



The Influence of the Thans of Gazi Baba Manik Pir in the Spread of Hindu-Muslim Syncretism in the Sunderban Region of South 24 Parganas.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the cultural-anthropological significance of Ghazi Baba Manik Pir as a prominent figure of folk Islam and a symbol of Hindu Muslim syncretism in the Bhati (deltaic) region of South Twenty Four Parganas, West Bengal. Situated within the culturally diverse Sundarbans delta, the region preserves a rich tradition of folk religion shaped by the interaction of Vedic, Buddhist, and Islamic influences. Through folk literature, oral traditions, shrine practices, and field survey data, the study explores the contested historical identity of Manik Pir, who is regarded by some scholars as a historical Sufi saint and by others as a imaginary folk pir. The paper highlights how Manik Pir became integrated into the religious life of agrarian Hindu and Muslim communities, particularly among marginalized Dalit and Atraf-Ajlaf Muslim groups. His shrines such as *Thans*, *Mazars*, *Yadgahs* and *Nazargahs* function as shared sacred spaces where syncretic ritual practices such as *puja*, *hajat* and *mannat* continue to foster communal harmony and social cohesion. Popular belief portrays him variously as a protector of cattle, healer, guardian of boatmen, and granter of fertility, reflecting his deep integration into agrarian folk belief systems. Based on field observations in the Jaynagar region, the study argues that the cult of Manik Pir played an important role in local social formation and the spread of popular Islam in the Bhati region. The paper concludes that



this declining yet significant folk tradition deserves further systematic research.

South 24 Parganas is one of the relatively newer administrative districts of West Bengal, which was formerly a part of the undivided district of Twenty-Four Parganas. A major part of South 24 Parganas geographically belongs to the lower deltaic (bhati) region of the Sundarbans. At present, this vast deltaic (bhati) region, comprising fourteen police stations and thirty Community Development Blocks, is distinguished not only for its unique natural features but also for its rich cultural diversity. From a historical perspective as well, the deltaic tract of South 24 Parganas possesses a significantly rich heritage. The archaeological sites of Dhosa and Chandaneswar in this region at Joynagar continue to bear testimony to the historical legacy of the Mauryan and Kushan periods. Likewise, Jaynagar Majilpur still preserves the historical memory of the now defunct course of the Adi-Ganga, serving as an important marker of the region's fluvial past. Over the centuries, this remote region, surrounded by rivers, creeks, and dense forests, has witnessed the migration and settlement of people belonging to diverse castes, ethnic groups, and religious communities. As a result, major religious traditions such as Vedic religion, Buddhism, and Islam entered this region and, in many cases, lost their original doctrinal distinctiveness. In the process of adapting to local social needs and cultural contexts, these religions gradually transformed into forms of folk religion and popular belief. Centered on these popular beliefs, numerous folk deities have secured a permanent place in the mental realms and religious perception of the people of this region. It may be argued that few other regions of West Bengal exhibit such a remarkable proliferation of folk deities as is found in the deltaic (bhati) tracts of southern Bengal. Alongside deities such as Bonbibibi, Narayani, Manasa, Shitala, and Baba Panchanan, numerous figures known as Gazi Baba or Gazi Pir have also become established as folk divinities within the religious belief systems of the local agrarian population, particularly among the lower-class and marginalized communities. Among the folk Gazi Pirs of the Sundarbans region, one such prominent figure is Gazi Baba Manik Pir. He continues to be venerated in numerous Thanas (Sacred Sites), Yadgahs (commemorative place), and Nazargahs (saint's memorial shrine) across the Twenty-Four Parganas district, where he is represented in distinctive forms and through various symbolic manifestations. It may be argued that the emergence of Gazi Babas or Gazi Pirs in the deltaic (bhati) region of the Twenty-Four Parganas bears a close relationship with the growth of Folk Islam as well as with the processes of local social formation and reorganization.

Within half a century of the Turkish conquest in Eastern Bengal in the early fourteenth century, the soil of Bengal had been consecrated by the sacred footsteps of numerous Sufi saints and dervishes. Among



those sufies who played a significant role in the spread of Islam in Eastern and Southern Bengal, Pir Shah Jalal and his 360 disciples (*awliya*) occupy a special place in the history of the opening out of popular Islam and traditional Islamic culture. However, many among these 360 saints remain shrouded in mystery. Although the historical identities of several of them cannot be clearly established, their activities, spiritual influence, and social impact continue to survive in the folk traditions, oral literature, folk-songs, and Cultural-Anthropological elements of Bengal. Through these mediums, their legacy still remains vibrant among both the Hindu and Muslim marginalized village communities of the sunderban region.

Many historians have described such figures as folk pirs or even as imaginary saints. In eastern and southern Bengal, particularly in the Sundarbans and the Bhati (deltaic lowland) region, one such folk pir is Ghazi Baba, also known as Ghazi Saheb Manik Pir. Despite various historical and social adversities, the cultural and anthropological elements associated with Manik Pir continue to carry the legacy of Hindu–Muslim syncretic traditions in the Bhati region. By exploring the self-identity of Manik Pir and examining the ritual practices of worship and vows (*puja-hajat*) prevalent at his shrines, we can develop an understanding of his influence both on the spread of Islam in the Bhati region and on the growth of Hindu-Muslim syncretic cultural traditions.

Biographical Identity of Manik Pir:

There exists considerable debate among Folk Researchers and the scholars regarding the identity of Ghazi Manik Pir and the period of his arrival in Eastern and Southern Bengal. While some scholars have regarded him as a imaginary pir, others have identified him as a historical figure whom had a real existence. Diverse opinions are also found regarding the origin of the name "Manik" associated with Manik Pir. The term 'Manik' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Manikya', which denotes a precious stone such as a Ruby or Padmaraga. However, when it used as a proper name for an individual, the term 'Manik' often signifies a person of exceptional worth and immense importance within the family and the wider social sphere. On the other hand, the term '*Pir*' generally refers to an *awliya* (saint) or a Sufi spiritual figure. Therefore, it may be suggested that Manik Pir was possibly a Sufi saint of considerable importance in both social and individual spheres of life. It is also probable that he may have participated in a military campaign alongside a Muslim force, thereby acquiring the title *Ghazi* (religious warrior). Alternatively, through the demonstration of miraculous powers attributed to him in popular belief, he may have come to be venerated among his followers as Ghazi Saheb or Ghazi Baba.



However, with the passage of time, the exaggerated glorification of his greatness and miraculous powers by his devotees gradually transformed Manik Pir into a folk deity known as *Ghazi Baba* among the lower strata of society. At present, Manik Pir continues to occupy an important place in the folk religious culture of various regions of both East Bengal (Bangladesh) and West Bengals, particularly among the lower-class *atraf* Bengali Muslim communities, where he is venerated within the Sufi devotional traditions at mazars, yadgahs, and nazargahs. At the same time, in many Thans (shrines) located in rural areas predominantly inhabited by lower-caste Hindus of Bengal, Ghazi Manik Pir is worshipped in diverse forms as a folk deity within different streams of popular religious practices.

But we don't have any direct historical evidence regarding the identity of this popular Sufi saint Manik Pir, also revered as the folk deity Ghazi Baba Manik Pir, including details about his birthplace, his original name, the period of his arrival in Bengal, or his travels across different parts of the region. Similarly, no reliable information is available concerning the exact timeframe of his arrival, movements, and religious activities in Bengal, particularly in southern Bengal and the south-eastern Bhati region (notably the Sundarbans area of present-day West Bengal). Moreover, the routes of his journey and the chronology of his activities in these regions also remain historically uncertain.

But, insights into his arrival in Bengal and his influence on the contemporary society and culture can be traced through cultural–anthropological components, pir literature, and folk songs. The continuing cultural and anthropological traditions associated with Manik Pir also provide important information regarding his influence on the social structure of the Bhati region as well as the nature of spiritual practices regarding him. Folklorists and scholars have put forward various opinions regarding the identity of Manik Pir. **Dr. Sukumar Sen**, in his work 'Bangla Sahityer Itihas' (vol-I), described Manik Pir as a pir recognized within the Sufi tradition. According to him, Manik Pir was a historical personality. He is believed to have been a resident of Iran and, in the second or third century CE, to have introduced a new religious doctrine based on a synthesis of Christian and Zoroastrian beliefs. The Sufis referred to him as a pir and accepted him as a compassionate and healing spiritual figure comparable to Jesus.⁽¹⁾

But, **Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah**, in his work 'Bangla Sahityer Katha' (vol-2), criticized the views of Dr. Sukumar Sen regarding Manik Pir. He argued that the name of Manik Pir is not found in the Sufi tradition in Iran, Afghanistan, or Hindustan. Therefore, the claim that this pir of Bengal was imported from Iran is not credible. Manik Pir holds no position within orthodox Sufi traditions. According to Dr. Shahidullah, Manik Pir is a folk pir like other folk pir of Bengal such as Baro Khan Ghazi, Kalu Ghazi, and Satya Pir. Boatmen invoke the name of Manik Pir while seiling their boats afloat on the river. In



some places, Hindus offer chickens in the name of the pir when their cattle fall ill, and after a cow gives birth, they offer milk to Manik Pir on the twenty-first day before consuming the milk themselves. An annual fair is held in honour of Manik Pir at Jadavpur, where Muslims offer chickens as *hajat* (votive offerings), cook them, and consume them.⁽²⁾

Dr. Muhammad Enamul Haque also described Manik Pir as a non-historical or imaginary pir.⁽³⁾ But, **Syed Ali Ahsan**, in his work ‘*Bangla Sahityer Itihas(Modhyojug)*’ said that Manik Pir was a theologically significant figure accepted within Sufi traditions. He further observed that Most of the literary compositions related to Manik Pir were widely circulated throughout Bengal in the form of rhymes. Sufi faqirs used to travel from village to village, singing these verses while seeking alms.⁽⁴⁾ Regarding the identity of Manik Pir, **Dr.Girindranath Das** in his work ‘*Bangla Pir Sahityer Katha*’ remarked that Manik Pir was not a purely imaginary pir like Satya Pir. Like Dr. Sukumar Sen, he also identified Manik Pir as a resident of Iran and a pir recognized by the Sufis. At the same time, Dr. Das noted that in Bengal, through various narratives and traditions, Manik Pir assumed the character of a semi-legendary pir and, in the popular religious imagination, came to be regarded as a distinctive folk deity.⁽⁵⁾

It may be assumed that Manik Pir was possibly a hakim (traditional physician) or a practitioner of indigenous herbal medicine. For this reason, he may have chosen the Bhati region, particularly the Sundarbans area, which is rich in medicinal flora, as a principal field for both his healing practices and religious preaching. It is believed that he travelled from the northern Bhati region (Dhaka area) to the southern Bhati region (undivided Twenty-Four Parganas). Alongside the propagation of Islam, he may have gained prominence among the agrarian communities of the Bhati region by protecting their cattle, their principal economic asset from epidemics through his herbal treatments. Consequently, he may have come to be regarded as a saviour of their livestock. Perhaps for this reason, in later times he secured a permanent place in the religious belief of the lower-class agrarian population as a symbolic protective folk deity associated with the welfare of cattle. Folk songs also contain references to the belief that, through the blessings (*dowa*) of Manik Pir, cattle could be protected by means of sixty-four remedies (*dawai*). This reflects his association in popular belief as a guardian of livestock. As one folk verse states: "**Choushotti beyadhi gorur choushotti daowai / Maniker doa hole tobe par pai.**" ("For the sixty-four diseases of cows there are sixty-four remedies; only through the blessings of Manik can they be saved.")⁽⁶⁾



It is mentionable that no other pir in the entire Bhati region appears to have as many Mazars, Nazargahs, Yeadgahs and the local shrines Thans as Manik Pir. Perhaps due to his wandering life in the remote Sundarbans region, detailed historical information about him remains scarce. If Manik Pir were merely a fictional figure, it is worth questioning whether his name, reputation, and the attributed miraculous powers could have exercised such a deep and widespread influence across the vast expanse of undivided Bengal, from Sylhet to the Sundarbans of South Twenty-Four Parganas. Furthermore, it is also debatable whether the extensive network of Mazars, Nazargahs, Yadgahs, and *Thans*, along with the institutionalized practices of *hajat*, *manat*, annual festival and ritual worship that developed around his veneration over several centuries, could have attained such a degree of expansion if he had been purely imaginary? However, it may also be argued that the construction of his imagined iconography in popular tradition contributed to his identification as a folk deity known as Ghazi Baba or Ghazi Saheb within the shrine-centred religious culture. Through various cultural–anthropological elements such as Nazargahs, Yadgahs, and particularly the local shrines Thans and their associated icons as well as through folk festivals and annual rituals of *puja* and *hajat* centred around his veneration, Manik Pir continues to occupy a revered position as a living spiritual presence or Ghazi *Baba* among a section of the marginalized lower-class agrarian communities of South Twenty-Four parganas.

Manik Pir in Bengali Folk Literature:

From the sources of Bengali folk literature, indirect indications regarding the biographical identity of Manik Pir and his arrival in southern Bengal can be traced. Such two important folk literary sources related to Manik Pir are ‘Manik Pirer Geet’ (The Songs of Manik Pir) composed by **Fakir Mohammad** and ‘Manik Pirer Keccha’ (The Tales of Manik Pir) written by **Munshi Mohammad Pijiruddin**. Apart from the allegorical narratives described in these two folk works, their contextual background provides us with fragmentary glimpses of Manik Pir’s biographical identity and certain aspects of his arrival in Bengal. **Sukumar Sen** included some selected excerpts from ‘Manik Pirer Geet’ composed by Fakir Mohammad In his work ‘**Islami Bangla Sahitya**’ under the section titled ‘Pir Mahatmya Gatha’ (legends of the spiritual greatness of pirs). Although ‘Manik Pirer Git’ is primarily an allegorical narrative divided into several sections, it also provides indirect insights into his biographical identity, his arrival in the *Bhati* (low-lying deltaic) region of southern Bengal, and the spread of Islamic influence among the Hindu Dalit communities through the display of miraculous powers. Furthermore, it reflects the syncretic religious trends associated with his cult.



In the 'Manik Pirer Geet' composed by Fakir Mohammad, Manik Pir is described as an inhabitant of 'Batun'. It is stated in the Git that- "**Batune Manik chhilo, Elahi mangaiya nilo.**" ("Manik was in Batun; he was brought by divine command.")⁽⁷⁾ This reference symbolically suggests his spiritual origin and portrays his arrival as divinely ordained. The term 'Batun' is derived from the Arabic word 'Batin' which means the inner, internal, or hidden world. Sufi mystics believe that within the spiritual realm of every individual's soul there exists a *batin*, representing the inner self of a person. When this inner self is purified under the guidance of a spiritual mentor, it becomes spiritually elevated and refined. From this point of view, it may be argued that Manik Pir was spiritually elevated under the guidance of his preceptor. However, *in reality* he was perhaps an inhabitant of an 'Arabatun'. The Arabic term 'Arabatun' refers to a barren and vegetationless dry tract or a desert landscape. In his verses, Fakir Mohammad made several references to Arabatun Mecca. Fakir Mohammad writes in his *Geet* that - "**Elahi Jibril-ke bollen, Mokay joto pir paygambar ache tader deke ano.** (God commanded the angel Jibril (Gabriel) to bring together all the saints (pirs) and prophets (paygambar) residing in Mecca). **Allar huzure eshe auliyagone kohe bat, chhati pore diya hat, talab koroh kar tore.**" (Coming before Allah, the awliyas spoke among themselves; placing their hands upon their chests, they asked for whom has this summons been issued?)⁽⁸⁾ This description symbolically situates Manik Pir within a broader Islamic sacred geography and spiritual tradition. From the description found in the verses of Fakir Mohammad's *Geet*, it may be presumed that Manik Pir's origin was associated with Arabatun Mecca, or possibly with some 'interior' region of the Arabian Peninsula. This 'interior' region may have been metaphorically referred to as *Batin* (the inner or hidden realm). In this context, it could also denote the remote and interior parts of the desert landscape of Arabia, possibly indicating regions distant from Mecca, such as areas adjoining Syria or Yemen. Elsewhere, in the narrative of the Git, Manik, following the advice of his companion Haraj Ali, first proceeded to Mecca in order to manifest his spiritual powers before the people of the world. The text states that-

"Manik bolen shun Haraj Ali bhai, (*Manik said, listen, brother Haraj Ali,*)
Jahir korite kon khane jai? (*Where should I go to reveal myself for my spiritual powers?*)
Haraj Ali bole jodi puchhile amare, (*Haraj Ali replied, if you ask me*)
Age giye murid hao Mokka shahore. (*First go and become a disciple in the city of Mecca.*)
Murshid hole bhai manbe dibe khir, (*Once you have a spiritual guide (murshid), people will honour you as a pir and give you to eat pudding*)
Jekhane shekhane sheshe koribo jahir". (*And thereafter you may reveal yourself wherever you wish*)"⁽⁹⁾



In this section of the Geet, Manik is advised to go to **Mecca** and become a murid (disciple) of a spiritual guide. Based on this allegorical description of the saint Manik's journey from Batun to Arabatun, that is, to Mecca, it may not be unreasonable to assume that Manik Pir was of Arab origin. In the onother section of the Geet titled 'Kangal Dukher Kahini' (The Tale of the Poor Dukhe) Manik Pir is also addressed as a 'Sheikh'. In the end of the narrative, Dukhe refers to him by saying - "**Nara Sheikh Bhalo Manush Bote.**"(Infidle Sheikh is indeed a good man.) ⁽¹⁰⁾ In general, a person of noble Arab lineage is often referred to as a *Sheikh*. Therefore, it may be said that the original homeland of Manik Pir was Arabian Peninsula and that he migrated from there to this region. Furthermore, the use of the term 'Nara' in the *Geet* is also significant. In Bengali literary usage, the term *Nara* has sometimes been used to refer to foreign infidle Muslims, which may possibly indicate the period of Manik Pir's arrival in Bengal during the medieval Islamic era. It may be presumed that Manik Pir possibly arrived in Eastern Bengal, particularly in Sylhet, either with Pir Shah Jalal of Yemen in 1303 CE or with Pir Shah Paran of Yemen. The Manik Pir's Tila (mound) in Sylhet, Bangladesh, and the Manikganj Sub-District still preserve the memory of his name. Even today, a shrine (Mazar) of Manik Pir exists in Satkhira, across the Ichamati River. Pir Shah Paran, who was a nephew of Pir Shah Jalal, is believed to have come to Eastern Bengal around 1303 CE for the purpose of propogating Islam. Paran and Manik are regarded as two popular Gazi Pirs among the rural masses of the North-Eastern part of Bangladesh and South-Eastern part of West Bengal respectively. The real name of Pir Shah Paran was Hazrat Shah Sultan, whereas the actual name of Manik Pir remains unknown.

It may be noted that Pir Shah Jalal and most of his companions who arrived in eastern Bengal were of Arab origin of Yemen. Similarly, Pir Gorachand, who came to North 24 Parganas, along with his twenty-one companions, is believed to have been accompanied by several awliyas (saints), some of whose associates may have later travelled to the Bhati region of South 24 Parganas with the objective of propogating Islam. It may therefore be conjectured that Pir Shah Paran and Manik Pir were possibly among the companions of these saints who arrived in the Bhati region along with Pir Gorachand. In the invocatory section of 'Ambiyabani' composed by **Hayat Mamud**, there are references to the miraculous powers (karamat) of the two brothers, Manik Pir and Shaha Pir. The text states that "**Manik Pir Shaha Pir bondo dui bhai , Maria gother gabi diyeche jiyai**". (Manik Pir and Shaha Pir were two close brothers, they brought a dead cow of the cowshed back to life.) ⁽¹¹⁾ These references suggest the possibility that Manik Pir and Pir Shah Paran (Shaha) may have been considered brothers, a question which merits further historical investigation. Among the devotees of Manik Pir in Southern Bengal, the collective group known as the 'Panch Pir' (Five Pirs) includes Pir Paran, Pir Manik, Pir Sona, Pir Gora,



and Pir Badr. During the annual urs festival of Pir Gorachand, the songs (geet) of Manik Pir are traditionally performed. Furthermore, **Azahar Uddin Ahmad Siddiqui** in his book ‘Srihate *Islam Jyoti*’ provides a list of the companions who accompanied Shah Jalal during his journey, where the name of Manik Pir is also mentioned. ⁽¹²⁾

From the allegorical narrative of the ‘Dukher Kahini’ (The Tale of Dukhe) in Fakir Mohammad’s *Manik Pirer Geet*, one can indirectly discern the story of Manik Pir’s arrival in the Bhati region and the establishment of his spiritual authority among the Dalit community. According to the account, through his miraculous powers, Manik facilitates the marriage of Dukhe, the son of a Dalit Bagdi, to a princess of the Brahmin caste, resulting in Dukhe being elevated to the status of Ganga Raja. Furthermore, the depiction of the tigers as part of Dukhe’s wedding procession may reflect a lost folk cultural practice of the Sundarbans region, specifically the ritual of wearing Baghro masks (Tiger masked men)). The narrative of ‘Dukher Kahini’ in the ‘Geet’ provides insights into the caste hierarchy and patrilineal traditions of the feudal Hindu society in contemporary Bengal. Within the story, Dukhe, a lower-caste Bagdi, is able through the strategic guidance and miraculous powers (karamat) of Manik Pir to assert the spiritual authority of Islam over Brahminical dominance. Ultimately, Dukhe addresses Pir Manik with the honorific word ‘Saheb’ and presents him with a ceremonial offering of sweets (shirni), signifying both respect and devotion. ⁽¹³⁾ In this way, the Sufi saint gradually established his position within the Hindu Dalit community. Dukhe’s spiritual master, Pir Saheb Manik Pir, over time became revered as Gazi Saheb and *Gazi Baba* among the lower strata of Hindu society. From the section ‘*Kinu Ghosher Pala; of the work of Munshi Mohammad Pijiruddin’s ‘Manik Pirer Keccha*’, the narrative recounts his journey across a river to Derag Nager and subsequently to Bairat Nager. It is possible that this river corresponds to the Ichamati, and that Derag Nager refers to Deganga, while Bairat Nager may correspond to Behala or Baruiapur in South 24 Parganas. ⁽¹⁴⁾ It is noteworthy that one of the oldest figure and Than of Gazi Baba Manik Pir still exists in Bibiamar Thana, located in Changa-Ramnagar village of Sitakundu in Baruiapur Block of the district of South 24 Parganas, where his vehicle is depicted as a cow. However, in most other thanas in the southern part of the Bhati region, his vehicle is represented as a white horse. In this context, it is also noteworthy that the Adi Ganga, flowing along the western and southern sides of Baruiapur, once extended from Kalighat through Vaishnabghata, Rajpur-Sonarpur, surjapur, Multi, South Barasat, Jaynagar-Majilpur, South Bishnupur, and Chhatrabhog, before finally emptying into the Bay of Bengal to the south of Sagar Island. It can be observed that almost every settlement that developed along the banks of the Adi Ganga contains the sacred *Thans* of Manik Pir. The only oldest known Mazar of Manik Pir is located at Rajabazar in Kolkata, not far from the Adi Ganga. Furthermore, in the settlements



situated along the course of the Adi-Gang River such as Jadavpur, Sonarpur, Baruipur, Barasat, Multi, Baharu, and Jaynagar, Thanas (shrines) dedicated to Manik Pir are widely found. These shrines continue to be venerated to this day by both Hindu and Muslim communities, particularly among the general agrarian population.

Manik Pir in Popular Belief:

In prevailing folk belief, Manik Pir is regarded as a historical figure, a pir who truly existed. In his work 'Bangla Pir Sahitya Katha', **Girindranath Das** notes that, according to the oral traditions of the northern Basirhat region, a proverb persists that two brothers, named Manik and Madar, set out in the guise of fakirs under divine command to propagate his spiritual greatness. On the banks of Gomapukur in Kadambagachi, under Barasat police station, there exist several ancient shrines (dargahs) associated with Manik Pir. It is said that Manik Pir once visited this village. In his memory, an annual urs and festival (hajjat) are observed here on the 3rd of Magh every year. ⁽¹⁵⁾ Due to phonetic variations in local pronunciation, Badr Pir is perhaps referred to as Madar Pir in popular tradition. Badr Pir is also regarded as one of the Panch Pir (the five revered saints) in the regional folk religious tradition. In most of the thanas in South 24 Parganas, the annual fair (Hajat *mela*) and devotional festival (hajjat) in honor of Manik Pir are held during the month of Magh and on the occasion of Poush Sankranti. In some places, the observance falls on the 1st of Magh, in others on the last Tuesday of Magh, while in certain thanas the annual *hajjat* or fair is held in the second week of the bright fortnight (shukla paksha) of Baishakh or around mid-Phalgun. According to the folk beliefs prevalent in the majority of thanas in 24 Parganas, Gazi Baba Manik Pir was one of the five Gazi Pirs who arrived in southern Bengal from Arabia. According to Nimay Chandra Ruidas, the caretaker of the *Than* of Gazi Saheb and Bibi Maa located near Debatakunja at Baharu, Joynagar, Block-I of South 24 Parganas, as stated in an interview conducted during my field survey, a belief has been transmitted in their family through generations that Gazi Saheb, identified with Manik Pir, was one of the five Pirs who came to South 24 Parganas from the Arab lands. ⁽¹⁶⁾ Dr. Muhammad Enamul Haq has also observed that in the southern regions of Bengal, including the Twenty-Four Parganas, the custom of offering shirni (ritual food offerings) and making *manasik* (votive pledges) in the name of the Panch Pir (Five Saints) is still prevalent among the Muslim community. However, he also notes that the names of the five Pirs vary across the rural areas of Bengal. ⁽¹⁷⁾

Manik Pir in Folk Songs:



Folk songs provide insights into the social significance and reverence of Manik Pir. Even today, in many thanas of the Bhati region in South 24 Parganas, various folk songs are sung during the annual *hajjat* festivals in his honor. One such popular folk song is:

"Begum begum boliya Manik chharil jigger,

Kalu Ghosher ma bolay, esho Satya Pir.

Kalu Ghosher ma ar Nanda Ghosher jhi,

bole, sokale eshechho fakir bhiksha debo ki?

Chal kodi-r fakir noi ma, chal kodi nibo,

Ektu khani dudh pele doa diye jabo.

Jar jemon bhagya mago, temni korbe dan.

Gowalete barbe goru, bongshe barbe maan."

(Manik pir began to call out as Begum, Begum. Kalu Ghosh's mother replied, Satya Pir you come in. Kalu Ghosh's mother and Nanda Ghosh's daughter asked to fakir you have arrived in very morning; what shall we give to you as alms? Fakir replied, I am not come for alms of rice and money. I have come to have a little milk. If I could get a little milk to drink, I would leave my blessing you. In your cowshed, the cattle will be increase, and in the lineage, honor will grow) ⁽¹⁸⁾

There is prevailing three general trends of folk songs dedicated to Manik Pir in 24 Parganas, viz. Gowale Geet or Goale Geet (songs basically sung by Muslim devotees), Fakiri Git or Mangan Geet (songs sung by Muslim fakirs for the purpose of soliciting alms), Asar or Pala Geet (songs performed primarily during the annual *hajjat* fair of Manik Pir, mainly sung by Hindu *palakars* (story tellers or performers)). These three distinct categories reflect the diverse devotional practices and communal participation in the veneration of Manik Pir. ⁽¹⁹⁾

Additionally, there exists another type of folk song, which may be termed a *Hajat Geet* (devotional song associated with a vow). These songs are primarily performed collectively by local devotees during the annual *hajjat* or offering of *naivedya* (*shirni* or ritual food). It sung by the devotee (*munshi*) who fulfills the vow. One such *Hajat Geet* which I have collected during my field survey is as follows:



Wāje Allāh, doḡāje Mohāmmad,(In the invocation is Allah, in the prayer is Muhammad.)
Shire Gaṅgā.(The Ganges rests upon the head.)
Āṭi gāē bhāṭi chore,(Across the eight villages of the deltaic river is at low tide)
Sonār noukāy Mānik chore.(Manik Pir sails upon the boat of Sona Pir)
Pāch Pīr badar badar.(Remember the names of the Five Pirs, including the name of Badr Pir.)⁽²⁰⁾ These songs serve both as expressions of devotional gratitude and as ritual reinforcement of communal harmony in the veneration of Manik Pir and the Panch Pirs.

From the *Hajat Geet* of Manik Pir, prevalent in the Jaynagar region, one can discern references to Manik Pir's journey by boat alongside his spiritual brother, Sona Pir, across eight locations in the Bhati region. The song simultaneously invokes the blessings of Allah and the prayers of the Prophet Muhammad, alongside those of the Bhati River Ganga and the folk goddess Manasa Devi, reflecting the syncretic devotional ethos of the Bhati region. Significantly, in the majority of thanas of the Bhati region in South 24 Parganas, Gazi Baba Manik Pir is believed to coexist harmoniously with Manasa Devi, indicating a local tradition of religious and cultural integration.

Manik Pir in the Context of Cultural Anthropology:

From the view point of of cultural anthropology, the claim of Manik Pir's arrival in Bengal may not be wholly denied. From Sylhet of Eastern Bengal to the entire *Bhati* region of southern Bengal, the various cultural anthropological and architectural remains associated with the devotional practices of Manik Pir such as *Mazars* (shrines), *Nazargahs*, *Yadgahs* (memorial sites), *Thans* (sacred sites), and votive images indirectly testify to the tradition of his arrival and his peregrinations across different parts of eastern and southern Bengal. In various regions of the Sundarban Zone of the East and West Bengal, administrative units bearing the name "Manik" (such as Manikganj, Maniktala, and Manikpur) indirectly indicate the historical presence of Manik in these areas.

In West Bengal, two prominent Nazargahs dedicated to Manik Pir are particularly well-known; one is located at Maniktala in Kolkata, and the other at Sankrail (Manikpur), Howrah in Howrah, situated on the western bank of the Hooghly River, opposite Akra in South 24 Parganas. Although the number of Mazars and Nazargahs associated with Manik Pir is relatively limited in South 24 Parganas, the Sundarbans region of West Bengal that is, throughout North 24 Parganas and particularly across South 24 Parganas hosts numerous Thanas and Yadgahs linked to him. While some of these sites are devoid of icons, in the majority of Thanas, Manik Pir continues to be venerated in the form of a folk deity. There is no block in



South 24 Parganas from Jadavpur to the Khadi area of Raidighi, and from Budge Budge to Diamond Harbour that does not have at least one thana associated with Manik Pir.

Some scholars suggest that this Pir Manik may have been one of the 360 Awliya who accompanied Pir Shah Jalal from Yemen to Sylhet. If this is the case, then Manik Pir, or Pir Manik Shah, would have been a contemporary of Pir Poran Shah and Pir Gorachand. However, no reliable historical evidence has been found to substantiate this claim. Just as “Pir Poran” (Hazrat Shah Sultan) and “Pir Gorachand” (Syed Abbas Ali) were popularly used epithets, the name “Manik” was likely a familiar or devotional designation rather than his formal name; his actual name remains unknown. It is possible that he was one of the twenty-two Awliya sent by Pir Shah Jalal to the southern delta region. Across almost every block of South 24 Parganas, numerous thanas associated with Manik Pir exist, which, over the course of several centuries, have preserved and transmitted the cultural and anthropological identity of the local communities.

Influence:

The Thanas of Manik Pir are usually situated along the peripheral zone or boundary areas of villages. In some places, the *than* (sacred site) of Manik Pir is situated on an elevated earthen mound beneath a banyan tree, without any idol or image. However, in most cases, the *Thans* of Manik Pir feature his presence either in the form of an image (idol) or through symbolic representations (such as earthen or cemented pillars and the *asadanda* bearing the symbol of the Panjatan). In some places, he is represented in idol figure alongside his spiritual disciple Baman Gazi; elsewhere, he appears together with local Hindu folk goddesses such as Manasa and Shitala, the folk deity Panchanan, as well as several other vernacular deities including Bonbibi, Olabibi, Asanbibi, and other Bibis. A common characteristic of the sacred sites (*thans*) of Manik Pir is that almost every shrine dedicated to Manik Pir, also known as Gazi Baba, is situated in close proximity to a *than* of the folk deity Panchanan. These phenomena indicate the existence of a long-standing syncretic culture between Islamic and local folk religious traditions.

However, at present, in many villages and semi-urban areas of South 24 Parganas, it remains unclear whether the imagined figure or image venerated at the *thans* of Gazi Baba (or Gazi Saheb) represents Gazi Manik Pir or Pir Barakhan Gazi. The mostly illiterate and semi-educated rural devotees of Bengal are often not fully aware of his precise identity or historical background. In most instances, the *fakirs* and *munshis* who officiate the *hajjat* rituals at the sacred sites of Manik Pir are able to identify the Gazi of the shrine as Manik Pir. Nevertheless, a significant number of shrine custodians and lay devotees lack a clear understanding of the specific identity of the Gazi venerated at their respective *thans*. This ambiguity



largely stems from the considerable iconographic similarities between the imagined representations of Gazi Manik Pir and Pir Barakhan Gazi. Furthermore, the near disappearance of the older traditional terracotta or clay images associated with both pirs has further contributed to this uncertainty of identification. The bovine-mounted (cow-mounted) images of Manik Pir are now rarely found. Owing to the passage of time, most of the older earthen images have deteriorated or disappeared. At present, in many *thans*, he is represented in an equestrian (horse-mounted) form. Consequently, the comparatively recent images of Gazi Baba found in these shrines closely resemble in form, shape, and stylistic features the representations of another pir of the Bhati region, Barakhan Gazi. However, a few minor differences may still be observed in certain cases.

In some Thanas, Manik Pir may appear in the form traditionally associated with Barakhan Gazi, while in other places Barakhan Gazi may be represented in a form identified with Gazi Manik Pir. Both pirs are depicted as mounted on horseback; both are portrayed as handsome figures with fair or light complexions and large expressive eyes. Both are shown with long, flowing babri hair, and with a Islamic cap or turban on their heads. Both are represented holding a *asadanda* (ritual staff and wearing *traditional* footwear *nagra* or boots. However, a distinctive feature of Manik Pir's iconography is that he is usually depicted holding an *Ashabari* (ritual staff) in one hand and a *Tasbih* (rosary) or a healing pot or disease-curing pot (*Byadher Jambil*) in the other hand. This constitutes one of the principal identifying characteristics of his visual representation

The visual form of Manik Pir is characterized by a calm, quiet and fair appearance. In Bengali folk songs, his physical depiction is described in the following manner: “ Mathay Rongin Toopi, Baydher Jambil/ Hate Loye Ashabari, Phere Manik Pir” (Wearing a colorful cap on his head, carrying a medicinal bowl, With an *āshadanda* in hand, Manik Pir roams the land.)⁽²¹⁾ In contrast, Barakhan Gazi is normally represented holding the ritual staff in one hand and the reins of his horse in the other, with both feet firmly placed in the stirrups. His iconographic form conveys a more martial and warlike disposition.

According to **Girindranath Das**, the idol of Borkhan Gazi (also known as Pir Mobarak Shah Gazi) is depicted as a handsome and heroic figure. He has a fair complexion and is always portrayed in the guise of a warrior. He wears Muslim-style *churidar* or *pyjama*. On his head, he dons a cap or turban, and his face bears a long beard with moustache extending to the ears, along with side-locks (*julfis*). His eyes are large and expressive. In one hand, he holds a weapon or *āshadanda*, while the other hand grasps the **reins**. His feet are shod with boots, firmly placed in the stirrups, and he is mounted on a large-sized horse.⁽²²⁾



Although the precise period of Manik Pir's arrival in the delta region of South 24 Parganas remains uncertain, but field surveys clearly indicate a profound relationship between his presence and influence, on the one hand, and the geographical location of his Thanas and the local social organization, on the other. The distribution of these Thanas reflects a deep historical connection with the emergence of the Bengali-Atraf and Azlaf Muslim communities in the concern region. Even today, within the agrarian-based local society of South 24 Parganas, the belief in the supernatural powers of Gazi Pirs remains deeply entrenched in the spiritual mind of both Hindu and Muslim indigenous communities. The social structures that historically developed around the influence of these miraculous powers are, to a large extent, still intact. Within this social framework, Muslim-named settlements and neighborhoods such as Alipur, Tajpur, Fatepur, Kashimpur, and Hashimpur etc. emerged along one side of the Thanas of Gazi Baba Manik Pir. On the opposite side were Hindu Dalit and indigenous settlements, including Ruidas Para, Ghosh Para, Pal Para, Paik Para, as well as villages associated with communities such as Sardar, Mandal, Gayen, Biswas, Kayal, Marik, and Naiya etc. The socio-economic conditions of the Atraf-Ajlaf Muslims and the Dalit and tribal communities of both villages are largely similar, as all of them are primarily dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. Likewise, their class identities also show significant similarities. Members of these communities often share common surnames such as Sardar, Mondal, Gayen, Biswas, Kayal, Middia, Sapui, Sipai, Shikari, Paik, Bagani, Naiya, Mollick *and* Purkait, among others. The Thans (local shrines) and *Nazargahs* (sacred memorial sites) of Ghazi Manik Pir have primarily developed in those areas of rural Bengal inhabited by the so-called lower castes and marginalized communities, which remained outside the socially and religiously conservative spheres of the Brahmanical upper classes. These shrines are also commonly found in the peripheral, forested zones of villages, particularly in areas adjacent to mixed Hindu-Muslim settlements, indicating their emergence within shared socio-cultural spaces of popular religious practices. This type of rural settlement pattern reflects the inherent syncretic spatial organization and social logic of the rural social structure.

Several historians argue that during the approximately two-hundred-year period between the Turkish conquest of Eastern Bengal in the early fourteenth century and the Mughal conquest of Bengal in the latter half of the sixteenth century, the Islamization of the indigenous populations of Eastern and Southern Bengal by the sufi preachers resulted in the formation of a new indigenous Atraf-Ajlaf Muslim social formation. It may be noted that the agrarian economic relationships between the indigenous Muslim society and the non-Brahmanical indigenous communities of the Bhati region, particularly the Dalit and tribal groups, continued to persist. At the same time, a sphere of shared folk-cultural interaction also developed, at the centre of which was the influence of the purported miraculous powers attributed to



the Sufi pirs, Ghazi pirs, or locally venerated Ghazi Babas, along with the exaggerated popular propagation of their supernatural abilities. The supernatural attributes of the Gazi Manik pir were widely magnified through popular belief and oral traditions in the Bhati zone.

Centred on the political and religious activities of the Ghazi pirs, as well as the propagation of their purported miraculous powers, a new messianic world emerged within the rural society of Bengal. The agrarian Dalit and Adivasi Hindu communities of rural Bengal also developed a deep relationship of faith with this messianic sphere. While maintaining their own distinct religious and cultural identities, they nevertheless established regular connections with the Thans, *Mazars* and local sacred *Yadgah* associated with these pirs and Ghazis. In the course of time, some pirs and ghazis became integral to the everyday devotional practices of rural communities. Shrines dedicated to these figures were often established at sites locally believed to mark their halting places, and their imagined icons were sometimes incorporated into the sacred spaces of existing folk deities. Consequently, within the popular religious imagination of the agrarian masses of eastern and southern Bengal, the symbolic persona of Manik Pir gradually secured a stable and enduring position. In the course of time, some pirs and Ghazis became integral to the daily devotional practices of rural communities. Shrines dedicated to these figures were often established at sites locally believed to mark their halting places, and their imagined icons were sometimes incorporated into the sacred spaces of existing folk deities. Within the imaginative religious world of the agrarian common people of Eastern and Southern Bengal, the imagined figure of Manik Pir came to occupy a permanent place of devotion.

The responsibility for organizing the annual worship (*puja*) or *hajāt* (votive offerings) of Manik Pir generally lies with Muslim custodians such as *khadems*, *faqirs*, or *munshis*. However, the daily or weekly rituals and offerings at many of these Thanas are often conducted by local non-Brahman Hindu *sebayets* (ritual attendants) or devotees. In cases where Manik Pir is enshrined within the sacred spaces of Hindu folk deities like Manasa, Laxmi, Narayani, Sitala, Banobibi, Olabibi or Olaichandi, and Panchanan, the responsibility for his weekly and annual worship and *hajāt* offerings is normally undertaken by non-Brahman Hindu *sebayet*. However, the annual *hajāt* ritual is characteristically completed by a Muslim *munshi* (religious functionary), who performs the ceremony in front of the symbolic representation of Manik Pir. The ritual generally involves the recitation of sacred formulas or the offering of a two rakat *salat* (prayer), followed by the act of breathing consecrated blessings (*dowa-put*) over the *Shirni* (offerings) placed at the Thanas. These offerings may include vegetarian *shirni* (sacred food), *bhog* (ritual offerings), or non-vegetarian preparations such as cooked chicken with rice. This annual *hajāt*



festival continues to serve as a remarkable example of communal harmony and social cohesion in the rural society of South 24 Parganas. .

The social, cultural, and religious history of the undivided district of Twenty-Four Parganas is marked by considerable diversity. In particular, the Sundarbans region of South Twenty-Four Parganas represents a rich repository of folk religion and folk cultural practices. Across the rural and semi-urban areas of South Twenty-Four Parganas, especially within the Sundarbans region, one finds numerous temples and shrines dedicated to local folk deities alongside many *mazars*, *dargahs*, and *nazargahs* of Sufi pirs, as well as a large number of shrines dedicated to locally venerated Ghazi Babas. Among the folk pirs, or the so-called Ghazi Babas or Ghazi Sahibs of the Twenty-Four Parganas, Ghazi Manik Pir is the figure to whom the largest number of *Thans* (local shrines), *Mazars*, *Dargahs*, and *Nazargahs* are dedicated. At one time, a syncretic tradition of folk religion and folk culture had developed around him, often described as the Manik Pir cult; however, this tradition is now nearly on the verge of disappearance.

Manik Pir is a revered figure among both the Hindu and Muslim agrarian communities of Eastern and Southern Bengal. Devotees from both communities offer *hajaj* (votive offerings) and *Mannat* (acts of reverence) at his Mazars, Dargahs, and Nazargahs, where he is symbolically represented through aniconic grave markers. At the same time, at many Gazi Thans (local shrines), he is also worshipped in the form of a distinct iconographic representation or symbolic effigy, receiving ritual offerings from devotees of both communities. Within the agrarian Dalit society of rural Bengal, this pir, popularly known as Gazi Baba Manik Pir, is often imagined as a supernatural protector deity of cattle and other livestock.

In some places, Manik Pir is regarded as the protector of farmers from the bites of venomous snakes; elsewhere, he is venerated as the guardian of boatmen and sailors; and in other contexts, he is believed to grant the prayers of infertile women seeking children. In certain local traditions, he is also worshipped as the spiritual preceptor (Bhabguru) of Baman (Baon or Bamun) Pir, who is believed to cure burn injuries through the application of ritually consecrated oil. At Majars and Najargahs, he is revered as a saintly wali of Allah endowed with supernatural powers. Among the lower strata of society, particularly the poor, uneducated, and semi-educated marginal Hindu and Muslim communities he is regarded as a highly awakened (*jagrato*) folk pir and a popular deity. The daily and annual rituals and festivals centred on the Thans of Manik Pir in the folk society of South Twenty Four Parganas demonstrate that this distinctive stream of Bengal's folk religion and folk culture continues to survive to the present day.

A considerable number of shrines dedicated to Manik Pir are located in two administrative blocks of the Jaynagar area in South Twenty-Four Parganas. Based on my own field investigations at several of these sites, I have identified particular ritual and devotional characteristics associated with the veneration of Ghazi Baba Manik Pir. I believe that these practices have exercised a notable influence on the local social formation and may also have contributed to the process of Islamization in the Bhati region. Consequently, this subject deserves more comprehensive scholarly investigation.



An Annual Hajot Festival (votive offering) is performed through the recitation of prayers at the sacred than by a Munshi named Meher Ali Gazi. Gazi's than, Debatakunj, Baharu Ruidas Para, Jaynagar, Block-I, South 24 parganas, West Bengal. (My own collection, dated: 07.12.2024, at 1.20 AM)



An Annual Hajot Festival, Dakshinpara, Baharu, Joynagar-I, 24PGS(S), Dated: 12.01.2025, at 10-11.30 P



Gazi Baba Manik is enshrined along with the local deities Manasa and Shitala and Panchanan with in same sacred than. Tajpur-Mithani, Baharu, Joynagar-I, 24PGS(S)

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