationship to Lālôn's iconic shrine fortifies her position as a champion of cultural integrity, aligning her beliefs to a physical space beyond the concert stage. As a musical style, Parveen's classicized renditions of Lālôn's songs recapitulates and expands on a century of recreational music making in Bengal, which has emphasized a restrained association with music through harmonium playing, semi-classical art songs, and concise renderings brought on by mass literacy in pedagogical notation systems. As devotional poetry, Parveen's emphasis is on Lālôn as Sufi. In her definition however, Sufism is not simply posited against Islamic conservatism but rather a debased shrine culture of hedonism.

While Parveen's female contemporaries Pilu Momtaz (ca. 1953–2011) and Runa Laila (b. 1952) would later usher in an era of women singers in Bangladeshi pop music, dancing and singing to Westernized arrangements, Parveen's success is drawn from demure representations of this urbanized Sufi, steeped in contemporary religiosity, that has received wider demographic popularity across age groups and the growing middle class. In a sense, Parveen's sound is not unique to the manner in which the female singer of urban art song in the Muslim world has been routinely classified, in this case, as a musical catalyst for gentrified appropriations of certain styles: a more accessible form of classical music, a more refined interpretation of folk song, and a secularized approach to mystical poetry—all of these source musics combining to appeal to moderate middle class tastes.

Though professionalized female musicians in Muslim Bengal had begun to emerge in the middle of the twentieth century, their particular musical stylings interacted with a *mélange* of sentiments promoted by both the bureaucratic endeavors and *vox populi*. The artist Firoza

Begum popularized a style *nazrul gīti* in the East Pakistan era that sought to reintroduce the urbane compositions of Kazi Nazrul Islam in a milieu which promoted the image of the female Bengali Muslim artist as a conveyor of feminine progressiveness, yet removed from the rustic side of national sentiment. Begum conjured a distinctively metropolitan sensibility through an acknowledgement of the tradition of *ādhunik* or “modern” song (largely promoted by Bengali Hindu composers in the earlier part of the century and further developed as a studio sound in Kolkata), which gravitated toward semi-classical composition inspired by popular raga paradigms, showed virtuosic capacity with restraint, favored soloistic and voice-centered arrangements, and were lightly accompanied by the superfluous harmonies of a studio orchestra. This sound was further complicated by state-run studios under the Pakistani regime that placed certain restrictions on Bengali-language song, especially Hindu devotional pieces, preferring those *nazrul gīti* compositions that were ultimately inspired by the Urdu-languages genres of *ghazal* and *naat* through themes of romance and solemn Islamic piety.

Farida Parveen’s introduction of Bengali folk and devotional poetry through the songs of Lālôn was an extension of these aesthetic trajectories, and suggested what an urbanized Sufi sound might be for a new modern listenership, incorporating notions of regional heritage and cultural space that reinforced an idealized stage presence and Bengali Muslim propriety. Like Begum, Parveen was deeply and genuinely initiated into the musical tradition that she would come to represent on stage, yet worked creatively to impart an aura of refinement which sidestepped the perceived intemperance of shrine culture and the unsavory compositional contributions in Lālôn’s ennobled canon. In this process, she rose to fame through an ability to

re-articulate endearing regional devotionism in a simpatico Sufi spirit congruous with bourgeois sentiment, distancing herself from saint-focus practice while conjuring archaic poetry through subtly rāga-esque and studio-polished timbres.

### **Women, Rural Sainthood, and Piety-Focused Bengali-ness**

By the 1990s, a number of political maneuvers in Bangladesh seemed further to complicate the place and space of women in public performance. A mass protest took place in December of 1990 that ultimately led to the fall of General Hussain Muhammad Ershad (b. 1930), who had presided over the governance of Bangladesh through the 1980s via a military dictatorship. The subsequent uprising is marked as the starting point of parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh after nearly a decade of military rule, and paved the way for a credible election in 1991. However, this backdrop existed concurrently with a resurgence of Hindutva<sup>13</sup> in India, particularly through the demolition of the Babri Masjid—a historical Mughal-era mosque in Ayodhya, the birthplace of Rāma and setting of the epic Rāmāyaṇa<sup>14</sup>—by Hindu militants. As the further controversy surrounding British Indian author Salman Rushdie and his novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988) erupted—a book seen as an irreverent depiction of the figure of Muḥammad by many conservative Muslims—the Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin experience a similar backlash to her historical fiction *Lajja* (1993). Revolving around the story of a traumatized Hindu Bangladeshi family in the liberation era, *Lajja* and its open criticism of misogyny in

---

<sup>13</sup> Hindutva, or “Hindu-ness,” is the predominant form of Hindu nationalism in India. The term was popularized by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966) in 1923 (Patrī 2016).

<sup>14</sup> One of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, the other being the Mahābhārata. The Rāmāyaṇa narrates the life of Rāma, the legendary prince of the Kosala Kingdom, with its capital at Ayodhya, in the Late Vedic period (ca. 1100–ca. 500 BCE).

Islam, was released at a time when major political parties changed hands in the nation. Nasrin has been living in exile since 1994.

The decisive advancement and control of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in the 1990s was enhanced by their critical allegiance with the Bangladesh wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat), an Islamic political organization and socially conservative movement founded in 1941 in British India by the Islamic theologian and socio-political philosopher Abu al-‘Ala Maudūdī (1903–1979). The Jamaat became a largely underground operation in the early years of Bangladesh independence, especially since its members had been largely outspoken advocates of a two-state Pakistan and Urdu-language governance. The BNP—the largest oppositional entity to the Awami League (AL), the country’s founding party—increasingly sought to define itself against the secular humanism of AL political rhetoric, which they formally strengthened through their association with the Jamaat and its highly organized student wing coalition. This remarkable bond coincided with the rise of the BNP in 1991.

In this era, a democratically-elected counter party and the formal entrance of political Islam in the governance of Bangladesh was also marked by a new wave of migrant demographics leaving the nation for opportunities elsewhere, especially amongst the working class and from localized regions of the nation. Throughout the 1990s, Bangladeshis continuously represented one of the largest group of recipients of the Diversity Immigrant Visa program, or green card lottery, issued by the United States government, which prompted the large-scale immigration of increasingly non-professional Bangladeshi expatriates to North America (Rai and Reeves 2009). Recent works have begun exploring the topic of transnational Bangladeshi Muslims with regard to ruptures in the migration process as well as the plight of those who stay

at “home,” challenging assumptions about the processes and relationships of movement and immobility, especially in different contexts of nation creation (Alexander, Chatterji, and Julais 2016). Other works have similarly examined the effect of diasporic life experiences on the contemporary religious landscape of Bangladesh, noting the complex relationship between global migrations and Islamic revival (Kibria 2013). While Islam unofficially received state-sponsorship in Bangladesh in the 1990s, the nation simultaneously remained a unitary parliamentary republic with secular objectives. This act was not only consolidated at the bureaucratic level through the political consortium of the BNP with the Jamaat, but thus also reflected growing middle class sensibilities, increasingly impacted by both foreign work<sup>15</sup> or resettlement abroad<sup>16</sup> and burgeoning economic stability within Bangladesh, that espoused a somber, scripture-based and prayer-focused Islamic piety increasingly popular amongst educated Sunni Muslims around the world.

While successive governments have supported the Islamization of social and political life in Bangladesh since the 1990s—partly in response to popular religious sentiment and partly aimed at developing relations with oil-rich Middle East countries—the larger shift towards versions of more orthodox Islam seem to originate from two different sources. Firstly, Western-style mass education has not reduced the significance of religious practice but rather supported the growth of conservatism, with the heterodox teachings of the traditional and semi-literate

---

<sup>15</sup> This phenomenon particularly includes labor migration to the Arab Gulf States and Malaysia, by both Muslim and non-Muslim working class communities throughout South Asia.

<sup>16</sup> In the United Kingdom, the demonym Bengali is nearly synonymous with Bangladeshi, reflecting the massive presence of Bengali Muslims over Bengali Hindus, initially settling in Brick Lane in the borough of the Tower Hamlets in London’s East End. Prior to the 1960s, most Indian dining establishments in Britain were owned by Bangladeshi restaurateurs even though they primarily served North Indian fare, reflecting both their early relocation to England in large numbers, and the cultural trivialization they experienced there as a regionalized South Asian ethnic group.

Muslim leaders being questioned by a newer generation of college-educated students with access to textual knowledge and empowered by a sense of direct spiritual experience (Bowen 1993, Horvatich 1994). In Bangladesh, the Jamaat has a strong middle class and largely urban support base, and is particularly popular with young and enthusiastic student supporters. A second trend is overseas migration and “deterritorialization” (Appadurai 1996: 301)—the process by which religions, ethnicities, and economies span nation states—further promoting the appeal of fundamentalisms. In Bangladesh, deep-seated religious revival is particular present in regions of western and southern Bangladesh, areas with a historically rich Sufi heritage but currently associated with concentrated overseas migration.

As mentioned in Chapter Four, local shrines leadership in Bangladesh has remained largely detached from fundamentalist organizations that encompass both nonpolitical proselytizing groups (such as the Tablighi Jamaat Bangladesh) and political parties (such as the Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh or Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh).<sup>17</sup> In fact, in the traditionally regionalized spaces of Bangladesh, women have continued to find meaning in Islam through context-dependent circumstances revised through practice. This phenomenon is particularly striking in the realm of spiritual authority, saintly power, and shrine culture, where the existence of the female Sufi saint, or *pīrāni*, is not only tolerated but actively patronized.

How has shrine culture in the regionalized spaces of Bangladesh, against a rising religious zeal that seeks to delegitimize them, enabled the *pīrāni*, to productively work within the confines of Bengali Islam to articulate a sense of agency and resistance? First, the *pīrāni* and her

---

<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that all of these organizations were formulated elsewhere, either in Muslim India or the Arab Muslim world, and their overall position remains contentious in Bangladesh amongst different groups of Bengali Muslims.

localized place in rural Bengal is situated in a region where social class and culture norms can uniquely, if not non-uniformly, transcend gender. In such traditional spaces of Muslim Bengal, the age of a woman or her rite of passage into motherhood is often equated with a certain status or cultural authority. This notion might be verified by an oft-repeated phrase: *māyer pāye behester cābi*, “the key to heaven lies at the feet of the mother.” Furthermore, overseas migration seems to have led to an increase in the power of mothers, including young mothers, in the absence of men, who are left to run households (Callan 2007, Gardner 1995). Thus, while traditionally viewed as subordinate to their husbands, certain women experience a striking ability to resist particular forms of oppression, authorized by their position as provisional breadwinners, loving maternal figures, or respected and feared mother-in-laws, a standing that even accords them a superior ranking over poorer men in their village (Callan 2007).

Secondly, the legitimacy of the *pīrāni* is enhanced by certain socio-economical conditions increasingly associated with the domain of rurality, allowing her to not only gain popularity through a personal aptitude for spiritual guidance, but also further establish a wider support base of adherents through supplemental operations. According to Alyson Callan, some notable *pīrāni* figures in the region of Sylhet, Bangladesh, have attracted a significant body of devotees through their entrepreneurial prowess, in some cases running orphanages or madrassas alongside the management of their duties as local spiritual advisors (2008). This phenomenon concurrently exists alongside unprecedented opportunities of rural Bangladeshi women made possible through women-centered initiatives of development banks and NGOs in the past decades. For example, the Grameen Bank, a micro-finance organization and community development institution founded Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, provides small and low-rate interest loans to rural

lenders. Ninety seven percent of Grameen Bank loans are issued to rural women who, according to Grameen data, have largely demonstrated a resourcefulness through their ability to make sounder investments and payoff loans quicker than male lenders (Yunus 2002).<sup>18</sup>

Thirdly, Alyson Callan further suggests a coinciding and extra-corporeal notion, that the fundamental spiritual power of the *pīrāni* is less attributed to her individual qualities, but rather to some supernatural entity that is temporarily affiliated with her (2008). This idea reflects a common anthropological observation that, in the Islamic world, spirit possession and knowledge of holy scriptures often reflect two distinct, gendered domains of religious practice (Lewis 1989, Lambek 1993, Boddy 1994). Therefore, women who attend or preside over ceremonies at saints' shrines, or demonstrate a general penchant to traffic with spirits, are articulating an intention to sacralize their own space, as well as share grievances and a sense of community with other women (Mernissi 1975, Doumato 2000, Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2002). However, the relationship between spirit possession and agency is paradoxical and, whereas being taken over by the spirit involves a displacement of the host's consciousness, the spirit may expand the host's personal agency by legitimating the host's voice (Askberg 2014). Furthermore, the *pīrāni* in Bangladesh may also have intensely dedicated male followers, or even supportive and sometimes subservient husbands.<sup>19</sup>

Connected to this idea of a feminist spiritual possession is a fourth, that the *pīrāni* and her engagement with Islamic piety should also not be generalized as a simple deflection of counter-

---

<sup>18</sup> The various undertakings of BRAC, one of the largest NGOs of its type that was formed in the formative years of Bangladesh's independence, has been previously mentioned. Grameen Bank's micro-finance system has since been implemented in a number of other countries worldwide.

<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that spirit possession in the Sufi environment can also be a catalyst for other articulations, for example a cross-cultural and migratory past connecting the Arab-Islamic world with sub-Saharan spirits in Tunisia (Jankowsky 2010).

hegemony. Rather, localized Islam in Bangladesh retains a critical atmosphere in which a range of pietistic positionalities can be simultaneously and experimentally investigated. This phenomenon seems to be particularly feasible due to a regional disposition that looks out and observes streams of religiosities that surround it and are made fashionable in the moment, yet remembers and engages in an abiding tradition of speculation and whimsical engagement fostered by the expressive development of Bengali Islam in the agrarian expanse.

In Bangladesh, Bengalis often have a way of understanding themselves in relationship to others through an implicit sense of geographical hierarchy. Those living in a select number of metropolitan cities in the small nation (a *nāgôrik*) consider others living in the myriad small towns beyond as less advantaged simpletons. Such small town folks are consequently known as living in the *mufôssôl* (Arabic: *mufaṣṣal*, from the passive participle of *faṣṣala*, to “divide” or “classify”). Originally, this Mughal administrative term was also used to designate the regions of India outside the three East India Company capitals of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras (Stifflend 2000). This term is still widely used in India and Bangladesh and, although historically value-neutral, carries negative connotations when used by residents of a large metropolis, referring to those situated in “the boonies” or “the sticks.” Residents of the *mufôssôl* accordingly refer to those residing in the deep villages, further isolated from their own territory, as *gēye* or *gēyo*, a pejorative meaning “country bumpkin.” This cultural “pecking order” of citizenry is perhaps not unique to Bangladesh, but curiously exists alongside a pervasive reverence for the rural in nationalist rhetoric, one that seemingly positions villagers at the top of the gradation. While middle class citizens residing in small towns hold a medial position between notions of

refinement and rusticity in this continuum, it is the “distant” villager who seems best oriented to observe small town consolidation, and metropolitan appropriation, of the rural.

Lastly, Bengali Muslim women novelists and singers in urban spaces have had to deal more directly with the particularities of a feminist propagation as it has been complicated by the public celebration of women in the nationalist enterprise, changing political regimes and their incorporation of religious rhetoric, or various promotions of female artists on stage and in the studio. The existence of the *pīrāni* in Bangladesh seems to echo Saba Mahmood’s observation that an engagement with or resurgence of interests in piety amongst Muslim women is often better understood through the informants’ view of practice, a relationship with piety for piety’s sake (2005). This idea points to the manner in which agency is itself a culturally constructed concept, and how the assumption that all women desire freedom from structures of male domination can in fact be ethnocentric. Uniquely situated in the confines of the rural, the *pīrāni* both upholds certain cultural practices delineated for women while inverting such paradigms in other instances. Notably, this process is often expressed as being undertaken in the name of Allah, and not as resistance against patriarchy.

### **Crossroads, Commodified Deliberation, and the Bôyāti Queen**

In this final section, I examine the rise of Momtaz Begum as the *bôyāti* community’s first widescale pop star. I consider the musical trajectory of Momtaz, beginning with her gradual departure from the standardized debate genre as she gained prominence amongst a larger and broader audience within Bangladesh, as well as with a distinctive expatriate Bangladeshi listenership.

Momtaz's musical career is coupled with an important reconfiguration in the national climate beginning in the 2000s. Firstly, by the early twenty first century, the country's sociopolitical condition is critically shaped by a return to the democratic election process after decades of sudden and sometimes violent seizures of power. This "resurrection" is solidified by the cornerstone liberalism of the founding Awami League party—reassuming the mantle of leadership after a long hiatus—and is further augmented by a continued economic stability that would position Bangladesh as a Next 11 country.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, an equally burgeoning progressivism amongst everyday Bangladeshis is coupled by continuing waves of migration, particularly for a broader and increasingly non-professional class of citizens searching for opportunities abroad. This phenomenon is culturally supplemented by a distinctive sense of folk revivalism steeped in the Bangladeshi imaginary (Rahman 2015), instigating a critical moment of introspection and reevaluation of cultural convictions. Thirdly, the larger parameters of these circumstances provided a striking space for popular attention drawn to the *bôyāti*, especially as a female artist of regional music, though situated in the somewhat cumbersome relationship between resistance and piety. However, the *fakirāni*'s engagement in devotionism and popular sentiment at this junction moves beyond the confines of a binary model of subordination and resistance, or coercion and choice (Jacobsen 2011). By relying on both the confines of *bicār gān* material and making sweeping changes to its arrangement, I argue that decisive aspects of Momtaz Begum's musical career, especially in the studio, allow for configurations of personhood, ethics and self-realization—drawn from both Islamic and liberal-secular discursive

---

<sup>20</sup> The Next Eleven (or N-11) are eleven countries—Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, Turkey, and Vietnam—that the Goldman Sachs investment bank predicts will become members of world's largest economies in the twenty first century, together with BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) (Lens 2017).

formations—to inhabit not only the same cultural and historical space, but further shape individual subjectivities and modes of agency.

By 1996, the Awami League (AL) had returned to power in Bangladesh, led by Sheikh Hasina (b. 1947), the daughter of the nation’s founding leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920–1975). Self-labeled as the “pro-liberation” voice of Bangladesh, the resurgence of the AL was also marked by a swift retaliation aimed at further delegitimizing the power of the dethroned BNP and the political clout it had helped to garner for the Jamaat leadership throughout the 90s.<sup>21</sup> After the AL successfully won another general election in 2008, the party was able to make a monumental move by establishing the International Crimes Tribunal-Bangladesh (ICT-Bangladesh) as a forum to investigate and prosecute suspects for the genocide committed during the Bangladesh Liberation War.<sup>22</sup> This concerted effort—at that point, thirty-eight years in the making—condemned a number of local collaborators of the Pakistan Army, including the living members of the Jamaat leadership that were active during the war in 1971.<sup>23</sup> In reprisal, a

---

<sup>21</sup> Three radical Islamist parties, Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), Jamaat al-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), and Harkat al-Jihad (HJ) were banned in February of 2005 on the grounds of militancy and terrorism (Witheld 2015).

<sup>22</sup> As described earlier in this chapter, while the Bangladesh liberation movement ended over four decades ago, the repositioning of the war criminals issue within the state’s power structure remains a key strategic focus of factions vying for control. Ultimately, such political machinations have retained poignancy due to the pervasive sense of “justice unserved” that has both vindicated the nation’s foundational ethnolinguistic ethos, yet has threatened to undermine this rationale because of its prolonged unresolvedness.

<sup>23</sup> Perpetuated attempts to seek out retributive justice in Bangladesh’s political history is situated along a complicated trajectory. In the early years of Bangladesh governance, the nation’s young body of officials, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, were completely inundated by the devastating Bhola cyclone in the Bay of Bengal, which had redirected resources toward humanitarian aid rather than addressing war crime reparations. While just beginning the acclimation to sovereignty through genocide, the nation was thus doubly and massively overwhelmed by famine, polluted water supplies and disease, ecologically-based dispossession, and a rising death toll caused by natural disaster. The impact of the cyclone amongst large portions of the populace, combined with a growing concern over political ineptitude, led to the eventual assassination of Sheikh Mujib in 1975. The following decades were politically shaped by a series of military coups, including the reign of BNP founder Ziaur Rahman in 1977 (lasting until his assassination in 1981), and that of Hussain Muhammad Ershad in 1982 (until he was forced to resign, following a large pro-democracy uprising in 1990 that was jointly organized by the leaders of the AL and BNP). Through decades of unremitting political reorientation and military insurgency, the issue of redressing liberation-era atrocities had gone unchecked, lingering in the national consciousness but largely remaining on the back burner.

number of secularist writers, bloggers and publishers in Bangladesh were brutally killed or seriously injured in attacks perpetrated by Islamic extremists in 2012-13, many associated with the Jamaat. The attempts to set the tribunal in motion quickly gained attention and, as a consequence of the heinous and unprecedented attacks against freethinkers, hitherto unknown in Bangladesh, public approval of the tribunal swelled. This phenomenon coincided with the Shahbag Movement, a large-scale protest of over thirty thousand civilians occurring later in 2013, rallying against a lenient ruling for war criminals accused in the tribunal (Khan 2017). After a series of high profile cases against major Jamaat figures in the tribunal, mostly leading to verdicts of life imprisonment or death by hanging, the Jamaat was effectively banned from Bangladesh politics, though the Islami Chhatra Shibir, its influential student wing, remains active in the country, especially through more clandestine operations (Alam 2017).<sup>24</sup>

A radical shift in political climate once again allowed for a reexamination of women and public performance in Bangladesh, this time from within the bôyāti community. In early 2015, I witnessed a televised performance of Momtaz Begum, a well known bôyāti artist, not from the debate dais but from her seat in parliament, as an MP representing her home district of Manikganj.<sup>25</sup> The performance itself was in obsequious praise of the Prime Minister Shaikh Hasina, firmly set to the tune of bicār gān melodies, and in front of a legislative body of delegates at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban, Bangladesh's House of Parliament. By this time,

---

<sup>24</sup> In 2016, The Economist Intelligence Unit, a British organization providing forecasting and advisory services through research and analysis, rated Bangladesh as “hybrid regime,” that is, one where consequential irregularities exist in elections, regularly preventing them from being fair and free. Such nations, according to the report, commonly have governments that apply pressure on political opponents, non-independent judiciaries, widespread corruption, harassment and pressure placed on the media, anemic rule of law, and more pronounced faults than flawed democracies in the realms of underdeveloped political culture, low levels of participation in politics, and issues in the functioning of governance (Besker 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Momtaz Begum retains a general seat in parliament, amongst a number of seats specifically reserved for women representatives.

Momtaz had not only entered politics, but had moved beyond the realm of music into philanthropy, funding several local clinics for the poor, including a vision care hospital in honor of her father, Madhu Boyati,<sup>26</sup> a local musician who has lost his sight due to being unable to afford cataract surgery.<sup>27</sup>

Very much a rags-to-riches story, the rise of Momtaz Begum in the entertainment industry coincided with a new-found concern for promoting women artists in the urban spotlight, one that seemed to be a partial protest of the widespread fundamentalist attacks that had precipitated extraordinary national unrest. However, the appeal of Momtaz also cultivated new ground for the bōyāti community in many ways, not only through the exceptional promotion of a female artist within a male-majority performance tradition, but also due to her ability and decision to break from the confines of her own tradition by directly engaging in bureaucratic affairs, despite that fact that the bōyāti community have long maintained a political aloofness. Ultimately, the rise of Momtaz was situated in complex civic moment that strived to balance a growing attraction to both the prescriptions and trappings governing Islamic etiquette that increasingly informed Bangladeshis' sense of Bengali-ness, and a phenomenal cultural reawakening in defiance of religious conservatism.

By the mid-2000s, the figure of Momtaz Begum (b. 1974) had already become a household name, having generated a prolific career as a studio artist and playback singer, producing at least eight hundred albums of folk and devotional songs in vernacular Bengali by

---

<sup>26</sup> Madhu Mela, a fair and bicār gān venue in honor of Momtaz's deceased father, occurs every January 2 in her home district of Manikganj, within the bōyāti belt.

<sup>27</sup> The 50-bed Momtaz Eye Hospital was established in her native village, with the support of Orbis International, an NGO dedicated to combatting global blindness (Benighton 2016).

2012 (Habib 2015).<sup>28</sup> Eventually given the title “Music Queen,” Momtaz not only managed to become a leading voice of the nation’s regional music traditions, but had also developed a cult following amongst a Bangladeshi expatriate working class, further labeling her “Pardesi Bôyāti,” the “foreign” or “overseas” bôyāti. For contracted Bangladeshi laborers in the Gulf States, Momtaz had become the musical sound of a working class abroad, and she continues to be annually invited to headline the Boishakh Mela circuit, a global event organized by expatriate Bangladeshis on the occasion of the Bengali New Year every April, celebrated in London, Toronto, Abu Dhabi, New York City, Kuala Lumpur, and Tokyo.

Momtaz’s initial entrance into the entertainment industry began with self-financed regional recordings of standard material used in bicār gān, but her successful career as a studio artist was ultimately solidified through a significant approach to performance and packaging. Early popular recordings of her hits display a clever reorientation of the debate genre as a new listening experience for bôyāti music. Before Momtaz’s rise to fame, a handful of male bôyāti artist had developed careers performing bicār gān on cassettes and VCDs, essentially via recordings of truncated performances of the debate that ultimately retained its general format.<sup>29</sup> With Momtaz’s recordings, the songs of bicār gān become separated from the dialectical format of the staged debate, eliminating narrative dialogue and eschewing the more polemical aspects of

---

<sup>28</sup> In popular option, Momtaz’s rigorous recording career is often likened to the Indian playback singer, the “Nightingale of Bollywood,” Lata Mangeshkar (b. 1929).

<sup>29</sup> On cassette, this format has largely consisted of three pālā-s on Side A, and three pālā-s on Side B. Subsequent VCD renditions have essentially followed the same format, although sometimes splicing together footage of audiences at live shrine performances with video of bôyāti artists recording in the studio. This technique has, in some ways, aimed to concoct a sense of an extemporized devotional performance, especially since audience interaction, and the general shrine venue, is essentially removed from the commodified production of bicār gān. These more succinct recordings of the bicār gān style, however, are locally produce and inexpensively circulated amongst regional recording studios for regional consumers (Manuel 1993).

the traditional duel.<sup>30</sup> While disintegrating the overall form and style of bicār gān, this presentation essentially extracts the de-compartmentalized musical material of the debate and re-compartmentalizes them as separate genres or song themes, enabling the music to be heard as discrete curations of songs. On the one hand, this novel but unconventional recording strategy disassociates itself from the polemical spirit of long-form bicār gān that is so critical to bōyāti performance. On the other hand, instead of multiple positionalities being emphasized within the performative confines of one staged debate, different positionalities are able to be repackaged for individualized listening pleasure, reifying the various and consequential genres of Bengali folk and devotional song that comprise bōyāti musicianship in new light.

Ultimately, this marketing tactic has highlighted Momtaz's ability to sonically explore a singular theme over the course of a recording, while orientating the music of bicār gān into bite-size and pop song length compositions. Unlike in the performance of long-form bicār gān on stage, where discursive devotionism has been situationally enjoyed and understood as improvised commentary through a protracted sequence of dialectical musings, Momtaz's recordings as theme-oriented song collections of bicār gān repertoire streamline the aural experience of bōyāti music for a broader audience. In doing so, it allows pre-arranged material to reconcile the various positionalities of the fakirāni with the various moods of a new and somewhat unexplored consumership. As opposed to the muddled rumination of the abstruse staged debate, such recordings verify distinct but separate perceptions that represent familiar and increasingly apropos notions of regional pride, spiritual awe, or egalitarian sentiment.

---

<sup>30</sup> In live stage performances of such songs, however, Momtaz is known to extensively and unexpectedly engage with the audience, sometimes stopping mid-song to ask questions, tell jokes, or elaborate on song lyrics. This presentation style, certainly unusual for a Bangladeshi pop concert, seems to draw on the capriciousness and cheekiness of the original bicār gān performance style.

This simple but pioneering technique has allowed Momtaz to break the barriers of a specialist consumerism through a range of themes given to individual albums. For example, some albums reinforce traditional Sufi values that are central to bôyāti musicality, such as *elem-e mārḥôt* (The Secrets of Mystical Knowledge, 2001) or *bhāber boiḥôk* (A Gathering of Bhāb, 2007). Alternate recordings emphasize her position or plight as a female singer, such as *nārīr bedônā* (A Woman’s Pain, 2001) or *mānikgônjer māiyā* (The Girl from Manikganj, 2005). Others, recognizing a diasporic listenership, include newer compositions on love and loss that explore the repercussions of employment opportunities abroad that separate modern families, such as *riḥārn ṭikiṭ* (Return Ticket, 2009) or *āmi jāmu lôṇḍône* (I’ll Go to London, 2004). This presentation, combined with the timbre of Momtaz’s unabashed and full-throated delivery style, is telling because it not only stands in contrast to the traditions of demure or refined singing that were established by female recording artists before her time, but increasingly transgresses the limitations of seemingly crude or cryptic lyrics and hyper-regionalized imagery found in the traditional bôyāti canon and reproduces them as an opportune soundtrack for cultural renaissance.

### **The Fakirāni and Folk Studio**

Momtaz’s popularization of bôyāti music not only reflects a cultural atmosphere brought on by the country’s robust socioeconomic condition in the 2000s, but also reifies the supplemental explosion of folk pop in the national and transglobal Bangladeshi music scene. On the one hand, this contemporary folk revival shares certain similarities with a growing Sufi pop sound in India and Pakistan that has become fashionable over the last decades in its exploration of Sufism as a celebration of vernacular wisdom through poetry and song. Notably, however, this

type of Sufi pop is one that is less musically aligned with any specific conceptualization of religiosity, but rather evokes a creativity that favors and sanctions a certain experimentalism and “fusion,” as that term has been embraced in various collaborative popular music projects within South Asia (Manuel 2008). On the other hand, Bangladeshi folk pop is also situated in the innovative but vacillating space of the country’s burgeoning economy, one that might be understood as being positioned somewhere in between the major and minor players of South Asia’s key economic powers, further aligned with various ontologies past and present that reflect changes in leadership or regulation.<sup>31</sup>

Thomas Turino’s work on Zimbabwe has suggested that the idea of a musical revival can offer new insights into the weighty and extensive study of musical nationalism, beyond the implied strain existing between nationalists in power and the sense of cultivation negatively associated with a previous period of colonial or imperial rule. Yet, in Zimbabwe, localized forms of rock and pop that function as conduits of national or anti-colonial protest are assiduously embedded in multicultural histories (2000). Mujulika Rahman’s examination of the predicaments of contemporary modern dance in Bangladesh suggests a similar negotiation, here situated in the power play of modern South Asian nation states, and her study complicates the structures of power that a Bangladeshi dancer operates within when he or she trains and performs in India, incorporating “Indian” dance forms in choreography and a certain “high class” aesthetics in stage production. Rahman maintains that such a form of dance utilizes choreographic choices that

---

<sup>31</sup> Consider, for example, the liminality of Bangladesh’s sense of national might and fiscal viability. The manner in which the prestige of Bangladesh’s armed services is overshadowed by the presence of a larger military-industrial complex in South Asia—exemplified by the escalating conundrum of India’s and Pakistan’s nuclear arsenals. The peripherality of Bangladesh’s international political economy within the Indian subcontinent, too, represents a sort of medial growth development, characterized as possessing a strong domestic market but modest offshore investment ventures.

resists stereotypes that Indians might have about dancers of Bangladeshi background, and ultimately the role of transnational pedagogy in maintaining cultural hegemony and how nations come to acquire cultural capital (2015). Furthermore, in scrutinizing the globalized predicaments of music and various formations of “cosmopolitanism,” Martin Stokes suggests conceiving such a phenomenon as “less [a] single system, increasingly beyond our conceptual reach and out of our control, and more as a set of projects with cultural and institutional specificity” (8). This notion might be further aligned with Anna Tsing’s, regarding a localized discreteness, of multiple ideas produced by people in diverse times, places, and sites, with various goals and desires in mind (2002).

Considering these various notions, the nature Bangladesh’s folk revival and the role of the *fakirāni* within it might be briefly examined through the phenomenon of Coke Studio in India and Pakistan, and Bangladesh’s musical response to it. Coke Studio, a long-running and highly popular international music franchise in both India and Pakistan, features live studio-recorded music performances by established and emerging artists. The show combines myriad musical influences—from classical, devotional and regional styles to contemporary pop, rock, and hip hop—and is particularly noted for promoting both countries’ multiculturalism by inviting artists from diverse regional, religious, and linguistic spheres to collaborate musically in a meticulously-arranged and exceedingly eclectic jam band setting. While the Coke Studio franchise has not been introduced in Bangladesh, presumably because of a lack of viability by the Coca-Cola company, a comparable and domestically-funded project named Folk Studio Bangla, largely promoted through its popular YouTube channel, functions as both a

commemoration of Bangladesh's own rich musical traditions in a fashionable setting, as well as a reaction to the phenomenon of Coke Studio beyond its borders.

A number of fakirāni artists, especially Momtaz Begum, are frequently featured in televised Folk Studio sessions. Various sonic and visual aspects of their presentation style reveal their unique embodiment of a certain "vernacular cosmopolitanism" (Stokes 2008). Firstly, the phenomenon of Folk Studio is both a reproduction of and protest to the popular style generated by the Coke Studio franchise. On the one hand, the musical arrangements of both Studios are familiar: traditional artists from regional areas interact with modern session musicians on an expansive and carefully arranged sound floor, mixing a massive multi-track live recording that fuses exuberant, vernacular voices and instruments with static, ethereal chord progressions on guitars and keyboards, and vigorous percussion. On the other hand, the name Folk Studio is meant to sound cheeky, replacing the moniker of a multinational corporation with a nod to Bangladesh's own hyper-regionalized yet Bengali-focused vernacularism, one distinct from Coke Studio's appropriation of Indian or Pakistani ethnic diversity. On the Folk Studio stage, musicians wearing both traditional Bengali clothing and T-shirts with intentionally misspelled English slogans on them further articulates this sensibility, that a celebration of Bangladeshi folk music is also a satisfaction in continued liminality as a modern South Asian nation state.

The political and cultural climate that produced a series such as Folk Studio is also the result of a burgeoning rock scene in Dhaka.<sup>32</sup> Beginning as the proclivity of the affluent urban youth, rock bands grew exponentially in the 2000s, and as its musicians democratized, the

---

<sup>32</sup> Dhaka-based rock is also recognizable from Kolkata-based rock, in its indifference to Bollywood. The national rock scene has changed over the decades but, in recent times, also seems to approach the regional musics of Bangladesh as a reaction to an increasingly popularity in mawkish, electronically-arranged pop.

implementation of mystical poetry and a musical counterculture began to integrate the music of Lālôn and other regional poets. Unlike Parveen’s music, which aimed to sublimate a Sufi sound into bourgeois song form, the folk rock bands sought to discover the more exuberant voice of the fakir, inviting bāul and bôyāti musicians to collaborate with them onstage, while also creating new set lists featuring original compositions in the same “mystical” vein.<sup>33</sup>

On one season of Folk Studio, a young female bôyāti sang a song popularized by Kangalini Sufia entitled *buṛi hoilām tor kārône*. The song states, “I’ve become an old woman because of you, I make my living and earn my keep with much hardship, and yet I still haven’t received the old man’s heart.” A particularly popular number composed by Kangalini, and a commonly requested one at her concerts, the song’s lyrics express an ostensibly Sufi longing for a love unreciprocated and the consequential suffering of being spurned by the beloved, but is nonetheless wrapped in a rather obvious and witty critique of male chauvinism and idleness. What will no doubt be her swan song as she approaches retirement, this composition is a poignant reflection of Kangalini’s rags-to-riches story, as she was also vilified in her youth for traveling alone, earning very little, and performing in the male-dominated spaces of shrine concerts. In this interpretation, the famous song about old age and ingratitude is sung by a nine year old girl, backed by a lush jam band of dhols and guitars. The static harmonic embellishments add a superfluous modern texture to this leisurely-based rendition of Kangalini’s song, but the charm here lies in the performance’s statement about the future of women’s rights, especially as the program aired during International Education Week.

---

<sup>33</sup> Important rock musicians, such as Maqsoodul Haque, and women-fronted bands like Lalôn and Bangla, developed their careers by relying on the material of bāul and bôyāti artists.

## Conclusion

While the general predicament of *bôyāti* artists and the regionally-situated genre of *bicār gān* seem to have always been just out of earshot of popular and nationalist discussions of Bengali-ness and Muslim-ness, the discourses of a modern Bengali Muslim femininity have existed and grown throughout much of the twentieth century, though engaging with a range of distinctive complexities over time. It is only through the emergence of successful female *bôyāti* artists beginning in the 1990s, supplemented by a broader *fakirāni* community of women performer-practitioners, that a *bôyāti* identity is solidified beyond their traditional shrine-based venues in the small towns and villages of Bangladesh. For those within and outside of this musical world, the voice and image of the *bôyāti* woman increasingly reconciles multiple subjectivities of the contemporary Bangladeshi citizen, reflecting both the promise of economic and political stability, and the importance of its safeguarding from religious fanaticism. Specifically, the presentation of *bôyāti* song by female *bôyāti* artists has prompted a fresh and broad attraction to a uniquely Bengali articulation of Muslim piety that had previously been trivialized or unliked. While this phenomenon has presented new musical opportunities for many *bôyāti* artists, who have increasingly distanced themselves from the dialectical spirit of *bicār gān*, for many in the *fakirāni* community, this moment also reaffirms the disparate ways in which piety, resistance, and various notions of agency have always been contested in the vernacular domain.

## Epilogue

To add further context to the meaningfulness of bicār gān in contemporary Bangladesh, I turn here to a topic that has been largely set aside in this dissertation, the debate performance's listenership.<sup>1</sup> Recent middle class expansion in the small towns and villages of Bangladesh has contributed to a heightened but dynamic sense of pietistic expression that has in turn affected stylized approaches toward speech, dress, and musical listening. More broadly, William Mazzarella has observed, “since the mid-1980s, one of the more noticeable symptoms of the process of social and economic liberalization in India has been an obsessive public cultural concern with the category ‘middle class’” (2017: 35). Snigdha Poonam has further delineated the complications of this term, especially through a pronounced religious-national identity amongst younger men in India, which seems to be partly the result of frustrations in finding none of the traditional routes to upward socioeconomic mobility open to them. However, Poonam adds that

---

<sup>1</sup> While a discussion of embodied reception is beyond the purview of this dissertation, one way to perhaps situate such a discussion is to examine connections with scholarship on the changing and diverse listening strategies amongst connoisseurs of North Indian classical music. The Hindustani musical world is widely known for its striking and even disruptive gesticulations and exclamations of praise by audience members, but this phenomenon provides unique insight into the sensibilities which regulate or influence such mannerisms. A casual listener of Hindustani classical music might feel compelled to vocalize praise for a performer when hearing a particular passage that combines subtle microtonal embellishment (*śruti*) with fine control of dynamics (for example, sounding a string once on the sitar with the plucking hand and nimbly pulling it with the fingering hand to produce a subtle melodic strain as the resonance dissipates). Despite its noticeable decrescendo, this type of playing exemplifies a *visual* sign of delicateness and control that is instantly appreciated by an everyday audience, as it does not require a detailed understanding of musical expertise. To draw attention to this technique, the performer may even stylistically “wave” his plucking hand away from the instrument as the progression is rendered and then sonically vanishes. An aesthete observing the same performance might be more inclined to show appreciation for restrained rendering as opposed to sheer technique, and through the proper boundaries of rāga delineation (for example, a musical phrase characterized by an unusually oblique turn that yet does not compromise the unique contours of the rāga performed)—along the lines of what John Napier has described as “subtle novelty” (2006). This type of playing exemplifies a *sonic* sign of delicateness and control that is only realized by an informed audience member, since it requires a more knowledgeable ear. For Hindustani music, these distinctions seem to reflect the dynamics of listenership brought on by drastic changes in classical music patronage and the concert setting, as well as newer technological mediums for sound experience outside of this setting through which a discrete sense of listening has been invigorated and moralized (Alaghband-Zadeh 2017).

“while there is a strong link between class and religion in terms of frustrations over upward mobility but we cannot make straight forward linkages . . . either” (2018: 56). In addition, Ammara Maqsood has also commented that “in both Pakistan and India there is a certain self-making that is expressed through consumption in very similar ways, [coupled with a] rise in religion” (2017: 75). For Maqsood, however, while Wahhabi Islam (a more literalist and conservative theological perspective) is taking a more visible role in the progressive modernity of the emerging middle class in Pakistan, importantly, there is no single dominant denomination amongst the middle classes. However, a stronger religious presence in the public sphere sits in contrast to the social habits of the older established middle class, who had previously gained affluence via connections with state projects of secular colonial modernity but have since retreated into the private sector following former dictator General Zia-ul-Haq’s (1924–1988) program of Islamization. These comments insinuate a palpable yet indescribable relationship between an increasingly visible and self-aware middle class across regions of South Asia and the byproduct articulations of their comparably burgeoning piety.

In Bangladesh, not only has a larger inflow of remittances and export-based manufacturing industries perpetuated progress, but a widening services sector, the expansion of domestic microcredit activities, major incentives for sustainable growth and consumerism, and success in higher birth rates also seem to be critical reasons behind the boom. Interestingly, those who fall under the financial parameters of a growing Bangladeshi middle class increasingly reflect a large portion of the population, even atypical in size in comparison to middle class demographics in many other parts of the world experiencing comparable growth (Hoek 2013). Notwithstanding the convoluted socioeconomic factors which govern upward mobility and its

vulnerabilities, the Bangladeshi middle class now includes street vendors and others who belong to a shared strata of waged or manual laborers, leading one to reconsider not only what this new middle class represents but who belongs to it and the nature of their ascribed aesthetic choices, which are acutely shaped by the perspectives of marketability or entrepreneurial capital.<sup>2</sup>

Such socioeconomic change and its cultural manifestations can be readily observed through the appropriation of style, which I begin to examine through a brief discussion of dialectal hybridism and variances in modest dress customs. Bangladeshis have long exhibited what linguists refer to as diglossia, a situation in which two distinct varieties of the same language are used under different conditions by the same speakers within a community.<sup>3</sup> Amongst middle class speakers throughout the nation, a distinctive “high” variety (standardized Bangladeshi Bengali) and a “low” variety (one of any number of regional dialects of the language, including from Old Dhaka, Rangpur, Chittagong, Sylhet, Faridpur, Barisal, Noakhali, Comilla, or Mymensingh) can be discerned, each of the two “versions” demonstrating unique features in vocabulary, tonal inflection, and diction. Consequently, the manner in which certain Bangladeshis speak Bengali, as the act of diglossia would suggest, is a highly contextual matter, reflecting the speaker’s personal affiliation with whom he or she is conversing, the nature of the interaction itself, and various cultural implications that the very voicing of formal or regional

---

<sup>2</sup> Chatterji, Alexander and Jallais’s *Bengal Muslims* (2015) traces migration and settlement within, and from, the Bengal delta region in the period after 1947, and potentially presents new ways of exploring migrant agency, the relationship between different spatial and cultural forms of migration, and the importance of “mobility capital.” In addition, Nazni Kibria’s *Muslims in Motion: Islam and National Identity in the Bangladeshi Diaspora* (2013) further explores global migrations on the one hand and Islamic revival on the other, through a study of movements from the Muslim-majority country of Bangladesh to different parts of the world such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Though beyond the scope of this discussion, such writings articulate how reexaminations of piety and cultural identity seem to resonate with Bengali Muslims within the delta and elsewhere, and can be instigated by both the promise of economic stability and the potential loss of it via the process and experience of physical relocation.

<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon can be readily observed in Bangladeshi drama serials, which are frequently written in specifically localized variations of Bangladeshi Bengali, but for an audience of diglossic viewers.

registers of Bangladeshi Bengali entail. More affluent speakers in Bangladesh, while being able to understand many regional varieties of the language, neither have the capacity nor inclination to speak such localized varieties, and the inverse is true for a lower working class strata of speakers. This speech phenomenon, which is therefore particular to the trends of middle class verbal communication, is also increasingly self-viewed as a form of style and empowerment, opening up spaces for sociality, aesthetics, value, and subjectivity through the unique articulations accorded to them by a juggling of cultural knowledge domains through code-switching.

With this notion, I correlate a second observation, referring to the physical adorning of the hijab—various forms of the religious headdress—amongst middle class Bangladeshi women. A number of authors have examined the manner in which the hijab might be viewed as either a demonstration of piety or fashion throughout the Muslim world and, through this sartorial duality, a complex reflection of how the one who dons it engages with the world (Winter 2008, Shirazi 2001, Ameli and Merali 2006, Croucher 2009, Hendricks 2009, Islam 2010, Hamzeh 2012). In actuality, the hijab itself is but one of many such physical or non-physical features of style which represent a range of pieties and non-pieties in Bangladesh, having both symbolic and functional uses across different circumstances and with the same “adorner” through its various applications. For a Bangladeshi woman, the hijab may be worn with varying degrees of hair or neck covering, further informed by different fabrics which correlate with the overall occasion of dress, or an attention or disregard for its maintenance that is dependent on surroundings. In addition, intentionally varied forms of the hijab wrapping itself are often worn based on the particular parameters governing social affair or mood and—through increasingly fashionable

correlations with Arab-based garments of modesty such as the *jilbāb*, *niqāb*, or *'abā'ah*, a more Western-influenced approach to covering that may be contrastive through its form-fitting or brand-labeling characteristics, or more Indic-based notions of beauty (or honor) evoked through an *āncal* (the end of the sari, sometimes pulled over the hair)—that further correlate to a range of pieties. As a middle class cultural practice, modesty through dress allows the wearer to both personally embody and demonstrate to others a familiarity with a spectrum of fashionable articulations of devotion (interconnecting Bangladesh with greater South Asia, expatriate Bangladeshis, and the larger Muslim world) through various constructions of *lōjjā* or decency.

Constantine Nakassis' style describes it as a type of social achievement among Tamilian youth in South India, whereby felicitous performances of style must both cite another external source and re-present it, but also be construable by an aligned peer group as not too much, not too different or distinct. Style, if done correctly, should demonstrate the correct calibration of individual distinction with similarity to the peer group. In this way, style itself shapes the peer group as “a site of sociality marked by a fundamental tension between, on the one hand, the transgression of adult norms through acts of stylish individuation and, on the other hand, modes of intimacy and solidarity that problematize those very stylish acts” (2016: 9).

Given the curious place of piety in a shifting and imprecise course toward upward mobility, middle class style in Bangladesh—as it relates to the act of listening and responding to *bicār gān* performance—seems to reflect an awareness of both multiple religious modalities (and their associated cultural perspectives) and an ability to extract value and belief from them despite the inherent contradictions of their co-existence in popular sentiment. Unlike other socioeconomic groups who may ardently listen to or dispassionately chance upon a performance

of bicār gān, a middle class listenership seems to ironically enjoy the debate as both a whimsical and deeply introspective act. Ultimately, their engagement with the debate, one that recognizes and finds merit in its odd amalgamation of elocution and playfulness, is an apt foil to bōyāti discursiveness. If, for the bōyāti, bicār gān is an astute demonstration of the muddled subjectivities of Bengali Muslims over time and space, its changing middle class listenership is perhaps uniquely poised to hear and delight in its apparent maundering and circuitousness nature.

In the final pages of writing, I turn more generally to the Bengali community at large today, and the manner in which examinations of Bengali-ness and Muslim-ness may open up a dialogue for future projects. The 1995 documentary film *Muktir Gaan* (“The Song of Freedom”) offers a musical perspective, through film, that epitomizes both the cultural agitations which led to the war for independence, and the peculiar aftermath of victory in subsequent decades. Upon its premier, *Muktir Gaan* became a critically-acclaimed film amongst a Bangladeshi viewership at home and abroad, and subsequently shot to fame its directors Tareque (1956-2011) and Catherine (b. 1963) Masud, who spearheaded a new generation of independent auteurs in the country. The entire film is situated in the refugee camps and battlefronts of the Liberation War in 1971, and follows a cultural troupe named *Bangladesh Mukti Shangrami Shilpi Shangstha* (“The Artists’ Association for the Struggle for Independent Bangladesh”), who traverse the war-torn land to perform patriotic folk songs, arrange puppet shows and stage regionally-styled dramas to inspire local freedom fighters. Notably, the Masuds used original footage captured by American filmmaker Lear Levin, as well as other archival footage collected from India and the UK. Levin’s unused material, central to the documentary, remained in a basement locker for decades after the war, but was unexpectedly obtained by the Masuds in the early 1990s.

I distinctively remember, as a young boy, the phenomenal impact this film had on the Bangladeshi community in the American Midwest, where I was raised. It was only at the time of the film's release that I realized that my older sister—who was born in 1971 and was moved from refugee camp to trench by my parents in order to be spared from the violence of war—was named “Shadhy” because it was an imaginative reinterpretation of the Bengali word *sādhin* (free). A few years ago, my admittedly poor and somewhat embarrassing lack of familiarity with fiction writing was kindled by a number of works written by expatriate or second-generation Bangladeshi authors, including Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* (2007) and *The Good Muslim* (2011), and, more recently, Tarfia Faizullah's book of poems, *Seam* (2014). All three women writers, in their own way, repeatedly ponder notions of secularity and religious zeal through a slew of permeating tropes: mourning and reparation, exile and return, losses both personal and political. Furthermore, the various narratives found in these works explore, with serious scope, the manner in which inter-generational and transglobal transactions between Bangladeshis are still greatly affected by the consequences of war, the hazards of an uneasy peace, the gains and losses of nation-building, and the rewriting of history. The materials that I mention above, beginning with the film *Muktir Gaan* and a more recent number of Bengali authors living outside of Bengal, reify the importance of these topics with regard to a sense of identity and belonging that seems consequential to Bangladeshis everywhere, regardless of place or milieu.

Willem van Schendel's *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia* (2005) examines the “Bengal Borderland” as critical but peripheral spaces where a major and intensely contested experiment in twentieth-century border making took place, challenging

assumptions about the nature of relationships between people, place, identity and culture through various notions of an idealized geography. As the final chapter of this thesis has suggested, my study of devotionism, through descriptions of *bôyāti* musicality and the *bicār gān* debate genre, presents a distinctive opportunity to also examine musical performance outside of the borders of a physical Bengal, in the many places where Bangladeshis have expatriated such as the Arab Gulf States, North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia. However, this devotionism also presents an opportunity to consider a hitherto unexamined sense of musical belonging within the borderland, the manner in which geographic and conceptual boundaries, the political imagination of both the state and individuals, and temporality play as reference points in the embodiment of belonging for the larger expanse within South Asia where Bengalis reside.

Consider, for example, that the saint-composer Shah Abdul Karim (1916–2009), a cherished musician amongst *bôyāti* artists, had many disciples and fans in his youth in the greater region of Sunamganj (currently in western Bangladesh), an area that was later partially reassigned to the adjacent region of Karimganj, in the Barak Valley of Assam, India. This region of Assam currently contains a majority Bengali population, but was a part of the larger East Bengali region of Sylhet before the 1947 referendum. The Barak Valley of Assam experienced its own Bengali Language Movement in the 1960s, which in this case was a successful protest against the Government of Assam to allow Bengali to maintain official language status alongside Assamese in the Barak Valley. A *bôyāti* community exists in the Barak Valley, though this community and their musicality remain to be studied.

Similarly, East Bengalis fleeing the region during the Liberation War moved in many directions, from the Andaman Islands and Tripura (where they form large or majority populations

today), as well as West Bengal. These waves of migration—happening over decades and therefore quite different from the Punjab partition between India and Pakistan—included many traditional musicians from East Bengal, whose music and legacies came to be memorialized somewhat differently in their new homeland in “another” Bengal. However, recent YouTube videos have also revealed a more recent phenomenon: that various musical communities in West Bengal, especially in the Muslim-influenced region of Gorbhanga, Nadia, currently hold death anniversary celebrations and musical festivals in honor of deceased bôyāti artists from Bangladesh. While it seems fairly certain that such bôyāti artists did not travel to such regions across the border in the post-independence era, the nature of this real or imagined expansion of bicār gān performance has also not yet been ascertained.

Lastly, the material of this thesis, particularly its exploration of Bengali-ness and Muslim-ness, offer a critical opportunity for me as a scholar, musician, and Bangladeshi American to engage in some reflexive writing. The seminal work *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* (Barz and Cooley, 1997 and 2008) followed and extended the profound spirit of questioning that enlivened postcolonial anthropology and ethnography in the 1980s-90s, issuing a timely reassessment of insider/outsider dualities, a new sensitivity to the power asymmetries involved in research, a dislodging of positivist and empiricist assumptions, a determination to present emic perspectives as well as etic interpretations, and a literary reflexivity exposing the actual processes and conditions of research and the ways these condition findings and interpretations (Manuel 2013).

The second edition of *Shadows in the Field* in 2008 expanded on the initial topics, given significant developments in recent decades, such as the spread of Internet ethnography and the

intensifications of diasporas and their study.<sup>4</sup> A particularly important topic in the new addition, by Jonathan Stock and Chou Chiener, brought up the astute observation that much fieldwork does not conform to the paradigmatic model in which the Western scholar travels abroad to encounter the Other and undergo cultural immersion. Not only do many Euro-Americans conduct their fieldwork at home—whether among diasporic communities or their own kind—but the ranks of ethnomusicology students and scholars have also long included those from outside the mainstream West who study their own music cultures. Such scholars have to negotiate their own complex relations with informants in “the field,” involving particular sorts of power dynamics and insider/outsider and emic/etic dualities, and the often uneasy relationships with local music scholars (who do not always call themselves “ethnomusicologists”). In the future, I hope to further consider how my study of bôyāti artists and the bicār gān debate relate to such issues, through my own travels between Bengal and elsewhere.

---

<sup>4</sup> Important and recent additions to this type of reflexive writing including Wong (2008), Berger (2012), as well as Ruskin and Rice (2012).

## Appendix: A Selection of Song Lyrics

### নামাজ তত্ত্ব গান বয়াতি রজ্জব দেওয়ান

### Nāmāz Tattva Song (on Prayer) Bōyāti Rajjab Dewān (b. 1974)

অনিয়মে ভজন বৃথা  
নিয়ম কানুন আগে মান্।  
ভেদ যেনে সে নামাজে সঁপে দাও প্রাণ  
ও ভাই মুসলমান॥

Unstructured worship is futile.  
First, one must heed that which is prescribed.  
The one who perceives can offer pure prayer,  
O Muslim brother!

শরিয়ত আর তরিকতে  
হাকিকত আর মারিফতে।  
নামাজ হুকুম বিধিমতে  
নিষেধ নাই বিধির বিধান॥

The religious precepts, the Sufi paths,  
The nature of reality, and Islamic gnosis.<sup>1</sup>  
God has prescribed prayer,  
He has not asked you to abandon it.

মেরাজেতে নবী গেল  
মুন্তাহাতে নজওয়া হলো।  
খোদাকে অনুনয় করল  
নামাজ আমাদের কল্যাণ॥

The Prophet made the Night Ascension<sup>2</sup>  
And had a secret conversation at Muntāhā.<sup>3</sup>  
There, he beseeched God (on behalf of mankind).<sup>4</sup>  
Prayer is our success.

বেনামাজি রজ্জব কানা  
পাঞ্জগানায় মন বসেনা।  
মুখে হয় মধুর বর্ণনা  
অন্তরে রাজীম শয়তান॥

The prayer-less Rajjab<sup>5</sup> is blind  
And does not yearn to perform his five prayers.  
Sweet words come from his mouth (in song),  
But in his heart resides Satan the Accursed.

<sup>1</sup> In traditional Sufi discourse, these items represent four stages of knowledge (Arabic: *sharī'at*, *ṭarīqat*, *ḥaqīqat*, and *ma'rīfat*).

<sup>2</sup> A two-part ascension through the heavens taken by the Prophet Muḥammad (Arabic: *al-'Isrā' wal-Mi'rāj*), one that is traditionally regarded as both a physical and spiritual journey (Qur'ān 17: 1).

<sup>3</sup> A large “lote tree” (Arabic: *Sidrat al-Muntahā*) that marks the end of the seventh heaven, a boundary which creation cannot pass. During the Night Ascension, the Prophet Muḥammad reached this tree and, through intimate dialogue (Arabic: *najwā*) with the Creator, learned of the mandated five daily prayers required of mankind (Qur'ān 53: 10-18).

<sup>4</sup> Traditionally, it is believed that God ordered mankind to offer many more daily prayers, but the number was reduced to five through Muḥammad's intervention.

<sup>5</sup> In this conventional conclusion of a bicār gān composition (incorporating a feature known as *bhōṇita*, a self-appellation or colophon in the final verse), the bōyāti composer reflexively comments on his shortcomings in an out-of-body and third person voice.

**নারী তত্ত্ব গান**  
**লালন**

নিশ্চয় বিচারে সত্য  
তাই গেল জানা ।  
মায়েরে ভজিলে হয়  
তার বাপের ঠিকানা ॥

পুরুষ পরওয়ারদিগার  
অঙ্গে ছিল প্রকৃতি তার ।  
প্রকৃতি প্রবৃত্তি সংসার,  
সৃষ্টির সব গেল জানা ॥

নিশ্চয় খবর নাহি জেনে,  
কে বা সে মায়েরে চেনে ।  
যার উপরে দুনিয়ার ভার  
দিলেন রাখানা ॥

ডিম্বের ভিতর কেবা ছিল,  
বাহির হয়ে কারে দেখিল ।  
লালন বলে ভেদ যে পেল,  
ঘুচল দ্বীন কানা ॥

**Nārī Tattva Song (on Women)**  
**Lālōn (d. 1890)**

Deliberating on the sacred precepts,  
It has been ascertained:  
Whoever worships the Mother  
Will find the Father's (true) address.

The male essence is the Sustainer,  
But the female essence is a part of him.  
Temperament and worldly desire  
All of creation is unraveled.

If one does not grasp these hidden truths  
How will one know the Mother,  
She upon whom God  
Has burdened the weight of the world?

Who was inside the egg,  
And when it hatched, whom did s/he see?  
Lalon says, "whoever has received this knowledge  
Will be relieved of the blindness of religion."

**ভণ্ডামির গান**  
**মাতাল রাজ্জাক দাওয়ান**

আমরা মুখে মুখে কোরান মানি  
ধনী মানি সবজনা।  
আসলে কোন শালাই মানে না॥

কোরান মোদের ধর্ম বাণী  
সুদ নিষেধ কোরানে শুনি।  
তবে সুদের চাকায় সবাই ধনী  
বাড়ী গাড়ী কারখানা ॥

জমি বন্টনের কালে  
দারা সুত বিবাদ করে।  
দলিল দাপন দায়ের লোভে  
জমির দাবির হাঙ্গামা॥

ইসলাম ধর্মের অনুসারে  
মূর্তিপূজক শাস্তি পাবে।  
কেন অহংকারের ঠাকুর গড়ে  
বিনয় ভাব আর রাখে না॥

বাজারের দোকানদার যারা  
তেল ঘি কি ভেজাল ছাড়া।  
ভেজাল ছাড়া আছে কিডা  
হাজী গাজী কাঠমোল্লা॥

**Bhōṇḍāmi Song (on Hypocrisy)**  
**Mātāl Razzāk Dewān (d. 2010)**

We all say we heed the words of the Qur'ān,  
But really everyone chases wealth.  
In truth, not a single rascal is genuine.

The Qur'ān is the proof of faith,  
And we know of its prohibition against usury.  
Everyone has amassed wealth from high interest  
And acquired expensive houses, cars, factories.

At the time of dividing the family estate,  
Brothers and sisters begin to quarrel.  
Who gets the deed, who gets a slice of land?  
Oh, the spectacle!

According to the tenets of Islam,  
Those who worship idols will be reprimanded.  
So why are people fashioning gods of arrogance?  
All humility is lost.

Do the storeowners in the bazaar  
Sell anything but tainted oil and ghee?  
Is there anyone or anything that is truly pure?  
The haji, the ghazi, the conservative mullah?

**খাজা তত্ত্ব গান**  
**শাহ আলম সরকার**

খাজা বাবার গান শুনিয়া  
আসমান জমিন নাচে।  
গান গাইয়া গান খাইয়া  
খাজা বাবা বাঁচে॥

গান শুনিতে নবী পয়গম্বর  
ওলি আল্লাহ গাউস কুতুব সাহাবি বিস্তর।  
গান শনেছে শুনতে কইছে  
হাদিসেতে আছে॥

গান হল আত্মার খোরাকই  
এসো গানে গানে আত্মার টানে আল্লাহরে ডাকি॥  
গানেতে মিলিবে নেকি  
জীবনেতে আছে॥

গান শুন যার কাঁদে না প্রাণ  
ওরে সে যেন শুনতে বসে না আল্লাহ নবীর গান।  
শাহ আলম কয় দোযখের ভয়ে  
যার জগতে আছে॥

**Khawājā Tattva Song (on Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī)**  
**Shāh Alam Sarkār (b. 1974)**

Hearing the songs of Khwājā Bābā,  
The heavens and earth dance.  
By singing and devouring such songs,  
Khwājā Bābā lives on.

The Prophet of God listened to music,  
The friends of God, masters, saints, all of them.  
They listened to music and encouraged it,  
And this is confirmed in the Aḥādīth.<sup>6</sup>

Songs are food for the soul,  
Come, let us bind our hearts and sing God’s praise.  
Blessings will be bestowed upon us through song,  
And in our lives.

The one who does not cry in appreciation  
When hearing songs, may he not join this assembly.  
Shah Alam says this, in fear of the hellfire,  
And in the name of whose earth I inhabit.

---

<sup>6</sup> The recorded and compiled words, actions, and the silent approvals of Muḥammad.

**আকার তত্ত্ব গান**  
**আব্দুল হালিম বয়াতি**

পাক পাঞ্জাতন কোথায় ছিল।  
কোন দেশেতে কোন রূপেতে  
কোন যুগেতে উদয় হল।

বাহাত্তর হাজার বারে  
কোথায় ডুবে কোথায় ওঠে।  
ডুবে গিয়ে তখন, কোথায় হয় গোপন  
আপনি আপন কে চেনিলো।

কিসেতে করিয়া আশয়  
পঞ্চকর্মের বিকাশ ঘটায়।  
একটি বর্ণ তার ছিল আকার  
আদি অন্ত তার ভেঙ্গে বল ॥

হালিম বলে অন্তরযামি  
অন্তরে বসিয়া আমি।  
তুমি থেকে যা মুখে বলাও  
সেই কথাটি প্রকাশ পেল ॥

**Ākār Tattva Song (on Divine Form)**  
**Abdul Halīm Bōyāti (1929–2007)**

Where were the Five Holy Ones?<sup>7</sup>  
In what country did they arrive, and in what guise?  
In which milieu did they become manifest?

Over the course of seventy two thousand cycles,<sup>8</sup>  
Where did they dematerialize and then reappear?  
Having disappeared, where did they remain hidden?  
Who then recognized them, themselves?

When can I find refuge (from this conundrum)?  
How can I expand my understanding of the five?  
From one primordial virtue, it took shape.  
Break it down, where is the beginning and the end?

Halim says, “O, he who indwells the heart,  
Here I am, residing within.”  
The words that you put in my mouth  
Are the words that reveal truth.

---

<sup>7</sup> A popular image found in Sufi and Shī‘a discourse that refers to the figures of Muḥammad, his righteous successor ‘Alī, the wife of ‘Alī and daughter of the Prophet (Fāṭimah), and her two sons Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. Here, they are collectively named in addressing the true nature of divinity.

<sup>8</sup> This number is commonly cited in Sufi numerology. Certain Aḥādīth narrations mention seventy two thousand veils between God and His creation.

**দোযখ তত্ত্ব গান**  
**কাজল দেওয়ান**

চাই না জান্নাত চাই না শান্তি  
যদি আমি থাকি একা।  
দোযখেতে যেতে রাজি  
যদি পাই মওলাজির দেখা॥

যারা আনন্দ আর ভোগ বিলাশে  
সদায় রয় মন উল্লাসে।  
তারা ঐ জান্নাত তো ভালোবাসে  
ভয় পায় দোযখের অগ্নি শিখা॥

ধনী মানি মহাজন যারা  
ধন সম্পদের পাগল যারা।  
মন বাসবে না জান্নাত ছাড়া  
জান্নাত তাদের জন্য রাখা॥

হুর পরি আর নারীর সেবা  
ঐ দোযখে পাইবে কেবা।  
কাজলকে দোযখে দিবা  
দোযখের পথ বড়ই বাঁকা॥

**Dozakh Tattva Song (on Hell)**  
**Kajol Dewān (b. 1976)**

I neither desire heaven nor peace  
If I am to remain alone.  
I am ready to go to hell,  
If only I might catch a glimpse of the beloved first.

Those hedonists who enjoy every pleasure,  
And live in perpetual bliss,  
They love the thought of heaven,  
And fear hell's fiery insight.

Those affluent ones who amass great wealth  
And are determined to stockpile more,  
Cannot live without the promise of heaven.  
Indeed, heaven is for them!

The fair maidens,<sup>9</sup> the company of women  
But who will receive the hellfire instead?  
Give it to Kajol, O Merciful One!  
The path to hell is truly baffling.

---

<sup>9</sup> In Islamic theology, the ḥūrī are celestial beings, typically described in the feminine, that accompany and serve the faithful in heaven.

**জ্ঞান ও সৃষ্টি তত্ত্ব গান**  
**লতিফ সরকার**

জিবরাইল পড়াইলেন কেনে  
খোদ খোদা কি ছিলেন বোকা।  
কাহা কে পড়াইলেন জিবরাইল  
ইক্রা বিস্মি রাব্বিকা॥

একত্ব আল্লাহ যদি হয়  
ফেরেশ্তার রূপে আসলো কে ভাই।  
এই কথা শুধাবো কথায়  
কাকে বলবো এ আজব ধাঁধা॥

রসুলের কি নাজিল হল  
ঘাম ছুটার পর কি ভেদ পেলো।  
খাদেজার কাছে দৌড়াইলো  
কিসের তত্ত্ব হল পয়দা॥

নিরক্ষর নবীর খোদা যা জন  
নাই তুলনা নাই বিশ্লেষণ।  
কুম ফাইয়া কুমে সব হল গঠণ  
জেনে নাও ঐ হিরা গুহার বার্তা॥

**Gyān/Srishti Tattva (on Knowledge & Creation)**  
**Latīf Sarkār (b. 1982)**

Why did Gabriel read (to the Prophet)?<sup>10</sup>  
Was God himself deaf and dumb?  
Who then read to Gabriel:  
Iqrā' bismi rabbika?<sup>11</sup>

If Allah is unique and singular,  
Then who arrived in the guise of an angel?  
To whom shall I put forth this inquiry?  
With whom shall I share this curious riddle?

What was revealed to the Prophet?  
What insight did he receive when the sweat dried?<sup>12</sup>  
When he ran back to Khadijah,  
What truth was born?

The God of the illiterate Prophet<sup>13</sup>  
Has no comparison, is devoid of explanation.  
With the words kun fayakūn,<sup>14</sup> all was created  
Learn of what transpired in the cave of Hira.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> In Islamic theology, the archangel Gabriel was the intermediary between Allah and Muḥammad in revealing the Qur'ān to mankind.

<sup>11</sup> This Arabic line is taken from the first verse of the ninety-seventh book of the Qur'ān, Surat al-'Alaq. This verse is regarded as the first verse of the Qur'ān revealed to Muḥammad by Gabriel. The entire verse states *iqrā' bismi rabbika alladhī khalaq*, “read in the name of your Lord, who created.”

<sup>12</sup> Islamic tradition states that Muḥammad was terrified and alone when he first received revelation from Gabriel, and quickly returned home to his wife, Khadijah, for comfort.

<sup>13</sup> For Muslims, one of the miracles of the Qur'ān is that it was revealed and safeguarded by Muḥammad, an “unlettered” but trustworthy ascetic.

<sup>14</sup> “Be, and it is,” a reference to Allah’s mysteriously creative power, as mentioned in the thirty sixth book of the Qur'ān, Surah Yā Sīn.

<sup>15</sup> Also known as Jabal al-Nūr, or the “Mountain of Light,” the cave where Muḥammad frequently meditated and sought solitude.

**হিন্দুত্ব গান**  
**নকুল সরকার**

টাকা দিয়ে পয়সা দিয়ে  
পাঠা দিয়ে মহিষ দিয়ে।  
ভজন পূজন করছো কার।  
ঈশ্বর কি ঘুষখোর পিচাশ।

বাটাতে চিনি সাঁজায়ে কর তাঁর আহ্বান।  
এতই যদি চিনির ভক্ত হতেন হরি ভগবান।  
তবে তাঁরে পাইত আগে  
চিনি কলের ম্যানেজার।।

কৃষ্ণ বলে ডাকলে যদি কৃষ্ণকে পাওয়া যেতো।  
যার ছেলের নাম কৃষ্ণ সেই তো আগে পেতো।  
কৃষ্ণ গুণগান করিয়া  
স্বর্গে যেতো টেপ রিকর্ডার।।

কেউ সর্বসুখ পাবার আশে তীর্থ ঐ পথে ঝাকে।  
নড়কের ভয়ে মাটিতে ঘনঘন মাথা ঠাকে।  
ক'জন লোকে তাঁরে খোঁজে  
নকুল বলে ভাবের দরকার।।

**Hindutva Song (on Hinduism)**  
**Nakul Sarkār (b. 1965)**

With all this money spent (on rituals)  
And goats, and buffaloes,  
Who are you worshipping?  
Is Ishwar<sup>16</sup> a blatant briber?

You prepare foods and sweets when invoking him,  
But does Hari<sup>17</sup> have such a sweet tooth?  
That not being the case, you would sooner  
Become a sugar mill manager.

If Krishna were to appear by calling his name,  
Then boy whose name is Krishna would be luckier.  
In chanting Krishna's name over and over again,  
The tape recorder itself would enter heaven.<sup>18</sup>

Those who seek eternal bliss journey to holy places  
And, fearing hell, put their head to the ground.  
But how many actually seek Him out?  
Nakul says, "this is worth pondering."

---

<sup>16</sup> A general Hindu term for God.

<sup>17</sup> Another general Hindu term for God.

<sup>18</sup> The snide comment here refers to the incessant playing of Krishna mantras over loud speakers in public spaces.

**বিচ্ছেদ গান**  
**শাহ আব্দুল করিম**

আমি বন্ধুরে কই পাব সখি গো  
সখি আমারে বলনা।  
বন্ধু বিনে পাগল মনে  
বুঝাইলে বুঝেনা॥

সাধে সাধে ঠেকছি ফাঁদে গো  
সখি দিলাম ষোলো আনা।  
প্রাণ পাখি উড়ে যেতে চায়  
আর ধৈর্য মানে না॥

কি আগুন জ্বালাইল বন্ধু গো  
সখি নিভাইলে নিভেনা।  
জল ঢালিলে দ্বিগুন জ্বলে  
উপায় কি বলনা॥

পাগল আব্দুল করিম বলে গো  
সখি অন্তরের বেদনা।  
সোনার বরণ রূপের কিরণ  
না দেখলে বাঁচেনা॥

**Bicched Song (on Separation from the Beloved)**  
**Shāh Abdul Karīm (1916–2009)**

When can I find my friend?  
Tell me, confidante.  
With him, my mind is going crazy  
I cannot appease it, even if I try.

My every desire has fallen wayside.  
Confidante, I've given him my all.  
The bird of the heart wants to be set free,  
It can no longer tolerate this.

What fire the beloved has cast in my bosom!  
Confidante, it cannot be extinguished.  
Dousing it makes it burn with twice the intensity,  
What recourse have I?

The delirious Abdul Karim says,  
“O, the pain in my heart!”  
Without his golden complexion, his beaming face  
I will cease to exist.

**স্রষ্টা জিজ্ঞাসা  
কবিয়াল বিজয় সরকার**

জানিতে চাই দয়াল তোমার আসল নামটা কি।  
আমরা বহু নামে ধরা ধামে  
কত রকমে ডাকি॥

কেউ তোমায় বলে ভগবান।  
আবার গড বলে কেউ বলে আহবান।  
কেউ খোদা কেউ যিহুদা কেউ কয় পাথিয়ান।  
গাইলাম জন্ম ভরে মুখস্ত গান  
মুখ বলা চিয়া পাথি॥

সর্ব শাস্ত্রে শুনিতো যে পাই।  
তোমার না কি পিতা মাতা নাই।  
তোমার নামকরণ কে করিলো বসে ভাবি তাই।  
তুমি নামই কি অনামই হে সাঁই  
আমরা তা বুঝি বা কি॥

পাগল বিজয় বলে মনের কথা কই।  
আমি খাঁটি ভাবের পাগল নই।  
আমার গোল বেঁধেছে মনের মাঝে  
কাজেই পাগল হই।  
আমার বুকো যা নাই মুখে তা কই  
কাঁটা কান চুলে ঢাকি॥

**Srashtā Jigyasā (on Divinity & the Creator)  
Kôbiyāl Bijôy Sarkār (1903–1985)**

I desire to know, beloved, what is your real name?  
We call on you by so many names,  
Throughout the world, and in places of worship.

Some refer to you as Bhagwan,  
Some call on you as God,  
Some say Khoda,<sup>19</sup> some Jehovah, some Pathiyan.<sup>20</sup>  
We've memorized these names all our lives,  
And recited them like a parrot.

I've read in all the scriptures  
That you have neither a father nor mother.  
I sit and wonder, then, who named you?  
Are you the named or the nameless?  
And what can we possibly understand of it?

The crazy Bijoy says, "let me speak freely,  
I'm not the consummate fakir."  
There's a thought that lingers in my mind  
And this is why I'm crazy.  
I express with my voice that which my heart cannot  
Covering my bad ear with my hair.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> A Persian word, and another name for Allah.

<sup>20</sup> The origins of this word is unclear.

<sup>21</sup> The proverb here refers to one's inability to be brutally honest.

## Glossary

*ābeg* — one hand raised sideways, with open palm; the gesture for passion

*ādhunik* — more recently created compositions

*ādi* — compositions of original saint-composers

*æk tārā* — a one-string instrument popular with bāul musicians

*āgômônī* — a six-beat *ṭhekā* that has strong associations with the ritualized drumming of Durga Puja; used in segues or to invoke auspiciousness

*ājôb khælā* — “strange play”; a *chāyā* popularized by Doorbin Shah (1910–1977)

*ākār* — the physical manifestation of God’s creation

*ākromon* — an attack used to weaken the challenger’s scheme in *bicār gān*

*ālem* — Arabic; an Islamic scholar

*āfā sindhu* — “ocean of hope”; a *chāyā* popularized by Bijoy Sarkar (1903–1985)

*āfcôrjô* — one hand, thumb to fingers with palm up and slight heading nodding; gesture for astonishment

*āsôr* — a gathering for musical performance, especially ones of a devotional nature

*ashraf* — Arabic; in the premodern era, an elite Muslim class of foreign descent that especially consisted of non-Bengali servicemen, administrators, and urban Sufis

*bækkhā* — one hand out and palm down with slight up and down movement; the gesture for elucidation

*bāgesrī* — a *rāga*-based *sur* associated with defiance

*bāhāc* — Arabic; largely rural-situated venues where leaders from various communities battled one another through a series of question and rebuttal sessions, and over a large range of topics ranging from ritualistic details to societal matters

*bākkô* — pointing index finger above head; the gesture for citation

*bāṅgāl* — traditionally, a Bengali whose ancestral home is east of the Padma River; a native Bangladeshi

*bāṅglā dhol* — a Bengali barrel drum played with the bare hand on the treble side (often with bamboo strips taped to the fingers, to increase dynamics), and a drum stick on the bass end; this instrument is central to bōyāti music

*bāṅglā ektāl* — a twelve-beat t̥hekā based on kōbigān performance, and associated with supposition

*bāṣi* — the Bengali bamboo flute

*bātil* — “canceled”; the relocation of a bicār gān performance at a separate, undisclosed, and non-shrine space in order to avoid hostile retaliation

*bāul* — a highly influential community of poets and esoteric practitioners in Bengal, especially known for their haunting but abstruse songs, their indoctrination of both Hindu and Muslim disciples, and their juggling of the social parameters associated with the traditional positions of householder and renouncer in South Asia

*bay‘ah* — Arabic; an oath of allegiance to a sheikh, or the larger initiating act of joining a brotherhood by dedicating oneself to a sheikh in exchange for spiritual knowledge; a possible root word from which the term bōyāti is derived

*bāynā* — a contract between performer and patron stipulating terms of agreement and payment

*bedōnā* — two hands crossed over chest with torso rocking sideways; gesture for suffering

*bekub bānānō* — an attempt to bamboozle an opponent in bicār gān

*behāl* — Persian; a bōyāti-composed sur associated with cosmological inquiry

*behelā* — the violin

*belāyôt* — the nature of sainthood

*bhāb* — musical sentiment, but also “thought” or “introspection”

*bhāb sōṅgīt* — “songs of sentiment”; a canonic base of songs for bicār gān

*bhāb t̥rōṅgô* — “ocean wave of sentiment”; a chāyā popularized by Jalaluddin Khan (1894-1972)

*bhajan* — in Bengal, any Hindu devotional song

*bhāver gīta* — a type of counter-renaissance song tradition that served as a precursor to bhāb sōṅgīt

*bhāṅḍāri* — a sur associated with the panegyric Sufī song traditions of Māijbhāṅḍār (in southeast Bangladesh)

*bhāṭiyāli* — a type of river song, or rather a song in which the poetic voice, typically a boatman or his anonymous passenger, reflects on themes of life’s impermanence and love lost through metaphorical musings on the river and its tide or bank

*bhāṭiyāli thekā* — an eight-beat thekā based on the drumming style used to accompany the genre of bhāṭiyāli; associated with introspection

*bhōdrōlok* — literally “gentleman” or “well-mannered person”; a Bengali Hindu gentry that emerged under British colonialism

*bhōṅgō gān* — dirge-like Brahma devotional hymns, common during Rabindranath Tagore’s youth

*bhōṅita* — the colophon or self-appellation in the last verse of a song, incorporating the poet’s pen name

*bhrômôr* — “bumblebee”; a chāyā popularized by Radharaman Dutta (1833–1915)

*bicār* — “deliberation”

*bicārôk* — judges in a bicār gān debate

*bicched* — an important melodic structure in Bangladeshi folk music characterized not only by a particular melodic contour, but also a melismatic phrasing style and unhurried tempo, which are intended to expose its agonizing or heartbreaking themes of disunion

*bicchinnô* — alienating or schismatic tactics used in bicār gān

*bidā* — Arabic: *bid‘ah*, heretical “innovations”

*bilās* — a bōyāti-composed sur associated with scriptural exegesis

*birôhō* — “separation”; a broader theme in Indic mythology which is commonly addressed in Bengali Vaishnavism through the longing of the estranged Radha for Lord Krishna; a sur associated with the genre of bicched gān

*birôti* — a break in bicār gān performance that allows for the transition of one bôyāti to another on stage

*bifrām* — a larger break in bicār gān performance, after a series of transitions between bôyāti artists has transpired

*boirāgī* — a sur associated with bāul songs

*bhoirôb* — a rāga-based sur associated with invocation

*bhoirôbī* — a rāga-based sur associated with Chishtī/Qādirī panegyrics

*bhupālī* — a rāga-based sur associated with objectivity

*boiṭhōkī gān* — “songs of assembly”; a musical gathering for the performance of various Bengali devotional songs, as mentioned by Abdul Halim Boyati (1929–2007)

*bondônā* — the primarily chorus line of a song performed in bicār gān

*bôṅgānubād* — a Bengali translation

*bôṅgôbhôṅgô* — the 1905 partition of Bengal, announced on July 19, 1905 by Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India

*caryāpada* — see cōrjāpōd

*cāturī* — refinement or dexterity

*chāc* — “mold” or “pattern”; punctuating and transitional interjections on the ḍhol drum that may appear suddenly, or even momentarily break the cyclical structure, through small and independent cadential patterns and drum rolls

*chāyā* — memorable song imageries

*Chishtī* — one of the principle Sufi brotherhoods of the bôyāti community

*côkkôr* — a sur associated with the genre of dhāmāil

*cillāh nashīnī* — Persian; in Sufi practice, a forty-day spiritual retreat involving prayer, penance, and isolated meditation, often involving austerities that induce trance or lead to an epiphany; this practice is also incorporated by Sufi musicians as a way marking the passing into a professional performance career

*côṛjāpṛad* — the earliest specimens of proto-Bengali literature, first rediscovered in the early twentieth century by Haraprasad Shastri (1853–1931)

*cumu* — one hand raised to forehead, and sometimes lips; gesture for deference when mentioning saint-composer’s name

*dar al-Harb* — Arabic, the “house of war,”; historically those territories which did not have a treaty of nonaggression towards Muslims

*dāspāhirā* — a sixteen-beat *ṭhekā* associated with Bengali *kīrtan*, and used during general discourse in *bicār gān*

*deḥ* — a *rāga*-based *sur* associated with love

*do-bhāṣī bāṅglā* — “two-idiom Bengali”; a literary style that has its roots in the mid-eighteenth century and represented an attempt by writers to Islamize the Bengali language by significantly incorporating Arabic and Persian terms in a newer and more intentional manner, yet in order to produce uncomplicated religious tracts for a broader, non-Urdu reading audience

*dohār* — an ensemble of accompanists and supporting singers; also called *dol*

*dōndōmūlōk* — dialectical

*dōmer mālā* — “the garland of breath”; a *chāyā* popularized by Pagla Kanai (1809–1889)

*dōṛfōk srotāgōṇ* — “beholders-cum-listeners,” the audience of a *bicār gān* performance

*dhæṇ* — a *bōyāti*-composed *sur* associated with solitary devotion

*dhāmāil* — a six-beat *ṭhekā* based on a traditional Sylheti song and dance form; associated with despondence

*dhikr* — Arabic; the remembrance of Allah; the repetitions of God’s names or Islamic litanies, often in a stylized and rhythmic fashion

*ḍhol* — see *bāṅglā ḍhol*

*dhrupad* — a genre of Hindustani classical music (a tradition which is known as *uccāṅgō sōṅgīt* or *fāstriyō sōṅgīt* in Bangladesh); the influence of *dhrupad* in Bengali song is particularly invigorated by the compositions of Rabindranath Tagore, especially an incorporation of older *rāga* and *tāla* systems and multiple stanzas of poetic compositions

*dhuli* — a dhol drummer

*dhun* — in Hindustani, or North Indian classical music, a semi-classical instrumental form often drawing loosely from regional folk material

*dhuwā* — the secondary chorus line of a song performed in bicār gān, when used as a refrain between verses

*dīkkhā guru* — “initiation” guru; a pedigreed religious guide from a Sufi brotherhood

*dīwānah* — Persian; madness

*dōndō* — two index fingers bent, crossed over one another; the gesture for conflict

*dotārā* — an indispensable plucked lute, found in Bengal and related parts of northeast India, with a roughly three-octave range, known for its percussive and staccato-like accompaniment

*ḍubki* — a Bengal tambourine

*ekuḥe sāhittō* — literally the “literature of the twenty-first,”; a canon of patriotic works which are memorized and performed each year in public spaces and on television, venerating fallen heroes and significant events in the independence movement which punctuate the Bangladeshi calendar

*fānā* — Arabic; two arms out with clenched fists and wrists gyrating; the gesture for ecstasy

*Faraizi movement* — The religious campaign of Haji Shariatullah (1781–1840), which emphasized the socioreligious amelioration of the rural poor

*farishtah* — Persian; the angelic realm in Islamic cosmology (comparable to the Arabic *malā'ikah*)

*fatwā* — Arabic; a non-binding but authoritative Islamic decree

*fiqh* — Arabic; Islamic jurisprudence; often described as the human understanding of divine Islamic law

*faqir* — a Muslim ascetic

*gān* — arms folded, each hand holding opposite elbow; gesture for erudition

*ghazal* — a form of love poetry specific to the Urdu language, with highly stylized vocabulary and a specific rhyme scheme

*ghôṭi* — traditionally, a Bengali whose ancestral home is west of the Padma River; a native Indian Bengali

*gīrah* — in qawwālī, the stylistic process of attaching various couplets of poetry together, from different sources, in order to elaborate on a mystical feeling and extend performance

*gītikār* — a lyricist

*granthī* — In the Sikh tradition, a person who is a ceremonial reader of the Guru Granth Sahib, the central religious text of Sikhism

*gurdwārā* — a Sikh temple

*guru śiṣya paramparā* — Sanskrit, “the succession from guru to disciple”; the various dimensions of intimacy, deference, commitment, and austerity associated with pedagogy

*guru tōttō* — songs which describe “the essence of the guru”

*ḥalqah-i zīkr* — Persian; a six-beat rhythmic thekā based on bhāṇḍārī song accompaniment; associated with ecstasy

*hekim* — Arabic; a physician using traditional Muslim remedies

*hujūr* — Arabic; a traditional class of hired Muslim priests in Bangladesh, especially tasked with presiding over the ceremonies of birth, entering adulthood, and death

*ibādōt khānā* — Persian, “house of worship”; a mosque

*ijtihād* — Arabic; an Islamic legal term referring to independent reasoning or the thorough exertion of a jurist’s mental faculty in finding a solution to a legal question

*‘ilm al-kalām* — Arabic; in classical Islam, the emphasis on rational thought and reason through argument

*imām bāri* — “houses of the Imams”; centers for Shī‘a worship and the commemoration of Muḥarram in Muslim Bengal (comparable to the term *imām bāṛā* in North India or Pakistan)

*iṅgit* — “hint” or “suggestion”

*imān* — Arabic; a bōyāti-composed sur associated with faith

*iḥārā* — the tradition of gesture in bicār gān

*jādu* — two open hands raised sideways, torso rocking forward and backward; the gesture for enchantment

*jānte mōrā* — “dying before living”; the obtainment of spiritual liberation through a “killing” of the vices of the soul

*jāgôrṇer gān* — “songs of awakening”; a vast body of defiant protest songs that have a deep and sentimental reception history amongst Bangladeshis

*jāri* — Persian; a sur associated with the genre of jārigān

*jārigān* — traditional Bengali compositions that are mostly based on the events solemnly ceremonialized during the Islamic month of Muḥarram

*jamāt* — in in pōdābōlī kīrtōn, this section is marked by the introduction of a different long-cycle rhythmic cycle new to the performance moment

*jātrā* — an important form of traditional Bengali folk theater

*jātrī* — a random wayfarer, or casual observer of bicār gān

*jāyej* — Arabic; referring to a permissible act with regard to conventional Islamic moral code

*jhijhiṭ* — a rāga-based sur associated with condemnation

*jhumur* — a six-beat ṭhekā

*jôp* — a sur associated with Bengali dhikr

*jugôl brōtô* — a “twin vows” ceremony whereby a bôyāti is initiated into the musical world in front of his or her two gurus

*kāfir* — Arabic; a disbeliever

*kāfôn* — a Muslim death shroud

*karāmāt al-awliyā'* — Arabic; the miraculous deeds of the saints

*kārigôr* — “craftsman”; a chāyā popularized by Ramesh Sheel (1877–1967)

*kartābhajā* — saint-composers of an enigmatic sect in late-colonial Bengal that composed songs known as bhāver gīta

*kāṭān* — in *ṣodābōlī kīrtōn*, this section is marked by a gradual increase in tempo, potentially +40 bpm from the original tempo, and accompanied by intense drumming patterns, often in double or quadruple time, on the *khol* drum

*kedār* — a *rāga*-based *sur* associated with entreaty

*kerāmōt* — Arabic; legendary and often miraculous biographical accounts, deeply tied to Sufi hagiography and the supernatural wonders performed by Muslim saints

*khācā* — “cage”; a *chāyā* popularized by Lalōn (d. 1890)

*khāker putul* — “clay doll”; a *chāyā* popularized by Shitalong Shah (1800–1889)

*khāmmāj* — a *rāga*-based *sur* associated with perseverance

*khārḡ al-‘ādah* — Arabic, “that which breaks custom”; compare with *sunnat Allāh*

*khās* — a *bōyāti*-composed *sur* associated with theological inquiry

*khātam al-nabīyīn* — Arabic, “seal of the prophets”; the conclusion of Islamic prophethood through the figure of Muḥammad

*khæpā* — a *bōyāti*-composed *sur* associated with defiance

*khed* — two hands crossed, holding earlobes; the gesture for sorrow

*khemṭā* — a general eight-beat *ṭhekā*

*khidmōt* — Arabic; the *bōyāti* artist’s deferential obligation to consolidate the audiences varied experiences into a viable devotional trajectory in performance

*khodā* — Persian; commonly used to address Allah amongst Muslims of North India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh

*khol* — a terra cotta drum specific to Bengal, and strongly attached to Bengali *kīrtōn*

*khōlifā* — Arabic, “successor”; a system of rural village arbitrators in Bangladesh, but also the living leader of a Sufi order

*khomōk* — a plucked drum known for its loud, percussive pitch

*kīrtōn* — in Bengal, a broad-ranging responsorial devotional genre that is poetically formulated on the structures of Vaiṣṇava mythology

*kōli* — the verse of a song performed in bicār gān

*kōlōber ṭhikānā* — “the heart’s address”; a chāyā popularized by Razzak Dewan (d. 2010)

*kōlōngkinī* — “ill-reputed one” (feminine inflection); a chāyā popularized by Manmohan Dutta (1833–1915)

*kōmiṭi* — see sōngsthā

*kōrtāl* — wooden clappers

*kuṣōlitā* — one open palm covering ear; the gesture for artfulness

*lālōnī* — a sur associated with the songs of Lālōn (d. 1890)

*līlā* — Sanskrit; in Bengali kīrtōn, a reference to various episodes of the Hindu deities Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa; in Indic aesthetics, this term refers to a “divine play,” a way of describing reality and the cosmos as the outcome of creative play by the divine

*liluwā bātās* — “cool breeze”; a chāyā popularized by Wakeel Munshi (d. 1978)

*lophā* — a twelve-beat thekā used in the genre of kōbigān, associated with bāul music or general Hindu devotional songs

*lōrāi* — an eight-beat thekā used in traditional Bengali stick fighting; associated with polemics

*maikhānah* — Persian; tavern

*mājār* — Persian; a Sufi shrine (also *dōrgāh*, *dōrbār jōrīf* or *roujā mobārōk*)

*mājhi* — a boatman; a sur associated with the genre of bhāṭiyāli

*majlis* — Arabic, “a place of sitting”, used in the context of a council to describe various types of special gatherings among common interest groups be it administrative, social or religious in countries with linguistic or cultural connections to Islam

*mālā gāthā* — “stringing together”; the referencing of conventional poets and their works in song through an extraction and entwining of their memorable song imageries (see chāyā)

*malḡūzāt* — Arabic; collected sermons, litanies and personal letters of scholars and poets

*mālkoḡ* — a rāga-based sur associated with transience

*mālsi* — an eight-beat *ṭhekā* used in *ṣātrā* folk theater and associated with satire

*marsiya* — Persian; narrations dealing with the Shī‘ī martyr Ḥusayn and the Battle of Karbala

*mast* — Persian; euphoria or inebriation

*mārfôt* — Arabic; Islamic gnosis

*mārfôtī* — songs which describe Islamic gnosis

*melā* — a public fair or festival

*môddhō ṣug* — Middle Bengali literary period, ca. fifteenth-eighteenth centuries

*madhhab* — Arabic; a school of legal thought in Sunni Islam

*mānôb rôtôn* — “jewel of humanity”; a *chāyā* popularized by Bhaba Pagla (1902-1984)

*môdhukôri* — the stylistic offering of money to the artist by an audience member, as a form of deference

*môhājôn* — see *bicārôk*

*mônjirā* — small brass finger cymbals

*morākābā* — Arabic; a sense of euphoria induced by meditation in which the seeker develops a deep “awareness” of the spiritual heart and, through it, knowledge of the beloved

*môrômī* — a *bôyāti*-composed *sur* associated with metaphysical inquiry

*mudrā* — Sanskrit, “emblem” or “mark”; a spiritual gesture and a seal of authenticity employed in the iconography and spiritual practice of Indic religions

*mujaddid* — a religious renewer

*muktijuddhō* — a Bangladeshi freedom fighter

*murfidī* — a *sur* associated with a specific Muslim genre of folk-devotional music found in Bengal known as *murfidī gān*; the central theme of such songs is to provide a poignant description of separation from the beloved, which encapsulates the intimate relationship between master and disciple in Sufī pedagogy

*musalmāni* — see *do-bhāṣī bānglā*

*nāi deowā* — indulging audience expectations in bicār gān

*nashah* — Persian; addiction

*nasīhat nāmā* — Persian; a literary form that came to be central to the reformist writers in the last nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

*nasta ‘līq* — a distinctively Persianized approach to writing in a modified version of the Arabic script, also used in Urdu

*nāt* — Persian; a sur associated with a cappella Islamic hymns

*nirdhārōk* — one palm down with thumb to fingers, and fingers moving apart while raising hand; gesture for definitiveness

*niṣṭhā* — two open palms, pressed together in prayer; the gesture for reverence

*nimrōtā* — one open hand, sideways with wrist and elbow swerving left and right; gesture for gentleness

*nōbuwōt* — Arabic; the nature of prophecy

*nūr* — Arabic; the primordial light of God

*ojhā* — ceremonial music séances

*ontōrā* — the secondary chorus line of a song performed in bicār gān

*owāj mahfil* — Persian; stylized evangelical orations in Bengali

*pāḥālī* — a Middle Bengali poetic form and performance medium; it is commonly believed that this form originally contained five distinct elements: song, music, extempore versifying, poetic contests, and dance

*pāhārī* — a sur associated with the regional folk music of Sylhet and Assam

*paimānah* — Persian; wine goblet; also see sāghar

*pāglāmi* — madness, or the act of going mad

*pāk pōnjātōn* — Persian, the “five holy ones”; a popular image found in Sufi and Shī‘a discourse which refers to the figures of Muḥammad, his righteous successor ‘Alī, the wife of ‘Alī’s wife and daughter of the Prophet, Fāṭimah, and her two sons Ḥasan and Ḥusayn

*pālā* — in bicār gān, each “turn” in the performance as two bōyāti artists alternate on stage; this term can sometimes also refer to the broader subject of the debate in a bicār gān performance (otherwise known as biṣoy)

*pālāgān* — a type of long performance in Bengali folk dramaturgy, which chronicles historical events or figures; although stylistically distinct, this term is used in some areas of Bangladesh to refer to bicār gān

*pālākār* — a performer of pālāgān

*pōdābōlī kīrtōn* — the most cherished and complex form of Bengali kīrtōn, which places increasing musical demands on the singer through a variety of specialized long-cycle rhythmic cycles

*pōdōkōrtā* — literally “verse-makers”; the poet-saint composers of bhāb sōṅgīt

*pilu* — a rāga-based sur associated with juxtaposition

*pīr* — Persian; a living or deceased Sufi saint

*pōkkō* — one side of a binary debate topic, to which a bōyāti is assigned to represent in a bicār gān debate

*poribefōn* — the act of presenting a query in bicār gān

*pourōsōbhā* — agrarian-based legal councils which are run by a village-elected chairman and remain central to arbitrating regional disputes in Bangladesh

*pōyār* — a couplet of fourteen syllable lines, divided by the following sequence of feet: 8 + 6, 8 + 6

*prārthōnā* — two open palms, facing performer; the gesture for supplication

*premer bājār* — “bazaar of love”; a chāyā popularized by Hasan Raja (1854-1922)

*prōbhābitō kōra* — an attempt to impress the audience or an opponent in bicār gān

*prōbhupōd* — a sur associated with the genre of Bengali kīrtan

*prōsādi* — a sur associated with the songs composed by Ramprasad Sen (1720–1781), a Shakta poet dedicated to the mother goddess as Kali

*puṭhi* — While this form of literature was not specific to Bengali Muslim writers, it developed a uniquely Muslim tone, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; known for its macaronic style which infused Bengali, Arabic, Persian, and Hindustani vocabulary, and its “backward” binding, in imitation of the Arabic writing system; a sur associated with the genre of *puṭhi*

*purôṣkār* — an award or medal received after performance

*Qādirī* — one of the principle Sufi brotherhoods of the bôyāti community

*qawwālī* — a pervasive form of Sufi music which developed in North India, originally drawing on Persian and Urdu mystical poetry, and developing within the Chishtī Sufi tradition

*rabindra sangeet* — the musical compositions of Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941)

*rasa* — Sanskrit, “juice,” “essence” or perhaps “taste”; connoting a vast concept in the traditional Indian arts regarding the aesthetic flavor of any visual, literary or musical work, particularly one that evokes an emotion or feeling in the reader or audience which cannot otherwise be altogether described

*risālah* — Arabic; booklets that provided localized perspectives on Muslim ritual duties or the biographies or military exploits of Islamic prophets of the Qur’ān

*rōṅg* — see *ijārā*

*rōṅger bārôī* — “colorful boat”; a *châyā* popularized by Shah Abdul Karim (1916–2009)

*rôṣik* — a connoisseur or aesthete

*ṣābāṣ* — “well done”; a vocal exclamation of appreciation and enjoyment

*sādhanā* — Sanskrit; the austerities of an ascetic, but also the rigorous practice and dedication of any artist

*sādhôk* — a devotee or ascetic

*sādhu* — Sanskrit; a vocal exclamation of appreciation and enjoyment, especially when mesmerized by the performance

*sāghar* — Persian; wine goblet; also see *paimānah*

*sajjādah nashīn* — an official caretaker, hereditary administrator or elected trustee of a shrine, who also serves as a regional talent scout, producer and middleman for the staged debate

*salām* — Arabic; a gesture of salutation by raising an open palm to the forehead; often used to show deference to the saint-composer of the song being rendered

*sama* ʿ — Arabic; in Sufi terms, the ritualized act of listening (to music)

*sampradāy* — Sanskrit; a specific community, sect, or denomination

*sārigān* — in Bengali folk music, a type of song that is allegorically attached to the upstream current of water, and is consequently joyous in mood and collectively performed with a chorus

*sārindā* — a three-string fiddle common to Bengali folk music, and often used by bōyāti musicians

*śāstriya saṅgīt* — Sanskrit, “music of the treatises”; classical music

*sāqī* — Persian; barkeeper

*sādhu sōṅgō* — “gathering of sages”; a private bicār gān performance at a bōyāti shrine, in the presence of colleagues and aesthetes

*sharāb* — Persian; wine

*ḥikkhā guru* — “instructive” guru; a senior bōyāti artist who takes on disciples

*silsilah* — Arabic; a religious genealogy that traces a Sufi brotherhood’s roots through sainthood and bloodline back to the Prophet

*ḥilpī* — a musician or artist

*ḥōkti* — open palm alternating face-down and face-up; gesture for endurance

*sōmmān* — taking cash offering from audience member and holding it to forehead; gesture for respect

*sōṅgrōhō* — mimicking the act of snatching and picking up by opening and closing fingers in air; gesture for accumulation

*sōṅsthā* — a shrine committee

*sōrkār* — a common surname attached to the stage names of kōbiyāl and bōyāti artists

*fōriyōt* — Arabic; religious law or orthodox Islamic practice, or songs describing this topic

*sarōlōtā* — straightforwardness, candidness

*soundōrjō* — one half-fist, moving in circular motion; the gesture for beauty

*sunnat Allāh* — Arabic, “divine custom”; compare with *kharq al-‘ādah*

*sur* — staple melodic contours central to the songs of *bicār gān*

*surōkār* — a melodist

*surphōk* — a ten-beat *ṭhekā* taken from the classical genre of *dhrupad* and associated with invocation

*tafsīr* — Arabic; Qur’ānic exegesis

*tāl phertā* — a quick and abrupt change from duple meter to triple meter, or vice versa, at the end of a performance

*tān* — the last line of the verse of a song performed in *bicār gān*, which shares the same melodic contour as the *ontōrā*

*taqlīd* — Arabic; an Islamic notion which seeks to examine the level of conformity of one religious outlook over another

*ṭarīqah* — Arabic, “road” or “path,”; a specific Sufī order or brotherhood

*teorā* — a seven-beat *ṭhekā*, popularized in Bengal through the compositions of Rabindranath Tagore, and associated with felicity

*ṭhekā* — staple rhythmic contours central to the songs of *bicār gān*

*tintāl* — a sixteen-beat *ṭhekā*, derived from classical music, and associated with refinement

*tōn bhubōn* — “the body-universe”; a *chāyā* popularized by Alif Chand Dewan (d. 1982)

*tōttō* — rhetorical essence

*tripōdi* — in Bengal folk prosody, a scheme where each line of verse contains twenty syllables with two caesuras, one following the sixth syllable and another following the twelfth syllable, which also share a rhyming scheme

*ucchās* — waving index finger; the gesture for exuberance

*ujān* — the upstream of a river; a sur associated with the genre of *sārigān*

*urôf mubārôk* — Arabic; the death anniversary of a Sufi saint

*yoga kalandar* — a form of love poetry which expounded mystical precepts, often through romantic tales or fictional dialogues

*zamīndār* — Persian; a landowner; in colonial Bengal, a local potentate usually granted semi-autonomy

*ziyārat* — Arabic; pilgrimage

## Bibliography

Abbasi, Mustafa Zaman. *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Man and Poet*. Dhaka: Independent University Press, 2013.

Abbas, SHEMEEM Burney. *The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002

Abbas, Tahir. *Islamic Radicalism and Multicultural Politics: The British Experience*. Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2011.

Adamson, Peter. *Philosophy in the Islamic World*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Ahmed, Nazneen. "The Poetics of Nationalism: Cultural Resistance and Poetry in East Pakistan/Bangladesh, 1952–1971." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 50(3): 256-268.

Ahmed, Syed Jamil. *In Praise of Niranjana: Islam, Theatre and Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Losauk, 2001.

Alaghband-Zadeh, Chloë. "Listening to North Indian Classical Music: How Embodied Ways of Listening Perform Imagined Histories and Social Class." *Ethnomusicology*, 61(2): 207-233

Alam, Muzaffar. *The Languages of Political Islam: India 1200–1800*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Alam, Sarwar. *Perceptions of Self, Power, and Gender Among Muslim Women: Narratives from a Rural Community in Bangladesh*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Alexander, Claire, Joya Chatterji, and Annu Jalais. *The Bengal Diaspora: Rethinking Muslim Migration*. London: Routledge, 2016.

Ali, Muhammad. *The Holy Qur'an: Arabic Text, Translation and Commentary*. Lahore: Ahmadiyyah Anjuman Isha'at Islam, 1917 [1951].

Ali, Monica. *Brick Lane*. New York: Scribner, 2003.

Ali, Syed Ashraf. *Muslim Traditions in Bengali Literature*. Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 1983.

Ahmed, Rafiuddin, ed. *Understanding the Bengali Muslims*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.

- Ameli, Saied R., and Arzu Merali. *Hijab, Meaning, Identity, Otherization and Politics: British Muslim Women*. London, UK: Islamic Human Rights Commission, 2006.
- Anam, Tahmima. *A Golden Age*. London: John Murray, 2007.
- Anam, Tahmima. *The Bones of Grace*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2016.
- Anam, Tahmima. *The Good Muslim*. Edinburgh; New York: Canongate, 2011.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.
- Anjum, Tanvir. *Chishti Sufis in the Sultanate of Delhi, 1190–1400: From Restrained Indifference to Calculate Defiance*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Aquil, Raziuddin, ed. *Sufism and Society in Medieval India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Bagchi, Barnita, trans. *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag: Two Feminist Utopias*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2005.
- Bald, Vivek. *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Bandyopadhyay, Sekar. *Caste, Culture, and Hegemony: Social Domination in Colonial Bengal*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004.
- Banu, U.A.B. Razia Akhtar. *Islam in Bangladesh*. Leiden: Brill, 1992.
- Barua, Dipak Kumar. *New Vajrayana Mystic Songs from Nepal: A Study on the Nava Caryapada with Texts and Translations*. Saarbrücken : VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2010.
- Barz, Gregory and Timothy J. Cooley, eds. *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*. 2nd Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Bass, Gary J. *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.
- Begum, Firoza. Interview by Bertie Kibreah. Personal interview. Dhaka, April 2005.

- Begum, Hasna. *Begum Rokeya, The Feminist: Views and Visions*. Dhaka: Sucheepatra, 2011.
- Begg, W.D. *The Holy Biography of Hazrat Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti*. Tucson: Chishti Sufi Mission of America, 1977.
- Behn, Wolfgang H., trans. *The History of the Qur'ān*. Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- Berger, Harris M. "Theory and Practice: On Large Introductory Courses." *Society of Ethnomusicology Newsletter* 46(2): 3-8.
- Bharali, Rabindra. *The Forgotten Forms of Hindustani Music*. New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, 2008.
- Bhatia, Varuni. *Unforgetting Chaitanya: Vaishnavism and Cultures of Devotion in Colonial Bengal*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Bhatnagar, R.S. *Mystical Vision and Thought in Medieval Sufism*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005.
- Bhatt, Chetan. *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies, and Modern Myths*. Oxford, UK: Berg, 2001.
- Bhattacharya, Debjani. *Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta: The Making of Calcutta*. Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Bhattacharya, Krishna. *Suniti Kumar Chatterji Revisited*. Kolkata: Gangchil, 2015.
- Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi. *Rabindranath Tagore: An Interpretation*. New Delhi: Viking and Penguin Books India, 2011.
- Bingaman, Amy, Lise Sanders, and Rebecca Zorach. *Embodied Utopias: Gender, Social Change, and the Modern Metropolis*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Blacking, John, ed. *The Anthropology of the Body*. London: Academic Press, 1977.
- Booth, Gregory D. and Bradley Shope, eds. *More than Bollywood: Studies in Indian Popular Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Bose, Neilesh. *Recasting the Region: Language, Culture and Islam in Colonial Bengal*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Bose, Sugata and Jalal Ayesha. *Nationalism, Democracy, and Development: State and Politics in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*. London, UK: Sage Publications, 1977.
- Bronwyn, Winter. *Hijab & The Republic: Uncovering the French Headscarf Debate*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008.
- Brown, Jonathan A.C. *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2009.
- Buehler, Arthur F. *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet: The Indian Naqshbandiyya and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Shaykh*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988.
- — —. *Revealed Grace: The Juristic Sufism of Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624)*. Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011.
- Butler, John F. “Creation, Art, and Lila.” *Philosophy East and West*, 10 (1/2): 3-12.
- Calbris, Genevieve. *The Semiotics of French Gestures*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Callan, Alyson. “Female Saints and the Practice of Islam in Sylhet, Bangladesh,” *American Ethnologist*, 35(3): 396-412.
- Cantú, Keith Edward. *Theurgy and the Snake: The Yoga Kalandar and Bengali Sufism*. PUBLISHER, 2011.
- Capwell, Charles. *The Music of the Bauls of Bengal*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University, 1986.
- Cashin, David G, ed and trans. *The Ocean of Love: Ali Raja's Agama/Jnana Sagara*. Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1993.
- Caudhurī, Satyajit. *Haraprasāda Śāstrī Racanā-Saṃgrah*. Kolkata: Paścimabaṅga Rājya Pustaka Parishada, 1980.
- Chakrabarty, Bidyut. *The Partition of Bengal and Assam, 1932–1947: Contour of Freedom*. Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2004.
- Chakraborty, Dipesh, Rochona Majumdar, and Andrew Sartori, eds. *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial: India and Pakistan in Transition*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Chakraborty, Mridula Nath, ed. *Being Bengali: At Home and in the World*. London: Routledge, 2014.

- Chandra, Satish. *State, Pluralism, and the Indian Historical Tradition*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Chatterji, Joya. *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- — —. *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Chatterjee, Pranab. *A Story of Ambivalent Modernization in Bangladesh and West Bengal: The Rise and Fall of Bengali Elitism in South Asia*. New York: Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 2011.
- Chatterji, Suniti Kumar. *The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language*. Kolkata: Calcutta University Press, 1926.
- Choguill, Charles L. *New Communities for Urban Squatters: Lessons from the Plan that Failed Dhaka, Bangladesh*. New York: Plenum Press, 1987.
- Choudhury, Abul Ahsan. *Lalon Sain*. Dhaka: Knox Prints, 2011.
- Chowdhury, Elora Halim. *Transnationalism Reversed: Women Organizing Against Gendered Violence in Bangladesh*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011.
- Chowdhury, Nusrat. *Paradoxes of the Popular: Crowd Politics in Bangladesh*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2019.
- Chowdhury, Tamina M. *Indigenous Identity in South Asia: Making Claims in the Colonial Chittagong Hill Tracts*. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Clayton, Martin. *Time in Indian Music: Rhythm, Metre, and Form in North Indian Rāg Performance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Clayton, Martin, Byron Dueck, and Laura Leante, eds. *Experience and Meaning in Music Performance*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Crovetto, Helen. “Embodied Knowledge and Divinity: The Hohm Community as Western-Style Bāuls.” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 10 (1): 69-95.
- Croucher, Stephen Michael. *Looking Beyond the Hijab*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2009.

Csordas, Thomas J., ed. *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Dahnhardt, Thomas. *Change and Continuity in Indian Sufism: A Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi Branch in the Hindu Environment*. New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2002.

Dalmia, Vasudha, Angelika Malinar and Martin Christof, eds. *Charisma and Canon: Essays on the Religious History of the Indian Subcontinent*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Dasgupta, Alokeranjan and Mary Ann Dasgupta, trans. *Roots in the Void: Baul Songs of Bengal*. Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1977.

Dasgupta, Biplab. *The Naxalite Movement*. Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1974.

Dasgupta, Samir, trans. *Songs of Lalou*. Dhaka: Sahitya Prakash, 2000.

Dasgupta, Shashi Bhushan. *An Introduction to Tāntric Buddhism*. Kolkata: University of Kolkata, 1974.

Dasgupta, Uma. *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.

d'Costa, Bina. *Nationbuilding, Gender, and War Crimes in South Asia*. London: Routledge, 2011.

De, Chandra Kumar, ed. *Eastern Bengal Ballads: Mymensing*. Kolkata: University of Calcutta, 1932.

De, Chandra Kumar, et al. *Purbabanga Gikita*. Kolkata: University of Calcutta, 1926.

De, Chandra Kumar and Dinesh Chandra Sen. *Maimansingha Gitika, Volumes 1-4*. Kolkata: University of Calcutta, 1923–1932.

De, Dhurjati Prasad. *Bengali Muslims in Search of Social Identity, 1905–47*. Dhaka: University Press, 1998.

Debdas, Nanigopal, ed. *Lalan Fakir: Songs Rendered into English*. Kolkata: Ajay Basu Roy, 1997.

de Jong, Frederick and Bernd Radtke, eds. *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*. Leiden: Brill, 1999.

Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Deva, Bigamudre Chaitanya. *Musical Instruments of India: Their History and Development*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2000.

Dey, Amit. *The Image of the Prophet in Bengali Muslim Piety, 1850–1947*. Kolkata: B.B.S. Enterprise, 2005.

Dey, Saumya. *Becoming Hindus and Muslims: Reading the Cultural Encounter in Bengal, 1342–1905*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2015.

d’Hubert, Thibaut. *In the Shade of the Golden Palace: Alaol and Middle Bengali Poetics in Arakan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

— — —. “Patterns of Composition in the Seventeenth-Century Bengali Literature of Arakan,” in *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*, ed. Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler Schofield (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015), 423-444.

Dimock, Edward C. *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaiṣṇava-Sahajiyā Cult of Bengal*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Doniger, Wendy. *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythological Beasts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Dunham, Mary Francis. *Jarigan: Muslim Epic Songs of Bangladesh*. Dhaka: University Press. Lmt., 1997.

Dunning, Eric. *Fighting Fans: Football Hooliganism as a World Phenomenon*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2002.

Dutta, Bishnupriya and Urmimala Sarkar Munsii, eds. *Endengering Performance: Indian Women Performers in Search of Identity*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2010.

Dutta, Krishna. *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996.

Dutta, Rajeshwari. “The Religious Aspect of the Bāul Songs of Bengal.” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 37 (3): 445-455.

Eaton, Richard M. *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Eisenlohr, Patrick. *Sounding Islam: Voice, Media, and Sonic Atmospheres in an Indian Ocean World*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018.

Elias, Jamal J. *Aisha's Cushion: Religious Art, Perception, and Practice in Islam*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012.

Emajuddin, Ahmed. *Bangladesh: Bureaucracy and Development*. Dhaka: Mizan Publishers, 2006.

Ernst, Carl W. *Refractions of Islam in India: Situating Sufism and Yoga*. New Delhi: Sage, 2016.

— — —. *Ruzbihan Baqli: Mysticism and the Rhetoric of Sainthood in Persian Sufism*. Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996.

Esposito, John L. “‘Ā’isha in the Islamic World: Past and Present.” *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*. Retrieved February 14, 2019.

Faizullah, Tarfia. *Seam*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2014.

Farzana, Kazi Fahmida. *Memories of Burmese Rohingya Refugees: Contested Identity and Belonging*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Foltz, Richard C, Frederick M. Denny and Azizan Baharuddin, eds. *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*. Cambridge, MA: Center for the Study of World Religions, 2003.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage Books, 1978.

Fredrickson, George M. *Diverse Nations: Explorations in the History of Racial and Ethnic Pluralism*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008.

Frembgen, Jürgen Wasim. *The Friends of God : Sufi Saints in Islam, Popular Poster Art from Pakistan*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2006

Gangopadhyay, Sunil. *The Fakir*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2010.

Gautama, Q.L. *Indian Railways: A Journey*. Delhi: B.R. Publications, 2012.

Ghosh, Anindita. *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society, 1778–1905*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Ghosh, G.K. *Daughters of Caryapada*. Kolkata: Knowledge Bank Publishers & Distributors, 2010.

Gill, Mahindara Kaur. *Guru Granth Sahib: The Literary Perspective*. New Delhi: National Book Shop, 2007.

- Ginsberg, Allen. *The Visions of the Great Remember*. Amherst, MA: 1974.
- Gokkhale, Pradip. *Lokāyata/Cārvāka: A Philosophical Inquiry*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Goswami, Karunamaya. *History of Bengali Music*. Dhaka: Losauk, 1994.
- — —. *Introducing Kazi Nazrul Islam*. Dhaka: Bangladeshi Institute of Performing Arts, 1999.
- Graves, Eben. “The Marketplace of Devotional Song: Cultural Economies of Exchange in Bengali Padāvalī-Kīrtan.” *Ethnomusicology*, 61 (1): 52-86.
- Green, Nile. *Indian Sufism since the Seventeenth Century: Saints, Books, and Empires in the Muslim Deccan*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- — —. *Sufis and Settlers in Early Modern India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Grewel, J.S. *Religious Movements and Institutions in Medieval India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Gritten, Anthony and Elaine King, eds. *Music and Gesture*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011.
- Gupta, Tapati. *Bankimchandra’s Bangadarshan: Selected Essays in Translation*. Kolkata: Dasgupta & Co., 2007.
- Guy, John. *The Emporium of the World: Maritime Quanzhou, 1000–1400*. Leiden: Brill, 2001
- Hadj-Moussa, R. and M. Nijhawan. *Suffering, Art, and Aesthetics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Hahn, Tomie. *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture through Japanese Dance*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007.
- Halim, Abdul. Interview by Bertie Kibreah. Personal interview. Dhaka, April 2005.
- Hamzeh, Manal. *Pedagogies of Deveiling: Muslim Girls and the Hijab Discourse*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishers, 2012.
- Haq, Muhammad Enamul. *A History of Sufi-ism in Bengal*. Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1975.
- Harder, Hans. *Sufism and Saint Veneration in Contemporary Bangladesh: The Maijbhandaris of Chittagong*. New York: Routledge, 2011

- Hatcher, Brian A. *Bourgeois Hinduism, or the Faith of the Modern Vedantists: Rare Discourses from Early Colonial Bengal*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- — —. *Vidyasagar: The Life and After-life of an Eminent Indian*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2014.
- Hawley, John, ed. *The Postcolonial Crescent: Islam's Impact on Contemporary Literature*. New York: Peter Lang, 1998.
- Haydn, Hiram. *The Counter Renaissance*. New York: Grove Press, 1960.
- Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture, The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen, 1979.
- Heehs, Peter, ed. *Indian Religions: A Historical Reader of Spiritual Expression and Experience*. New York: New York University Press, 2002.
- Hendricks, Pepe. *Hijab: Unveiling Queer Muslim Lives*. Cape Town: Inner Circle, 2009.
- Hirschkind, Charles. *The Ethnical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- Holdrege, Barbara A. *Bhakti and Embodiment: Fashioning Divine Bodies and Devotional Bodies in Kṛṣṇa Bhakti*. Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2015.
- Holdrege, Barbara A. and Karen Pechilis. *Refiguring the Body: Embodiment in South Asian Religions*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2016.
- Hossain, Mahabub, Shib Narayan Kairy, and Abdul Bayes. *Driving Development: A Story of BRAC's Evolution and Effectiveness*. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2016.
- Hossain, Mohsin. *Kabiyāl Bijay Sarkārer Jīban o Sangīt* [The Life and Music of Kabiyāl Bijay Sarkār]. Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1994.
- Hossain, Zakir. *Bangladesh Cinema and National Identity*. London; New York: Routledge, 2015.
- Husserl, Edmund. *The Idea of Phenomenology*. Leiden, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1964.
- Imam, Mafiz. *Jasimuddin: kabita o gan* [Jasimuddin: Poetry and Songs]. Dhaka: Jhinephul, 2016.
- Islam, Syed Manzoorul, ed. *Essays on Ekushey, the Language Movement, 1952*. Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1994.

- Islam, Tanwi Nandini. *Bright Lines*. New York: Penguin Books, 2015.
- Jahan, Rounaq. *Bangladesh: Promise and Performance*. London: Zed Books, 2001.
- Jafri, Saiyid Zaheer and Helmut Reifeld, eds. *The Islamic Path: Sufism, Society, and Politics in India*. New Delhi: Rainbow Publishers, 2006.
- Jain, Jasbir. *The Diaspora Writes Back*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2015.
- Jairazbhoy, Nazir Ali. *The Rāgs of North Indian Music: Their Structure and Evolution*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1971.
- Jankowsky, Richard C. *Stambeli: Music, Trance, and Alterity in Tunisia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Jasimuddin. *Murshida gan*. Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1977.
- Jhā, Śaktināth. *Bastubādī Bāul: Udbhab, Samāj, Saṃskṛti o Darśan*. Kolkata: Lokasaṃskṛti o Ādibāsī Saṃskṛti Kendra, 1999.
- — —. *Baul-Phakir Padābali*. Kolkata: Pūrba Medinīpura, 2008.
- Joarder, Hasina. *Begum Rokeya, The Emancipator*. Dacca: Nari Kalyan Sangstha, 1980.
- Kendon, Adam. *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Khalifa, Rashad. *Quran: Visual Presentation of the Miracle*. Karachi: H.A.M. Taha, 1974.
- Khalafallah, Haifaa G. *The al-Ghazali Enigma and Why Sharia is Not Islamic Law*. Cambridge, UK: Equinox Publishing, 2017.
- Khan, Ahmad Nabi. *Islamic Architecture in South Asia: Pakistan, India, Bangladesh*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Kibria, Nazli. *Muslims in Motion: Islam and National Identity in the Bangladeshi Diaspora*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011.
- Kinnear, Michael S. *Gramophone Company's First Indian Recordings, 1899-1908*. Hyderabad: Sangam Books Ltd., 1994.

Kinsman, R., ed. *The Darker Vision of the Renaissance*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974.

Knauff, Bruce. *Genealogies for the Present in Cultural Anthropology*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Knight, Lisa. *Contradictory Lives: Baul Women in India and Bangladesh*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Korom, Frank J. *Village of Painters: Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal*. Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2006.

Krakauer, Benjamin. "The Ennobling of a Folk Tradition and the Disempowerment of the Performers: Celebrations and Appropriations of Bāul-Fakir Identity in West Bengal." *Ethnomusicology*, 59 (3): 355-379.

Kugle, Scott. *Sufis and Saints' Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality, and Sacred Power in Islam*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

Kumar, Naresh. "Archaeology of the Contemporary: Many Lives of Gramophone Records." *Proceedings on the Indian History Congress*, vol. 75: 1062–1068.

Lahiri, Pradip Kumar. *Bengali Muslim Thought, 1818–1947: Its Liberal and Rational Trends*. Kolkata: K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1991.

Langley, Winston. *Kazi Nazrul Islam: The Voice of Poetry and the Struggle for Human Wholeness*. Dhaka: Nazrul Institute, 2007.

Lebling, Robert W. *Legends of the Fire Sprits: Jinn and Genies from Arabia to Zanzibar*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2010.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Savage Mind*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966.

Lewis, David. *Bangladesh Politics, Economy and Civil Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Lindholm, Charles. *The Islamic Middle East: An Historical Anthropology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996.

Lombard, Maurice. *The Golden Age of Islam*. New York: American Elsevier, 1975.

Luxenberg, Christoph. *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran*. Berlin: H. Schiler, 2

Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Maity, P.K. *Human Fertility Cults and Rituals of Bengal: A Comparative Study*. New Delhi: Ahhinav Publications, 1989.

Malloch, Stephen and Colwyn Trevarthen, eds. *Communicative Musicality: Exploring the Basis of Human Companionship*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Makdisi, George. *Ibn Aqil: Religion and Culture in Classical Islam*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997.

Mansuruddin, Muhammad. *Lālon Phôkirer Gān* [Songs of Lalon Fakir]. Dhaka: Dhaka University Press, 1948.

Manuel, Peter. *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

— — —. “Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology.” Review. *Ethnomusicology* 57(1): 124-130.

Maqsood, Ammara. *The New Pakistani Middle Class*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017.

Martinez, José Luiz. *Semiosis in Hindustani Music*. Delhi: Motilal Benarsidass Publishers, 2001.

Mazzarella, William. *The Mana of Mass Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

McDaniel, June. *The Madness of the Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

McNeill, David. *Gesture and Thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Meri, Josef W. *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge & Paul, 2002.

Metcalf, Barbara Daly. *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982.

Milewska, Iwona, ed. *Future of Indology*. Kraków: Jagiellonian University, Institute of Oriental Philology, 2008.

- Miller, Barbara Stoler. *The Powers of Art: Patronage in Indian Culture*. Delhi: New York: University Press, 1992.
- Miner, Allyn. *Sitar and Sarod in the 18th and 19th Centuries*. New York: C.F. Peters Corp., 1993.
- Mishra, Umakanta. *Vajrayāna Buddhism: Study in Social Iconography*. Delhi: Pratibha Prakashan, 2009.
- Mitra, Dola. *Decoding Didi: Making Sense of Mamata Banerjee*. New Delhi: Rupa, 2014.
- Mitra, Priti Kumar. *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam: Poetry and History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Mohsin, Amena. *The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: On the Difficult Road to Peace*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003.
- Mojumder, Atindra. *The Caryapadas: A Treatise on the Earliest Bengali Songs*. Kolkata: Naya Prakash, 1967.
- Morris, Rosalind C., ed. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Mukerji, Basavi. "Music and Rabindranath." *India International Centre Quarterly*, 38 (1): 42-51.
- Mukhopadhyay, Ladly. "The Eternal Journey of the Bauls." *Indian Literature*, 58 (6): 8-29.
- Musson, H.E., trans. *The Doctrine of Awakening: A Study on the Buddhist Ascesis*. London: Luzac, 1951.
- Mylonas, Harris. *The Politics of Nation-Building: Making Co-Nationals, Refugees, and Minorities*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Naim, C.M. *Zikr-i Mir: The Autobiography of the Eighteenth Century Mughal Poet Mir Taqi Mir, 1723-1810*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Nakassis, Constantine V. *Doing Style: Youth and Mass Mediation in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Nanda, Lisa. *Narrating the Nation: A Critique of Three Novels by Muslim Writers of the Indian Subcontinent*. Chandigarh: Unistar Books, 201

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Practice of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition*. New York: HarperOne, 2007.

— — —. *Islamic Philosophy in Contemporary Persia*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1972.

Nasrin, Taslima. *Lajja* [Shame]. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1993.

Nath, Mrinal. *Caryapada bhasha path rupantar*. Kolkata: Ebam Mushayer, 2011.

Negus, Keith. "Bob Dylan's Phonographic Imagination." *Popular Music*, 29 (2): 213-227.

Nelson, Lance E. *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988.

Neuman, Daniel M. *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Neuman, Dard. "Pedagogy, Practice, and Embodied Creativity in Hindustani Music." *Ethnomusicology* 56(3): 426-449.

— — —. "The Production of Aura in the Gramophone Age of the 'Live' Performance." *Asian Music* 40(2): 100-123.

Nice, Richard, trans. *Hinduism: The Anthropology of Civilization*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Nizami, Moin Ahmad. *Reform and Renewal in South Asian Islam: The Chishti-Sabris in 18th-19th Century North India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Novak, James J. *Bangladesh: Reflections on the Water*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993.

Novetzke, Christian Lee. *The Quotidian Revolution: Vernacularization, Religion, and the Premodern Public Sphere in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

— — —. *Religion and Public Memory: A Cultural History of Saint Namdev in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

Nurbakhsh, Javad. *Bayazid Bistami*. Tehran: Nurbakhsh, 1994.

Ohlander, Erik S. *Sufism in an Age of Transition: Umar al-Suhrawardi and the Rise of the Islamic Mystical Brotherhoods*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.

Openshaw, Jeanne. *Seeking Bāuls of Bengal*. Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge Press, 2002.

Orsini, Francesca and Katherine Butler Schofield, eds. *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015.

Parveen, Farida. Interview by Bertie Kibreah. Personal interview. Dhaka, June 2005.

Patrī, Umeśa. *Hindūtva*. Kaṭaka :Bījāyīnī Publications, 2016.

Pemberton, Kelly. *Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines in India*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2010.

Piliavsky, Anastasia. *Patronage as Politics in South Asia*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Pinto, Desiderio. *Piri-Muridi Relationship: A Study of the Nizamuddin Dargah*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 1995.

Pollock, Sheldon. “Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History,” in *Cosmopolitanism*, Carol A. Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, eds., 15-53. Durham: NC: Duke University Press, 2002.

— — —. *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

Poonam, Snigdha. *Dreamers: How Young Indians are Changing the World*. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2018.

Powers, Harold. “Mode.” *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2 (15): 775-860.

Prime, Ranchor. *The Birth of Kirtan: The Life and Teachings of Chaitanya*. San Rafael: Mandala Publishing, 2012.

Prentiss, Karen Penchilis. *The Embodiment of Bhakti*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Racy, Ali Jihad. *Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Tarab*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Radice, William, ed. *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism*. Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Rahaim, Matthew. *Musicking Bodies: Gesture and Voice in Hindustani Music*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012.

Rai, Rajesh and Peter Reeves, eds. *The South Asian Diaspora: Transnational Networks and Changing Identities*. London: Routledge, 2009.

Redfield, Robert and Milton B. Seeger. "The Cultural Role of Cities." *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 3(1): 53-73.

Qadri, Husain Muhiuddin. *SAARC and Globalization: Issues, Prospects, and Policy Prescriptions*. Lahore: Minhaj-ul-Quran Publications, 2008.

Qadri, Muhammad Riyaz. *The Sultan of the Saints: Mystical Life and Teaching of Shaikh Syed Abdul Qadir Jilani*. Gujranwala: Abbasi Publication, 2000.

Qureshi, Regula Burchhardt, ed. *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practice, Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Rafiabandi, H.N. *Saints and Saviors of Islam*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2005

Rahman, Lutfur. *Bauddha caryapada*. Dhaka: Dharani Sahitya Samsad, 1990.

Rahman, Mizanur, ed. *A Community in Transition: The Biharis in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Empowerment Through Law of the Common People, 2003.

Raja, Deepak. *Hindustani Music: A Tradition in Transition*. New Delhi: D.K. Printwork, 2005.

Ramsaran, John A. *English and Hindi Religious Poetry, An Analogical Study*. Leiden: Brill, 1973.

Ranajit, Guha. *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial Bengal*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Randal, Don Michael, ed. *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music. Third Edition*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986.

Rao, Velcheru Narayana. *Text and Tradition in South India*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017.

Ray, Rajat Kanta. *Mind, Body and Society: Life and Mentality in Colonial Bengal*. Kolkata: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Razavi, Mehdi Amin. *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination*. Surrey: Curzon, 1997.

Ridgeon, Lloyd, ed. *Sufis and Salafis in the Contemporary Age*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

Riyaz, Ali. *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.

Rowell, Lewis. *Music and Musical Thought in Early India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Robinson, Francis. *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Roy, Anwesha. *Making Peace, Making Riots: Communalism and Communal Violence, Bengal 1940-1947*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Roy, Asim. *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983.

Rudert, Angela. *Shakti's New Voice: Guru Devotion in a Woman-Led Spiritual Movement*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017.

Rushd, Abu. *Songs of Lalon Shah*. Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1964.

Ruskin, Jesse and Timothy Rice. "The Individual in Musical Ethnography." *Ethnomusicology* 56(2): 299-327.

Ruud, Arild Engelsen. "The Political Bully in Bangladesh," in *Patronage as Politics in South Asia*, ed. Anastasia Piliavsky (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 303-325.

Saikia, Yasmin. *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011.

Salil, Tripathi. *The Colonel Who Would Not Repent: The Bangladesh War and Its Unquiet Legacy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016.

Salomon, Carol (trans. and com.). Keith E. Cantú and Saymon Zakaria (eds). *City of Mirrors: Songs of Lalan Sai*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Salomon, Carol. "The Cosmogonic Riddles of Lalan Fakir." *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*. ed. Arjun Appadurai, Frank J. Korom, and Margaret A. Mills (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1991): 156-199.

Sankrityanan, Rahul. *Selected Essays of Rahul Sankrityanan*. New Delhi: People's Publishers House, 1984.

Sanyal, Hitesranjan. *Social Mobility in Bengal*. Kolkata: Papyrus, 1981.

Sanyal, Usha. *Ahmad Riza Khan Bareilwi: In the Path of the Prophet*. Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2005.

Sarkar, Sutapa Chatterjee. *The Sundarbans: Folk Deities, Monsters, and Mortals*. London: Routledge, 2010.

Śāstrī, Kshitimohan Sen. *Bāmlār Bāul*. Kolkata: Kalikātā Biśvabidyālay, 1993.

Sax, William Sturman, ed. *The Gods at Play: Lila in South Asia*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Saxena, Sushil Kumar. *Hindustani Music and Aesthetics Today: A Selective Study*. New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 2009.

Sayyid, Shamsul Alam. *Caryapada tattvika samiksha*. Dhaka: Ayadarna Publications, 2009.

Schimmel, Anne Marie. *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980.

— — —. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975.

— — —. *Pain and Grace: A Study of Two Mystical Writers of Eighteenth-Century Muslim India*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976.

Schofield, Katherine Butler. "Reviving the Golden Age Again: Classicization, Hindustani Music, and the Mughals." 54 (3): 484-517.

Schultz, Anna. *Singing a Hindu Nation: Marathi Devotional Performance and Nationalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Schwartz, Susan L. *Rasa*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

Seeley, Clinton. *A Poet Apart: A Literary Biography of the Bengali Poet Jibananda Das (1899–1954)*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990.

Seeley, Clinton. *The Slaying of Meghanada: A Ramayana from Colonial Bengal*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

- Sells, Michale A, ed. and trans. *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Miraj, Poetic and Theological Writings*. New York: Paulist Press, 1996.
- Sen, Amartya. "Indian Traditions and the Western Imagination." *Daedalus*, 126 (2): 1-26.
- Sen, Pulinbihari and Kshitis Roy, eds. *Rabindranath Tagore, A Tribute*. New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 2006.
- Sen, Sailendra Nath. *Ancient Indian History and Civilization*. New Delhi: New Age International, 1999.
- Sen, Sukumar (ed.). *Old Bengali Texts: Caryāgīti, Vajragīti [and] Prahelikā*. Kolkata: University of Calcutta, 1948.
- Shackle, Christopher, Gurharpal Singh and Arvind-pal Mandair, eds. *Sikh Religion, Culture, and Ethnicity*. Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2001.
- Shahidullah, Muhammad. *Śahīdullāh Saṃbardhanā Grantha*. Dhaka: Renaissance Printers, 1967.
- Sharify-Funk, Meena, William Rory Dickson, and Merin Shobhana Xavier (eds.). *Contemporary Sufism: Piety, Politics, and Popular Culture*. London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018.
- Sharma, Sunil. "Reading the Acts and Lives of Performers in Mughal Persian Texts," in *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*," ed. Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler Schofield (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015), 283-302.
- Shaw, Miranda Eberle. *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Sherinian, Zoe. *Tamil Folk Music as Dalit Liberation Theology*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014.
- Shirazi, Faegheh. *The Veil Unveiled: The Hijab in Modern Culture*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2001.
- Shrewsbury III, Miles. "Indian Music Scholarship." milesshrewsbury.wordpress.com. <https://milesshrewsbury.wordpress.com/2011/05/25/indian-music-scholarship-part-1> (accessed January 10, 2019).
- Siddiqi, Mohammad Suleman. *The Junaydi Sufis of the Deccan: Discovery of a Seventeenth Century Scroll*. New Delhi: Primus Books, 2014.

- Singh, Nirbhai. *Philosophy of Sikhism: Reality and its Manifestations*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1990.
- Sinha, Soumitra. *The Quest for Modernity and the Bengali Muslims, 1921–1947*. Kolkata: Minerva Publications, 1995.
- Slawek, Stephen. *Sitār Technique in Nibaddh Forms*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1987.
- Soneji, Devesh. *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Stewart, Tony K. *Fabulous Females and Peerless Pīrs : Tales of Mad Adventure in Old Bengal*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Stewart, Tony K. *The Final Word: The Caitanya Caritāmṛta and the Grammar of Religious Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Stille, Max. “Communities of Code-Switching Connoisseurs: Multilingualism in Islamic Sermons in Bangladesh.” *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, 1(3): 23-37.
- Stokes, Martin. “On Musical Cosmopolitanism.” *The Macalester International Roundtable 2007*. Paper 3.
- Sudipta, Sen. *Empire of Free Trade: The East India Company and the Making of the Colonial Marketplace*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *Creative Unity*. London: Macmillan, 1922.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *The Religion of Man*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1930.
- Tamizi, Mohammad Yahya. *Sufi Movements in Eastern India*. New Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat, 1992.
- Taneja, Anup, ed. *Sufi Cults and the Evolution of Medieval Indian Culture*. New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 2003.
- Torab, Azam. “Piety as Gendered Agency: A Study of Jalaseh Ritual Discourse in an Urban Neighbourhood in Iran.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 2(2): 235-252.
- Tripathi, Salil. *The Colonel Who Could Not Repent: The Bangladesh War and Its Unquiet Legacy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016.

Troll, Christian W, ed. *Muslim Shrines in India: Their Character, History, and Significance*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003

Turino, Thomas. *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

— — —. *Nationalists, Cosmopolitans, and Popular Music in Zimbabwe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

— — —. *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

— — —. “Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircian Semiotic Theory for Music.” *Ethnomusicology*, 43(2): 221-255.

Uddin, Sufia. *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity, and Language in an Islamic Nation*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

Urban, Hugh B. *The Economics of Ecstasy: Tantra, Secrecy, and Power in Colonial Bengal*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

— — —. “The Marketplace and the Temple: Economic Metaphors and Religious Meanings in the Folk Songs of Colonial Bengal.” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 60(4): 1085-1114.

— — —. “The Power of the Impure: Transgression, Violence, and Secrecy in Bengali Śākta Tantra and Modern Western Magic.” *Numen*, 50(3): 269-308.

— — —. “Songs of Ecstasy: Mystics, Minstrels, and Merchants in Colonial Bengal.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 123(3): 493-519.

— — —. *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy Politics, and Power in the Study of Religions*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

van Bruinessen, Martin and Julia Dey Howell, eds. *Sufism and the “Modern” in Islam*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2007.

van Schendel, Willem. *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*. London: Anthem, 2005.

— — —. *A History of Bangladesh*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

van Schendel, Willem and Itty Abraham, eds. *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things: States, Borders, and The Other Side of Globalization*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.

van Schendel, Willem, Wolfgang Mey and Aditya Kumar Dewan. *The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Living in a Borderland*. Dhaka: University Press, 2001.

Varadpande, M.L. *History of Indian Theatre*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1987.

Veer, Peter van der. *The Modern Spirit of Asia: The Spiritual and the Secular in China and India*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013.

— — —. *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

Waliullah, Sayyid. *Lalsalu* [The Red Cloth]. Kolkata: Comrade Publishers, 1948.

— — —. *A Tree without Roots*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1967.

Weidman, Amanda J. *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

Werbner, Pnina and Helene Basu, eds. *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality, and Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Widdess, Richard. "Text, Orality, and Performance in Newar Devotional Music," in *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*, ed. Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler Schofield (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015), 231-246.

— — —. *The Rāgas of Early Indian Music: Modes, Melodies and Musical Notations from the Gupta Period to ca. 1250*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

Wolf, Richard, *The Voice in the Drum: Music, Language, and Emotion in Islamicate South Asia*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014.

Wolf, Richard, ed. *Theorizing the Local: Music, Practice, and Experience in South Asia and Beyond*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Yunus, Muhammad. *Revisiting The Wall Street Journal, The Financial Times, and Grameen Bank*. Dhaka: Grameen Bank, 2002.

Zaman, Muhammad Qasim. *Islam in Pakistan*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018.

Zaman, Niaz. *A Divided Legacy: The Partition in Selected Novels of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh*. Karachi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Zbikowski, Lawrence M. *Foundations of Musical Grammar*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Zene, Cosimo. *The Rishi of Bangladesh: A History of Christian Dialogue*. London: Routledge, 2015.

Zubko, Katherine C. *Dancing Bodies of Devotion: Fluid Gestures in Bharata Natyam*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014.