

Bangla *Pir Kathā* and the *Fātimār Suratnāmā*: Reflecting the Female Sufi Horizon of Bengal

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Abstract: Sufism originated from the Qur'an and Hadith, absorbed various philosophical elements, knowledge and rituals from Arab, African, European and Asian traditions. It spread in the Indian subcontinent through a process of amalgamation and integration of diverse cultural traits drawn from different regions of the world. In course of time, when it reached Bengal, it interacted with local cultural and religious traditions, and developed distinct regional forms. The present researcher aims to trace the presence of women in Sufi *tariqās* of Eastern India, especially in Bengal (c. 1700-1900 CE) and investigate how vernacular literature presents female Sufis or the *Pirānīs*. One such middle Bengali manuscript copied in Arabic-Persian script was Sherbaj Khan's *Fātimār-Suratnāmā*. It contains the story about the beauty of Hazrat Fatima (RA), daughter of Hazrat Muhammad (SM). This article attempts to present the story of the *Fātimār-Suratnāmā* and place the central character of the text in the Sufi horizon. Following conventional historical research methodology, this paper bases itself on the ideas of 'otherness' and 'outsideness' propagated by existential feminism within the context of the South Asian Sufi horizon.

Key Words: Sufism, Vernacular Text, Existential Feminism, Female Sufi.

Sufism spread in the Indian subcontinent through a process of amalgamation and integration of diverse cultural traits drawn from different regions of the world. While Sufism originated from the Qur'an and Hadith, it absorbed various philosophical elements, knowledge and rituals from Arab, African, European and Asian traditions. In course of time, it spread across different parts of the globe, adopted different *tariqās* and within those *tariqās* developed several distinct sub-branches. For generations, the *Silsilāh* (chain) continued preserving the teachings and enriching the *tariqa*. Eventually, it reached Bengal, where it interacted with local cultural and religious traditions, and developed distinct regional forms. Sufism became one of the most discussed issues in Indian religious and social history. Scholars from England, France, and Germany got attracted to West Asian and Indian Sufism

in the 19th century as part of the colonial knowledge structure. From the mid-19th century, historians, sociologists, anthropologists and theologians of the United States focused their attention to many previously unknown mysterious facts of Sufism. Indian Sufism did not escape their attention. But a common tendency in these studies is, Sufi men are almost always placed at the center of discussion. However, the early history of Sufism shows a different scenario. Rabia Basri, also known as Rabia al Basri, was one of the earliest Arab saints and Sufi mystics, and became a highly influential religious figure in the 18th century CE. Her legacy continues to be revered even today. Following Rabia Basri, we find more extraordinary women like her around the globe in different phases of history. Notable mentions include Halima of Damascus, Rabi'a binte Ismail, Lubaba, Fatima of Damascus, Sha'wana, Ghufayra al-Abida, Dhakkara, Fātima al-Barda'iyya, Hazrat Bibi Zulaykha (the venerated mother of Shaikh Nizam al-Din Auliya), Hazrat Bibi Fatima Sam (adopted sister of Hazrat Baba Farid), Bibi Sahiba Kalan, Hazrat Bibi Rasti (also known as Bibi Pakdaman, mother of Shaikh Rukn-i-Alam). However, this kind of female Sufi agency is not found in the history of Sufism of the subcontinent, and particularly not in Bengal. In instances where we do find them, they are presented as the followers or relatives of male Sufi mystics. For example, let us take a look at these lines found in the Inscription of Maryam Sāliḥa Mosque (Photo 1), Babupura, Dhaka (1118 AH/1706 CE):



Photo 1: Inscription of Maryam Sāliḥa Mosque, Babupura, Dhaka.

Reading of the Inscription

L-1 مریم این سجده گہ بنا کردہ - ترک دنیای بی وفا کردہ

L-2 سال تاریخ فوت و مسجد او - خواستم ہاتھی ندا کردہ

L-3 گفت این مسجد وسیع زمان - مریم صالحہ بنا کردہ - سنہ ۱۱۱۸

Translation

L-1 Maryam built this place of prostration, and [then finally] left this unfaithful world.

L-2 When I looked for the year of the date of her demise and the [date of the construction of the] mosque, an unseen voice declared it.

L-3 and said: This vast mosque of the age was built by Maryam Saliha. The year 1118.¹

Maryam Saliha's prominence is clearly inscribed in these lines. But historians noted her as the sister of Shah Nuri (of Maghbazar) and daughter of Shaykh Abdullah Mujaddidi (of Babupura, Nilkhet). Her role in the *Pir-murid* structure has been largely ignored.² Kelly Pemberton has critically reviewed existing scholarship on Sufism that has ignored women's role in *Pir-murid* relationships. She highlights how earlier studies (Ahmed, Roy, Eaton, Flueckiger, Werbner, and others) revealed the fluid, non-institutional nature of South Asian Sufism, which creates a space for women's informal spiritual authority and shows how women, especially within *Pir* families, function as *de facto Pirs*.³ Saad Ali Khan and Abida Bano provide an exploratory, qualitative examination using thematic analysis of secondary sources to address the 'hagiographical silence' surrounding the presence of Sufi women in South Asia. They identify two significant historical trends defining the female experience in South Asian Sufism. A pervasive "veiling or silencing" evident in the scarcity of documentation of Sufi women in hagiographies, which are

predominantly focused on male figures; and second, a paradoxical imagination of women. This paradox sees women both demonized—sometimes equated with the *nafs* (the soul, self, ego inciting to evil)—and exalted, with revered female Sufis occasionally being celebrated only by being described as possessing the spiritual qualities of a man. Existential feminism explains this paradox within the framework of the highly complex nature of gender dynamics and patriarchal structures. This paper conforms with the ideas of ‘otherness’ and ‘outsideness’ propagated by existential feminisms within the specific historical and cultural context of South Asian Sufi culture.⁴

Keeping this dichotomy in mind, the present researcher aims to trace the presence of women in Sufi *tariqās* of Eastern India, especially in Bengal (c. 1700-1900 CE) and investigate how vernacular literature (*Pir Kathā*) presents female characteristics or the *Pirānī*. This article follows conventional historical research methodology which includes three fundamental steps. The first step is the collection of data from primary sources, followed by criticism of the data, and finally synthesis and conclusion.

Abdul Karim and later on Abdur Rahim vividly sketched the early Sufi paradigm of Bengal in their monograph on the social history of the Muslims in Bengal. Unfortunately, their discussion failed to enlist the female Sufis of the delta.⁵ The classical work of Mohammad Enamul Haq on Bengal Sufism is notably differing with Karim’s work in this trail.⁶ Haq noted that one and a half miles west of the town of Pabna, there is a famous *dargāh* known as the *Mayanāmatī* or *Nayanamatir Pirenīr āstānāh*. The guardian of this *āstānāh* is always a female, who is called *Pirenī* or *Pirānī*. This *āstānāh* was the most active center of Muharram celebration in the district. And the *Pirenī* had the undisputed authority over all the *Gahwarah* Parties organised in the town.⁷ But he strongly refused to include these *pirs* in the Sufi *silsilāh* of Bengal. Tony K. Stewart’s critical analysis on charismatic authority of the Sufis as described in the *Pir* literature, showed a commendable skill in presenting and analyzing the stories of *Manik Pir’s Jahuranama*, Muhammad Khater’s *Banbibī Jahuranama*, and Abdur Rahim’s *Gazi Kalu* and *Champavati Kanya’s Punthi*. He also noted the presence of ‘*Pirānī*’,

meaning mystic women with charisma.⁸ Girindranath Das documented the *Pir-Deruish*-Sufi-centric literature written in Bengali, where he showed that a special genre of Bangla literature emerged in the 17th-18th century which centered around the *pirs* as saints or preachers of Islam. In his list of historical Pirs, we find seven female characters.⁹ They were: Champavati, Fatima Bibi, Roshan Bibi, Ola Bibi, Khuri Bibi, Ban Bibi and Bibi Barakat.¹⁰ Das has documented a few of them during his field research.

Pirani Bibi Barakat

The *dargāh* of Pirani Barakat Bibi is located in Katakhalī village under Hingalgañj police station in present Basirhat district. The *dargāh* was supervised by late Abbas Ali Ghazi. The *khādīms* of the *dargāh* used to light lamps there every morning and evening. At present, many local devotees offer milk, *bātāsā* (sugar candy), fruits etc. here.¹¹ Popularly known as ‘Ma Barakat’, her *kārāmat* (charismatic power) was further amplified in Muhammad Alimuddin’s *Ma Barakater Mejmani Punthi*, where the poetic narrative and rhythmic verses helped produce the worldly figure of a *Pirānī* in the imaginary world of readers and listeners.¹² Girindranath Das, despite his efforts, was unable to reconstruct the historical identity of Bibi Barakat.

Hazrat Fatemā Zohrā

There was another fictional *dargāh* of a *Pirānī* called Hazrat Fatema Zohra, in Sahra village of Kharigachi Mauza in Barasat. She was popularly known as Bibi Fatima in that region. This Sufi *dargāh* had *lākherāj* (tax free *devottvar*) lands in Mathgram, Berunan Pukhuria, Malikapur, Paschim Ichapur, Ghola, Sonakharki, Kharigachi-Sahara mauzas. Historical identification of this *pirani* is not supported by any textual evidences. Girindranath had noticed more than ten printed Puthis where Hazrat Fatima or Bibi Fatima was the central character as *Pirani* or Female saint with charismatic power.¹³ However, all the texts analyzed by this researcher are mostly *dobhāshi puthi* from *Battalā*, a phenomenon and popular book production place of the colonial period.

Richard M Eaton’s work on medieval Bengal and expansion of Islam in the deltaic land had proposed the political leadership

of the Pirs in the expansion of agricultural activity and establishment of new settlements following the course of the River Ganges.¹⁴ Recent research on Bengal Sufism focused on the *tariqais* and vernacular characteristics following the traditional methods. Scholars like Amit Dey,¹⁵ Tahmid Zami¹⁶ and others explored various aspects of Sufism in the Bengal delta. However, their research ignored the Bangla Pir literary genre, especially the *Fatimar Suratnāmā*, which is a new primary source to revisit the Sufi literature. In the subsequent section an attempt will be made to explore this uncharted area with a focus on Sufi dynamics and feminist perspectives.

***Fātemār Suratnāmā* of Sherbaz Khan**

The *Fātemār Suratnāmā* is an exceptional piece of Bangla Pir-literature. Several copies of this Bangla manuscript are now preserved in Dhaka University Library (Photo 2)¹⁷ and Bangla Academy Manuscript Collection.¹⁸ Authored by the 18th century poet Sherbaz Khan, the central theme of this poem is to present the *surat* (beauty) of the Prophet Muhammad (SM)'s daughter, Hazrat Fatima (RA). In this text *surat* is manifested as a divine gift given to her by the Almighty Allah. The manuscript was edited and published in 2020 with illustration of the folios.¹⁹ The story starts with an event like this: one day, Fatima's husband Ali (RA) went to the house of Hazrat Abu Bakr (RA), one of the closest associates of the Prophet (SM), and called him from outside.

When Abu Bakr asked who was calling, Ali replied that he was the *dāmān* (son-in-law) of the Prophet (SM), the father of Hasan (RA) and Hussain (RA), and the husband of the most beautiful, Fatima (RA). Abu Bakr (RA) laughed and asked whether Ali had even seen the *surat* of Fatima. Ali (RA) replied that of course he had; as Fatima was his wife.²⁰ In the words of the poet:

*Hāsiyā bakkar tāne puchila bacan
Dekhichani Phātemār Surat Kemon
Āli balanata Bhāi ki kahilā bānī
Jei kathā Kahilā tumi Anuruba Kāhinī
Āmi Bale nā Dekhechi Surat Tāhāra
Tobe kene dui Farajana hailā Āmāra*²¹

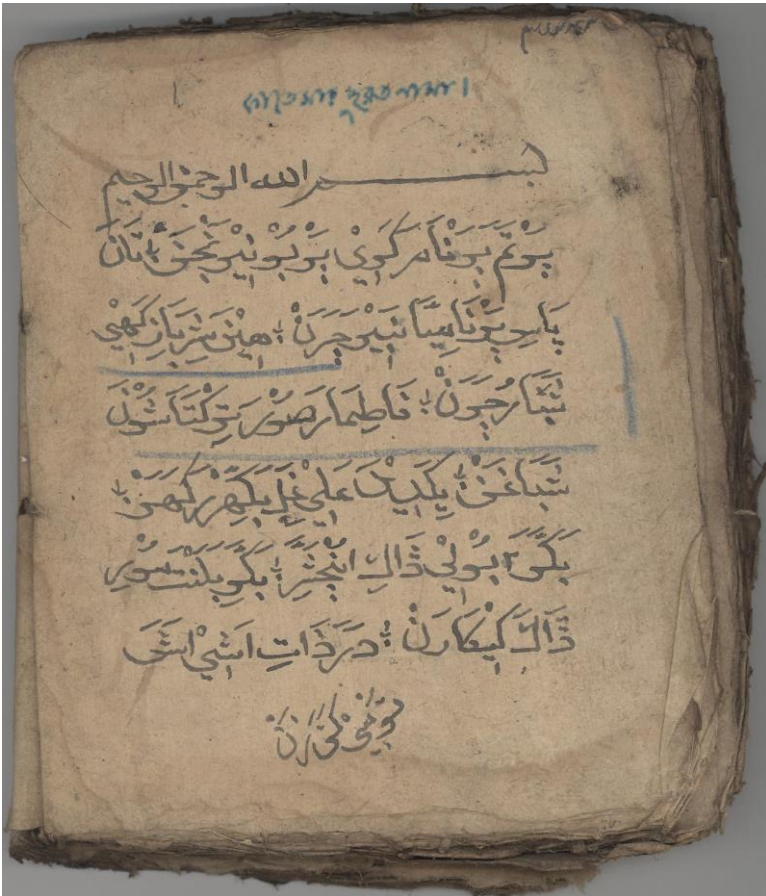


Photo 2: *Fātemār Suratnāmā* Bangla manuscript written in Arabic Scripts. Photo@ Dhaka University Central Library

Abu Bakr (RA) then replied that Fatima’s *surat* is a gift from Allah, the Almighty. It is *bātenī* (secret) and it can only be seen through *ilm* (knowledge). It will be revealed only on the Day of Judgement. After learning this, Ali (RA) returned home with surprise and anger. He demanded that Fatima (RA) should show him her *bātenī surat* (secret beauty). Out of anger and frustration, Ali (RA) refrained himself from taking food and drink for three consecutive days. Finally, Fatima (RA) agreed to show her *surat* and instructed Ali (RA) to go the

forest for *mrigayā* (hunting), where her secret beauty would be revealed.²² As the poet wrote:

Tābe bibi jagamātā kahite lāgilo
Sikārete ekdin jāite bulila
Sikār karite gelā arannar mājāra
Dekhibā jateluk rup sakkal āmāra
Bibir bacan Jodi Āliye Sunila
*Harisita haiyā Sikāre calila*²³

Ali (RA) set out and walked through the jungle under the scorching sun. During this journey, he encountered various mysterious, symbolic and metaphorical events, which were completely beyond his understanding. These events were:

- (a) In the first scene, Ali (RA) sees a *fakir* in prayer. Near him stands a *Kāngālinī/kankālinī* (a poor/skeletal woman) with two boys beside her.
- (b) In the second scene, Ali (RA) again walks through the forest in unbearable heat. Under a tree in the middle of an open field he sees a *fakir* in *sizdāh*, with his hands tied and tears streaming down. He is crying *ummāti, ummāti* (my followers). The poet describes how the earth is drowning in his tears. Seeing this, Ali (RA) breaks down and cries out *hāya hāya* (lamentation) loudly. The same *kankālinī* is here too, with her two boys, calling out *bābā, bābā* (father).
- (c) In the third scene, Ali (RA) encounters another *fakir* in *dhikr* (uttering Allah's name) inside a circle of fire. The poet metaphorically describes his brain boiling like rice in a pot (*hārīr bhītor jemon chāolo fute*). His skull cracks open, brain matter leaking out, yet the *fakir* continues to cry *ummāti, ummāti*.
- (d) At the edge of the forest, Ali (RA) finds a *kankālinī* making *ruti* (bread). Ali (RA) asks who she is, who her husband is, and for whom she is making the bread? She replies that she was making it for her *Nīranjan* (the lord of the three worlds, the physical, the astral and the causal). Ali (RA), in a harsh tone, asks if she has gone

mad, saying there is only one *Niranjan* in this world. The woman calmly responded that she has her own *Niranjan*.

- (e) In the middle of the forest, Ali (RA) chases a beautiful *Maynā* bird. It was wearing gold jewelries— a crown in its head, neck ornaments, two pearls in its ears and a *tikli*.²⁴ In the words of poet Sherbaj Khan:

Katadur jāy ā dekhe darkhater upara

Dirab ek maynā Āche adhika sundar

Maynār sireta Āche dirab ek taj

Sabuj tikoli Āche lalāter mājāra

Korāna dekhila maynār badaner upar

*Pāke pāke lekhā Āche kurāner harafa*²⁵

Following the bird, Ali (RA) eventually reaches the door of a mosque, where he sees an old woman sleeping on a *khātuli* (bed) blocking the entrance. Ali (RA) requestes the old woman to move. She replies that she has no strength left in her body and asks him to move her aside. Ali (RA) tries to pull the bed away with his full strength, but he could not move it even an inch. He tries again, still with no result. The old woman then says to him, people call you the Lion of Allah (*shere khudā*) or the mighty Ali (RA). But I have seen how much strength you truly have. Finally, she tells Ali (RA) to look inside the mosque. There, he saw the *Arsh Kursi*, and two boys reciting the Qur'an, one with a black face, and the other with a red face.²⁶

Ali (RA) returned home with a very unstable mind. When Fatima asked him about his journey to forest, he described his mysterious experience. Fatima (RA) explained and elaborated every event that he saw. All the encounters that had been experienced by Ali (RA) were explained by Fatima (RA) in the following manner:

- (a) The *fakir* was the Prophet Muhammad (SM) and the *Kankālinī* was Fatima (RA) herself. With her were their children- Hasan and Hussain.
- (b) Prophet Muhammad (SM) was crying and praying for *pānāh* (salvation) of the Muslim *ummāh* (community).

- (c) In the day of resurrection (*Hāshr*), when the sun will be right above the head of the resurrected, the prophet (SM) will still be crying for his *ummāh*.
- (d) In his encounter with the *kankālinī* making *ruti*, the woman was Fatima herself, making it for her husband Ali, the only *Niranjan* of Fatima.
- (e) The *Maynā* bird was Fatima (RA) in disguise. She describes that the crown was the Creator, the neck ornament was The Prophet (SM), the two pearl earrings were Hasan and Hussain. And on her head, the *Tikli* was Ali (RA) himself. The old lady in the mosque was also Fatima. The boys inside the mosque, their sons and the colour of their faces signify their upcoming death.²⁷

However, the above explanation of Fatima (RA) failed to fulfill the curiosity of Ali (RA). He was still not satisfied and insisted on seeing the actual *surat* of Fatima (RA). At this point, she went to the Prophet Muhammad (SM) to resolve this issue. The Prophet warned Ali (RA) that unveiling Fatima's *surat* and watching it may cause him his death. It was meant only for the *Roja Hāshara* (Day of Judgment), not for this world. But Ali kept insisting and finally Fatima (RA) agreed. As she began to untie *tin bandha* (three layers) of her robe, thunder roared, light overwhelmed their vision, and fire suddenly surrounded them. Everyone fell unconscious except for the Prophet (SM). He called Fatima (RA) three times, and only then did she regain consciousness. Immediately, she fixed her clothing and then helped Ali (RA) and her sons recover as well. Finally, having witnessed Fatima (RA)'s *surat*, Ali (RA) felt at peace, and he thanked Allah with two *rak'ah* of prayer.²⁸

The metaphoric story lines may have some similarity with a few fragmented events that is being mentioned in *sahihāin* (the Bukhari and the Muslim). For example, during the judgment day the crouching sun will be just above the head, everyone will think about themselves only. Under such situation, the Prophet Muhammad (SM) will be thinking about the salvation of his *ummāh*.

Conventional historical and Sufi texts in South Asia, more particularly Bengal, do not prominently highlight the role of

women in the spread of Islam or Sufi orders; local *Pirkathā* such as *Fatimar Suratnāmā* offers a striking exception. In this text, the centrality of Fatima (RA) has been elevated even above Ali (RA). When Ali becomes eager to behold the *surat* of his wife, she instructs him to go for a *mrigayā*, during which various manifestations appear before him. This shows Fatima (RA)'s authority over Ali (RA) and her own will. Upon return, as Ali (RA) narrates his experiences, she interprets each of the events for him. If we interpret this through a Sufi traditional lens, this positions Fatima (RA) as the spiritual *pir* (guide) and Ali (RA) as the *murid* (disciple). During the hunt he encounters a beautiful Mayna bird, embodying Fatima (RA), whose crown symbolizes the Supreme Creator, neck-ornament representing the Prophet Muhammad (SM), the two pearls in its ears signify Hasan and Hussain, and the *tikli* on her forehead refer to Ali (RA). Once again, we see Sherbaz Khan placing Fatima (RA) at the central spiritual role with the other revered figures appearing to be around her.

Conclusion

Despite the limited historical evidence of the female Sufi figures (*piranis*) in Bengal, this particular text composed in Bangla has taken an alternative plot and did not follow the convention of *ādab* writing and presents Fatima (RA) as the spiritual authority and Ali (RA) as the seeker. The geographical, as well as the cultural setting of these texts are vernacular. It opens a box with numerous probabilities. Did the social reality of the time allow for a woman's spiritual authority over man? Was the presence of women in eastern Indian Sufi traditions truly negligible? or have their contributions simply remained undocumented due to textual silences and historiographical gaps? These questions demand further rigorous investigations to understand the multi-layered gender relationship in different *tarikās* and the historical imagination of spiritual authority in Bengal.

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