Review


Reviewed by: Annalisa Bocchetti, ‘L’Orientale’ University of Naples, Italy. bocchetti.annalisa16@gmail.com

Keywords: Islam; Sufism; South Asia; saints; Bengali literature.

The book Witness to Marvels: Sufism and Literary Imagination by Tony K. Stewart uncovers the rich tradition of Bangla pīr kathās, stories about fictional Sufi saints that have circulated among Muslim Bangla-speaking communities from the fifteenth century up to the present. Although the corpus of pīr kathās contains a large number of narratives significant for Bangla literature that are still performed today, it has received surprisingly little attention. Stewart’s study compensates for this gap in scholarship by providing a detailed account of selected tales throughout six chapters, which he then complements with critical comments and translations. In this respect, he picks on a particular lexicon, pointing out that oral and living cultures like Bengal’s are not governed by standard orthographic practices. Therefore, in his translations, he uses Bangla transliterations of words as they appear and sound in the original sources, such as Āllā rather than Allāh for God or oli rather than auliya for ‘saint’. In doing so, he emphasizes the importance of using Bangla spellings also for terms evoking Arabic, Persian or Sanskrit concepts, since they can convey multiple and distinct semantics. In Stewart’s words, the reader should be aware of the transnational and shared nature of Islam and the local nuances it has taken on in Bangla-speaking areas (p. 2 n. 2).

In his analysis, Stewart discusses how the Bangla narratives of holy men (pîrs) and holy women (bibîs) are meant to illustrate the benefits of devotion to them through the display of wonders and miracles (karamat) that they are capable of performing. At a deeper level, such narratives ultimately spread the belief in Āllā as the sole God and source of the saints’ powers (p. 18). Some of the saintly figures Stewart covers are those of Mānik Pîr, Baḍa Khān Gājî, Bonbibī, Olābibī, and Satya Pîr, to whom the oldest and largest collection of tales is devoted (p. 189).
In the first part of his book, Stewart explains that these tales gained popularity with the revival of vernacular literatures back in the nineteenth century, when Bengal experienced the advent of print culture. Nevertheless, critics and literary historians have failed to acknowledge the work that the pīr kathās do in terms of its religious and cultural significance, dismissing them as pure entertainment (p. 25). Stewart claims that one reason for their exclusion from the Bangla official literary canon is related to the language of their composition, musalmāni bāṅglā, which combines Persian and Sanskrit. For this reason, it is commonly referred to as dobhāṣī (double language), which has nowadays become a derogatory term (pp. 23–24).

Furthermore, because these tales are about the lives of legendary or mythical rather than real saints, scholars have not regarded them as legitimate religious sources for understanding the history and experience of Islam in Bengal (p. 34). Stewart’s study is noteworthy for the way in which he attempts to explain and describe this complex genre of Bangla literature. By discussing the structures of the Bangla narrative romance, he identifies the pīr kathās as hagiographic fictional narratives. While they share all the elements of hagiography, the characters they present are fictional. It is, therefore, important to understand that the stories and adventures of Sufi saints portrayed in these tales only exist on the discursive level (pp. 37–39). For this reason, Stewart highlights the autotelic nature of these tales that makes them impossible to evaluate in terms of authenticity (p. 41). Thus, he follows Tzevan Todorov’s and Pierry Macharay’s suggestion to read such texts as narrations of ‘self-contained’ worlds. Aware of their fictional quality, Stewart situates these tales within a peculiar world that he calls the ‘Bengali imaginaire’. It is a space where authors are free to create their stories through the exercise of their imagination yet remain subject to certain constraints which place the stories within the context of their creation and reception (p. 114).

Stewart’s work brings to light sources that have been overlooked by the broader academic community for their apparent lack of logic and historical and religious value. To address this issue, Stewart outlines throughout his essay a set of interpretative models that lends a reading of the pīr kathās from various perspectives, including syntactics, semantics, semiotics and pragmatics. This helps him to detect their nature and function within their historical context and to demonstrate how they are relevant to understanding Bengal’s social, cultural, and religious world in the early modern era.

Stewart’s research on the pīr kathās enables us to see these narratives as indicators of how early modern India’s competitive linguistic and religious environment led to practices and discourses of negotiation that are specific to the Bengal region. The incorporation of both Indic and Islamic components in these tales, which Stewart calls respectively hinduyāni and musalmāni, allows readers and listeners to explore alternative worlds that lie outside the rigid boundaries of Islamic orthodoxy (p. 95).
The storylines of these fictional tales may look similar to the Sufi romances in the Avadhī language (premākhyāns); however, figures of pīrs and bibīs appear infrequently in the premākhyāns or are not found at all. Moreover, Stewart cares to clarify that while the premākhyāns are explicitly built on tenets of Sufi theology and are highly allegorical, the pīr kathās, on the other hand, do not enunciate a doctrine or theology. On the contrary, they only articulate vague religious notions expressed through symbolic associations (p. 190).

Stewart exposes the subtle parodic feature of these tales by which they comment positively or negatively on various traditional aspects and structures of Indian society (p. 93). For instance, by drawing on the Bengali genre of the maṅgal kāvyā (the ‘poetry of benefaction’, celebrating particular deities), these texts reveal the limited nature of the deities in contrast with the prominence of pīrs, the ‘friends of God’ (p. 107). In this sense, the authors of these tales make use of the generic Vaiṣṇav trope of avatār of the Kali Age to express the descent of pīrs and bibīs as a form of Āllā’s intervention to restore order and divine justice to the earth (p. 97). However, Stewart rightly warns his readers to avoid viewing these narratives as emblems of hybridity and syncretism, but rather to consider them as evidence of processes of appropriation and accommodation across India’s competing religious and cultural networks (p. 200). By quoting Roman Jakobson, Stewart encourages us to analyze the references to indigenous mythologies, symbols and rituals in the Sufi pīr kathās within the intersemiotic sphere (p. 183). Consequently, he asserts that these narratives represent forms of ‘cultural translation’, since their authors operated through both cultural and linguistic codes. In this way, they were able to communicate their religious and cultural notions through an entirely different culture and conceptual system (p. 184). Thus, while seeking to legitimize and institutionalize the figure of the pīr through establishing a new cosmology in the Indic realm, these tales promoted the acceptance of Islam and its associated figures and practices within the Bengali landscape (pp. 220, 254).

In light of this, Stewart’s work is a valuable resource for scholars who wish to explore the social and cultural world of Bengal’s Sufi saints from both a historical and a literary perspective. Guiding readers with his extensive comments and careful translations, Stewart introduces them to previously unexplored sources. Generally, we can say that Stewart’s book contributes significantly to research in the field of Sufism, and more broadly Islam, in early modern South Asia.