Politics of/for Recognition: The Cases of Three 'Pirs' in Contemporary Bangladesh

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Abstract

Historically, Sufi-Pirs[2] have had strong presence in the religio-cultural and political space of Bangladesh. Scholars have so far elucidated their role in the society and politics. However, as of today they have hardly pondered over the question: who is a Sufi or Pir? How does a person get social recognition as a Pir? Against this backdrop, this paper attempts to examine how an individual gains social recognition as a Pir. Examining three cases of contemporary Bangladesh, this paper challenges the traditional view that Pirs constitute an apolitical category that pre-exists in their respective socio-politico-religious milieu. This paper concludes that recognition of contemporary Pirs is often a political process.

Keywords: Social recognition, Recognition of Sufis, Non-recognition, Politics of recognition, Misrecognition

Introduction

Pirhood is basically "experiential" (Ernst & Lawrence, 2002, p. 9), and therefore, any Muslim can become a Pir by learning to have distinct experience from another Pir (Geertz, 1968, p. 52). An individual's journey toward Pirhood thus usually starts as an initiate under an existing Pir who guides them to spiritual mastery. Ideally, once the established Pir is convinced that the spiritual trainee has reached, through endurance and preparation, a satisfactory level of spiritual maturity, he gives the latter his *ijajat* (permission); from that point on, the *ijajat*-holder claims to be a *khalifa* (representative) of the established Pir and/or independently initiates other aspiring spiritual trainees as a Pir.

Alongside this process, however, there are persons who have no apparent recognition from other spiritual masters and still are accepted, and celebrated, as

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[2] Pirs are Muslim spiritual masters. In this paper the words Pir and Sufi have been used interchangeably.

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Pirs (Arberry, 2008/1950, p. 122; Field, 1910, p. 8). In the face of this dilemma, scholars (Chih, 2007, p. 29; Gellner, 2003, p. 41; Nicholson, 2005/1921, p. 48; Pastner, 1980, p. 42; Turner, 1998, p. 67) argue that who is a Pir and who is not one is decided by Muslims themselves. This, in practice, means that claims of Pirhood is dependent upon people's recognition. However, hardly any of them have analysed what type of activities increases their chances of being recognised and, alternatively, what diminishes their credibility as Pirs. As a result, scholars seem to be perplexed when some claimants can successfully earn social recognition while others fail. For instance, Gellner (1981, p. 40) has commented that sainthood among Muslims is 'unpredictable'.

Such lack of clarity, this paper argues, can be remedied by examining specific cases of successful and unsuccessful claims of Pirhood. Therefore, it seeks to analyse three claims[3], one in urban setting and two in the rural setting, in contemporary Bangladesh, and proposes that simply holding a licence from a recognised Sufi and gaining murids do not guarantee that a Pir-claimant will be recognised as such by wider society. In due course, he must effectively handle socially organised religio-political groups and the state apparatus that may sometimes strategically veto, or reject, his previously attained Pirhood.

To understand the process of social recognition at work, this article uses Stijn Rottiers' analytical model (2010), which proposes that any social actor – in our case, a prospective Pir – seeking to gain recognition from the target audience of a domain must be (a) visible to the reference group, and (b) perform according to pre-existing perception and expectation (or, to use an alternative phraseology, discourse) regarding the said actor. This visibility and performance frame the opinion: when positive and neutral opinion-holders are the majority, it is labelled as recognition; on the other hand, if negative opinion-holders dominate the space, it is labelled as non-recognition. We begin with a success story.

[3] Compared to the total number of recognised (as well as unsuccessful) Pirs in present-day Bangladesh, our number – three – is too small to be truly representative. This case selection, thus, requires explanation. There are a good number of hereditary Pirs whom we want to exclude from this discussion because they are well-recognised mainly due to their family legacy. The number of non-hereditary Pirs is not small either. Many of them passed away long ago. The chances are high that studies of these two categories will produce good hagiographies, which obviously is not the objective here. Again, bringing in living- and struggling Pirs under the scanner may jeopardise a Pir's career, which could present ethical concerns. Studying unsuccessful Pirs is also challenging since the level of social humiliation attached to non-recognition is so intense that it becomes painful for failed Pirs to continue living in their own surroundings. Therefore, they rarely remain in their own locality. For this reason, although news on *bhanda* Pirs abound in the newspapers of Bangladesh, one can hardly track them down. So, the cases presented here are not concerned with representativeness. Rather the primary focus is the process of recognition and non-recognition.

Julfikar Haider (1920-2014)

Haider alias *Hata Baba*'s dargah/majar was built in the capital city's Muhammadpur area as recently as April 2014. How could such a structure emerge in the heart of a metropolitan city in the twenty-first century?

Haider died of cardiac failure on 13 March 2014. His death was reported in mainstream Bangla newspapers and news-portals. Bdnews24.com conveyed the news within hours: *'Hata babar' mrityu, kabar nie bhaktader gandagol* ["'Hata babar' mrityu', 2014].[4] The next day *Ittefaq* published the same news with a simple heading *'Hata Babar' intekāl*. Both reports made it explicit that his followers regarded Haider as their 'Pir'. The focus of the news had been a conflict over the place of his burial between his followers and the locals: apparently, out of veneration his followers demanded to bury him in the middle of Mohammadpur Eidgah while another section of the local community opposed it because, in their eyes, it was an absurd claim. In the latter's view, the deceased could be laid to rest in the graveyard that was just adjacent to the Eidgah. However, to publicly assert such illogical demand, it took courage that stemmed from the mobilization of eight to ten thousand people who had gathered in the Eidgah by noon and started digging a grave ("Hata babar' mrityu', 2014). They came overwhelmingly from the Geneva Camps in the Muhammadpur area where the Urdu-speaking community (Bashir 2020), also known as stranded Pakistanis (*atke parā Pakistani*), lived (Sholder, 2011). Notably, ninety percent of these camp-dwellers were followers of Haider (Bashir, 2020).

This move, however, had been resisted by the local ulema, madrasa students and teachers of surrounding madrasas. In Muhammadpur there are forty-eight madrasas that are connected through a network, Ittefaqul Madarisil Qawmia (unity of qawmi madrasas), of around 10,000 students. When it looked like these two groups were about to engage in violent clash, representatives of the local political elites as well as the police administration appeared for mediation. The dispute was temporarily settled by sunset: Haider was buried in the graveyard that is adjacent to Muhammadpur Eidgah.

Interestingly, Haider's followers selected the furthest point of north-eastern corner of the graveyard. On the north lay the boundary between the graveyard and Taj Mahal Road, and on its east the boundary of the Eidgah. Either to protect other graves from being damaged due to the pressure of the huge gathering during his funeral or as a matter of strategy, a portion of the boundary

[4] The heading of the news item can be roughly translated as 'Death of 'Hata Baba', followers create disturbance over the issue of his grave'.

between the graveyard and the Eidgah was demolished just before the burial. Surprisingly, that demolished part has not since been repaired. Rather, within just a few days, a significant part of the boundary wall was further bulldozed and, to the utter frustration of locals, a permanent majar (see Figure 1) was constructed occupying a part of the Eidgah.

In it Haider's followers routinely performed *milad*s and other rituals. This was possibly an insult to the local madrasa-centred ulema, their students and some locals. The Principal of Jamia Wahedia madrasa and the Imam[5] of Muhammadpur Central Jame Masjid Jubayer Ahmed recalls his memory of the day of Haider's death. At around 12:00pm a group of local youths rushed to his office and expressed their concern that Haider was no more and that his followers might wish to bury him in the ground floor of the three-story building, which one of his followers had donated to him. If that happened, then the residential character of the area would be seriously endangered. Therefore, they argued that Haider had to be buried in the ordinary graveyard. Accordingly, they mobilised (Ahmed, 2020). His statement is a clear indication that local ulema and/or their likeminded forces were keeping a watchful eye on the activities of Haider and his followers.

Predictably, much uneasiness prevailed in the area centring the majar. Spells of clashes violence took place in Muhammadpur over the following weeks. On 2 April, a group of enthusiastic madrasa students, from Jamia Islamia Wahedia and Jamia Rahmania, engaged in day-long clashes with the Haider followers. Around 50 persons were injured to varying degrees. Again, local police had to intervene. To bring things back to normalcy, they fired rubber bullets ('Muhammadpure haider', 2014). Then, to stop the escalation of tension among contending groups, local councillors organised a series of multiparty dialogues involving the ulema, Haider's followers, local politicians and police administration ('Muhammadpure haider'). After that, no violence was reported in the area centring the majar issue. Meanwhile, journalists had been conducting their business as usual with a slight change in language. While some newspapers – *The Daily Star* and *Ittefaq* – were still using quotation mark around '*Haider Baba'*, others – *Samakal* and *Kaler Kontha* – directly referred to Haider as a Pir ('Muhammadpure haider', 2014). Now is the time for us to ask: Who was this Haider?

[5] A person who leads Muslim congregational prayers.

Figure 1: Majar of Julfikar Haider at Muhammadpur (Source: Author).

Haider had been a visible presence in Muhammadpur since the 1970s (Shamim, 2020). Even in the early 1980s locals, in general, used to consider him a vagabond. Some chased him out of the area accusing him of sponsoring marijuana addiction (Khan, 2019). Each time he came back to Muhammadpur area. By late 1980s Haider used to spend his afternoons in the vicinity of Muhammadpur Graveyard and gave time to those people who gathered around him. He often spoke Urdu, and occasionally Bangla (Shamim, 2020). At one stage, some people started believing in his spiritual power. From the early 1990s the size of the gathering around him started growing. In Muhammadpur, he first organised an *urs* for Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti in 1992. Since then, it has been a yearly programme.

As Haider spoke very little, people who gathered around him also remained mostly silent. On occasions, he walked, and the entourage silently followed, chanting no song or slogan. Followers claim that walking with him was a divine experience, it was never tiring. His attire was less than ordinary, hair uncombed. While taking a bath is a daily practice of the average Bangladeshi, Haider went unbathed for weeks or even months without smelling, or so his followers believed (Ahmed, 2020). Currently, hundreds of devotees visit his majar every

day. *Milads* are held every Thursday and Friday after *maghrib* (early evening) and *isha* (night) prayers. Haider's *urs* takes place every year according to the Arabic lunar calendar. Indeed, nowadays, there are three darbars of Haider in Muhammadpur.

Currently, both pro-majar and anti-majar camps seem to think that the political authorities, especially the two leaders – local councillor Md. Shafiqul Islam Sentu and member of parliament Jahangir Kabir Nanak – are on their side. Sentu, a presideim member of the opposition party and the commissioner of the locality for three consecutive terms, had been the presidents of two mosque-committees and an orphanage committee of the locality. Nanak was the presidium member of the party in power, and a former minister. Majar sympathisers claim that the tomb was constructed with the consent of the high-ups within the current government, in particular with the blessing of Nanak. Again, leader of the anti-majar camp Mahfuzul Huq states that Nanak repeatedly reiterated his solidarity with their demand and pledged that he would not allow any illegal construction, any majar, in the Eidgah. However, for reasons that remain unclear, the majar survived there. Six years after its establishment, when Huq looked back, his view was that its patrons had played a double role (Huq, 2020). It is now clear that local leaders wished to maintain good relations with madrasa-centred establishments, who, if aggrieved, may potentially destabilize the locality.

On the other hand, after Bangladesh's apex court's verdict (Correspondent, 2008; Rahman, 2003) that people of Geneva Camps born after 1971 were Bangladeshi citizens, the political landscape of Muhammadpur area dramatically changed. Now they became voters of three municipality wards (29, 31 and 32) of Dhaka North City Corporation and national elections. Of these, ward 32 hosts the largest chunk, some 40,000 people. Wards 29 and 31 host 15,000 people.[6] Local politicians in practice reached the voters of Geneva camp through Haider (Khan, 2019).

An overwhelming majority of camp-inhabitants are extremely poor (Haider, 2016, P. 434) and believe in Pirs and majars (Bashir, 2020). When the Camps were established in 1973, each family of stranded Pakistanis was allotted a room of 16 square feet, with common cooking and bathing facilities. Three generations later, the population has increased manifold but space for them remain unchanged. Living in a ghettoised life they have little interaction with mainstream culture, nor can they afford to enliven their own culture under

[6] In Ward-31 voters numbered 31,580 in the 2015 election, and 33,293 in the most recent 2020 election. The number of Urdu-speaking people is around 10,000. Sentu secured just over 4,000 votes in the 2015 elections.

extremely harsh conditions. For the local Urdu-speaking community Haider became an emblematic figure who shared the same suffering and endurance. For them, he was someone who could be approached with any of their problems. Haider's personality, his silence and his presence had a therapeutic effect on them. They found solace in him and, at the same time, took pride in him because a sizable section of the local Bangla-speaking community also used to pay tribute to one of their own. Therefore, this marginalised community's struggle for their own recognition became synonymous with Haider's individual recognition as a Pir. Indeed, we might explain their effort to establish his majar as their struggle to get rid of what James C Scott (1985, xviii). has called "ritual marginalisation".

Haider's study underline that whenever the pro- and anti-majar stood face to face, the state apparatus (Althusser 2014/1971, 70) intervened. On at least two occasions this intervention came from politicians and the local administration. What is clear is that both the groups were eventually reconciled with each other. The indirect, but clearly perceptible, outcome of the reconciliation is that Haider was recognised as a Pir. And following this resolution, one of the prominent leaders of ruling party Nanak together with the then Director General of the Islamic Foundation of Bangladesh apparently felt no uneasiness in being the chief guests (in two different sessions) at the first *urs* of Haider, which took place in 2015 (See Figure 6). Having briefly outlined Haider's 'success story', two failed cases are furnished below.

Sheikh Nur Muhammad (1937-2018) of Bagerhat

Muhammad had been an Assistant Teacher of a primary school teacher in Bagerhat. He joined and retired (1994) from the same institution with the same designation without being promoted and being transferred even once. That he could evade transfer throughout his career means that he could afford to halt transfers, presumably through his connections. All the same, he did not seem to use connections for securing promotion or career advancement (Billah, 2020). This would suggest that he was more interested in staying in his current station, perhaps to create his own domain. However, to the people of Bagerhat town he is much known as a *bhanda* Pir.[7] His family members and his only *khalifa* assert that Muhammad received *ijajat* from two strong Pir traditions in Bangladesh – the Furfura and the Sarsina. That he had been working with some mission was understandable from his activities of mid-1980s (Haider 2020; Khalifa 2020).

Muhammad publicly began his spiritual mission by organising *milad*s after

[7] We shall not use the derogatory term *bhanda* consistently here. He was labelled as *bhanda* after an incident in 2014.

maghrib and *isha* prayers in different mosques of the town. After those *milad* sessions, Muhammad used to give time to the participant devotees and return home late (Billah, 2020). It took almost a decade for Muhammad to gain a sizable following. Somehow, he managed to establish a connection with the then minister of home affairs Abdul Matin Chowdhury (Billah, 2020).[8] This possibly explains for why he was also paid intermittent visits by district commissioners, judges, secretaries, army officers etc. at his own humble residence. Most of his sympathisers had a general educational background. People used to visit him when they faced difficulties (Khalifa, 2020). By 2005 Muhammad had established his own khanqah on 1.25 acres of land near the Dhaka-Bagerhat highway on the outskirts of Bagerhat town. An orphanage-cum-*hafejia* madrasa[9] was also attached to it.

Muhammad had a large family consisting of four wives, nine sons and four daughters. He sent five of his sons to mainstream schools and colleges and four to madrasas. In contrast, he kept his daughters away from formal education. His wives and daughters were always completely confined within the four walls of a small, rented house (''43 bachar par', 2014). He also demonstrated an extreme level of apathy when it came to finding husbands for his daughters. When his eldest son Baki Billah enquired about finding his 32-year-old sister a suitable groom, their father reportedly replied in a stone-faced fashion: "I do not find anybody worthy of my daughter's hand" (Billah, 2020).

Being impatient, Billah finally arranged his eldest sister's marriage with a relatively well-off businessman from the town with the help of the district police chief. This incident enraged the patriarch in Muhammad. Consequently, the father-son relationship grew so bitter that Billah feared for his life and at a certain point fled to Khulna city. Then his father went to police chief and threatened him to transfer him to the most awkward possible place if he did not stay away from his family affairs (Haider, 2020).

After two years (June 2014), Billah contacted the then President of Bagerhat Press Club and narrated the long saga of how his father, who by then had earned some fame as a Pir, was mistreating the female members of the family. The journalist, realizing its sensitivity, placed the matter in the hands of the district police chief who, after primary investigation, found the allegation to be true. Considering the image of a former schoolteacher, especially the social humiliation and social stigma of his young daughters, and most importantly the prospect of his murids creating much hue and cry, the police wanted to mediate as amicably as possible. The Police Chief called on Muhammad to discuss the mistreatment of the female

[8] Abdul Matin Chowdhury served as the Ministry of Home Affairs between 1991 and 1996.

[9] A madrasa where children memorise the whole Quran under the instructions of teachers.

members of his family. Muhammad not only denounced all allegations, but he also sent the municipality councillor of his area to plead in his favour (Shaon, 2014).

Failing to settle those intra-family feud, the police raided Muhammad's house on 17 July 2014. Sensing the presence of the police, Muhammad escaped. The police found that the rooms of the house in which the wives and daughters had been living had no windows and were locked from outside. Even the females had no decent clothes in which to come outside. Once rescued, the police took Muhammad's wives, daughters and one minor son to court, from where they were later transferred into the custody of the social welfare department. On the same day, these developments were reported in the news portals. And the next day (18 July) mainstream newspapers published commentaries on how cruel a pseudo-Pir could be towards his wives and daughters.[10]

Figure 2: Protest of Locals against Sheikh Nur Muhammad (Source:Inzamam ul Huq, Bagerhat).

[10] Bagerhat Pratinidhi, 'Bagerhater kathita pirer kanda: strī santānder bandi rekhe calaten nirjātan', *Prothom Alo*, 18 July 2014, available at https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/270799 (accessed 25 March 2020). People thus came to know that Nur Muhammad had been enforcing the strictest version of female *purdah* (seclusion) on his daughters and wives, keeping his daughters away from minimum education and ultimately forcing them to live abnormally inhuman life. Being rescued they had burst into tears. The Pir's first wife Kulsum (58) was married to him at the age of fifteen. His second wife Parvin Akhter (43) was married when she was only thirteen. Kulsum complained that for the last 35 years she had not been allowed to see how the daylight looks. Nor was she allowed to visit any relative or neighbour. Kulsum was not allowed to visit her father's residence when her father died in 2004. Being suffocated within the four walls of the house Parvin escaped to his father's house in 2012. She was brought back forcefully and kept in chains indoors.

Figure 3: Protest of Civil Society Members and Government Officials (Source Inzamam ul Huq, Bagerhat).

Muhammad thus became the talk of the town. On the following day, local civil society members, human rights activists and even government officials formed a human chain in different parts of the town including in front of the aforementioned *khankah* (Figure 2). They protested at the mistreatment of the female members of the '*bhanda* Pir' and demanded his trial ('Kathita pirer', 2014). What is surprising is that officials of Department of Women Affairs of Bagerhat district also participated in this human chain (Figure 3) and demanded that he be punished for torturing females and children (Karim, 2014). Notably, it is not standard practice for government employees to take to the streets calling for the punishment of private citizens. Their participation indicated that there was consensus among district level officials that Muhammad was a person who should not be spared for his mistreatment of his family members, especially the women and girls.

Muhammad's story would remain incomplete unless an alternative version from his *khalifa*, who is now a professor at a renowned college in Dhaka, is also included here. This professor-cum-*khalifa* claimed that with all his savings, Muhammad had developed his khanqah. If he could be labelled *bhanda* in his old age, his family members would be able to use this land for their personal purposes. Besides, there had been some influential people in Bagerhat who had threatened to send his Pir to jail even for a single day. Again, Muhammad had a strained relationship with local ulema (Khalifa, 2020).

Muhammad's whistle-blowing son Billah, some locals and even local journalists testify that he was linked with the Furfura and the Sarsina traditions, had a fairly large following and even nominated a person as his *khalifa*. As far as spiritual training was concerned, he fulfilled the criterion of a Pir. But he failed to live up to public expectations of a sensible teacher, father and affable member of the local imam community. Again, by depriving his daughters of receiving even a primary education, this Pir had effectively violated law of the land. Indeed, keeping daughters confined to the home is nowadays regarded as a *madhyayugīya*[11] practice both by the local state apparatuses and civil society. So, when the Pir was exposed by his own sons for defying the values championed by the state and civil society alike, both joined hands to brand him a charlatan.

Major Muhammad Matiur Rahman (d. 2013)

Having earned his baccalaureate degree, Matiur joined the Pakistan army (Renu, 2020). In the eye of surviving freedom fighters from his village – Shimulia in Kishoreganj district – he was a war hero: Captain Matiur's company had freed two districts, Netrokona and Kishoreganj, from the control of the Pakistani Army on the eve of the victory of Bangladesh's Liberation Force on 16-17 December 1971 ('Ke ai pir?', 1989). In recognition of his role in the war, he received the *Bir Protik* medal, Bangladesh's fourth highest gallantry award. However, relatively younger people say that they have heard that a *bhanda* Pir was active in the village for some time. Again, Matiur is occasionally remembered as a pioneer of religious terrorism in the country.[12] Let us briefly introduce the person now.

Following Bangladesh's independence, Matiur was promoted to Major. He took early retirement in 1974 and bought a four-story house in the Dhaka's Khilgaon area. He also tried to make his fortune through a Dhaka-based real estate start-up. It did not go well: he was accused of embezzling forty million taka, put on trial, and handed five-year imprisonment. Jail life completely transformed him. The former military man and former entrepreneur now reappeared armed with his mission of religion and spirituality. In his post-jail life, Matiur began paying occasional visits to his village and inviting locally

[11] Meaning 'medieval' in derogatory terms.

[12] Tipu Sultan, 'Bangladesh jangi tatparatā: pratham paryai', *Prothom Alo*, 3 August 2016 available at https://www.prothomalo.com/opinion/article/935452 (accessed 10 March 2020); see also, Rahman Masud, 'Shimulia theke holy artisan', *Banglanews24.com*, 30 June 2017, available at https://www.banglanews24.com/banglanewsprint/584181 (accessed 10 March 2020).

influential people to his residence. People were curious when they heard that their co-villager Matiur had become Pir. On occasions, he used to organise *milad* and *waj mahfil*s (''Pakundiai dudin', 1989). As time went on, the frequency of such programmes increased: over the following five years, *waj* became a monthly ritual at which only Matiur spoke. Till then Matiur had been stationed in Dhaka.

By mid-1980s, the number of his murids in Shimulia and its neighbouring villages had grown exponentially. His followers made him virtually an 'absentee-boss' whose influence now surpassed that of previously influential local actors. People waited for his return from Dhaka to arbitrate local disputes (Imamuddin, 2020). At that time, Matiur was introduced in *mahfil*s as Shah Sufi Alhajj Hazrat Maulana Maj (retd.) Al Mansur Abdul Hamid Muhammad Matiur Rahman. And Matiur started staying at Shimulia two days a week. During this period, thousands of people gathered around him and attended his programmes (Mia M. Z., 2020; Mia M. A., 2020). Alongside ordinary people, members of the local elite – such as chairmen and members of neighbouring union councils – paid Matiur regular visits.

From 1987, the entrepreneur inside Matiur became active again. He established a lozenge factory and a pen factory in Shimulia, creating myriad employment opportunities for local people, especially for his murids. He even offered help to people with a reputation for dacoity (Mia M. Z., 2020). Near his village home Pir Matiur also organized a local bazar (Alam, 2020). And the preparation of an oil factory got underway so that none of his murids remained economically idle. Moreover, to ensure that everybody acquired a minimum level of religious education, Matiur also established a madrasa: day sessions were devoted for children and the evening sessions were attended by adults. He also organized a team of young volunteers who were deployed at strategic points of the village to ensure security. Thanks to these military-style checkpoints burglary and dacoity were reputed to be banished from the neighbourhood. In short, Matiur established an informal 'parallel' administration in Shimulia and its neighbouring village. Again, from his Dhaka residence he brought out a monthly publication *Millat.* He also used to post advertisements in mainstream newspapers inviting Muslims to join his classes on the basics of Islam (Figure 4). By that period, he had gained influence in the capital's Khilgaon area (''Dhakai rahasya', 1989).

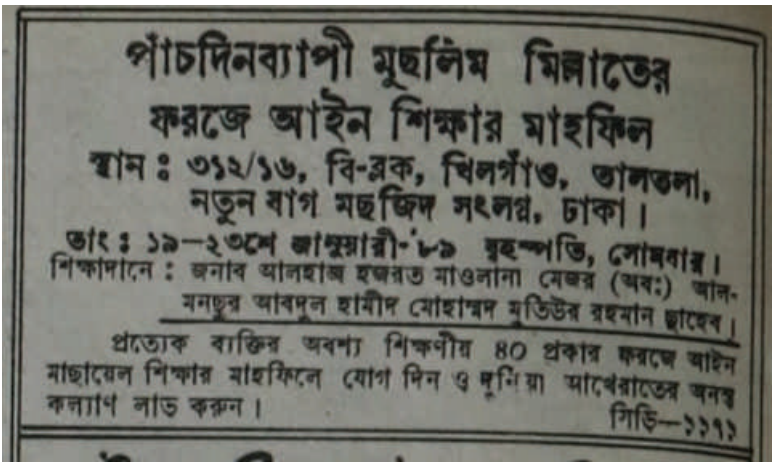

পাঁচদিনব্যাপী মুছলিম মিল্লাতের
ফরজে আইন শিক্ষার মাহফিল
স্থান ঃ ৩১২/১৬, বি-ব্লক, খিলগাঁও, তালতলা,
নতুন বাগ মছজিদ সংলগ্ন, ঢাকা।
তাং ঃ ১৯—২৩শে জানুয়ারী-'৮৯ বৃহস্পতি, সোমবার।
শিক্ষাদানে : জনাব আলহাজ্ব হজরত মাওলানা মেজর (অবঃ) আল-
মনছুর আবদুল হামীদ মোহাম্মদ মুতিউর রহমান ছাহেব।
প্রত্যেক ব্যক্তির অবশ্য শিক্ষণীয় ৪০ প্রকার ফরজে আইন
মাছায়েল শিক্ষার মাহফিলে যোগ দিন ও দুনিয়া আখেরাতের অনন্ত
কল্যাণ লাভ করুন।
সিডি—১১৭১

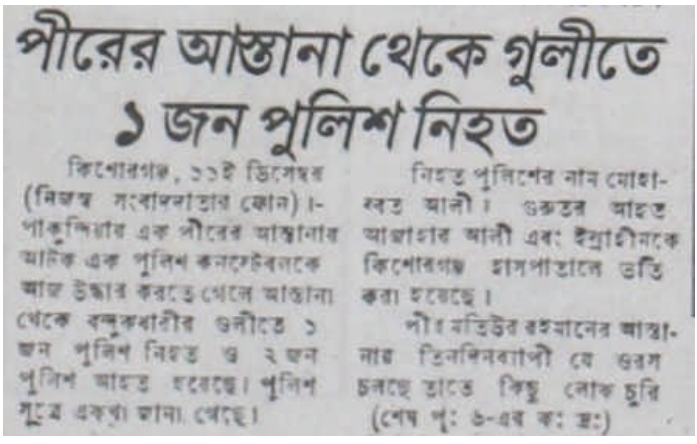
Figure 4: Advertisement of Matiur's Class on Islam. This was published in the daily Ittefaq on 18 January 1989. It says that to know about the compulsory duties of Islam, everybody should join his five-day long mahfil (from 19 to 23 January 1989) at his Khilgaon residence.

However, in the winter of 1988 one of Matiur's associates Mufazzal Hossain, who had been in charge of affairs in Shimulia, brought a teenage Hindu boy Debabrata Ghosh from Narail district, converted him to Islam, and made him Matiur's murid. Meanwhile Debabrata's family members arrived at Shimulia with police to rescue the minor. Following the incident of the Hindu teenager, however, local police maintained a close watch on activities taking place in Matiur's Shimulia base. In a *mahfil* of the winter of 1989, Matiur's followers captured a watcher of special branch police. By noon, another watcher came to the same spot in search of his colleague. Locals also kept him captive. In the afternoon, the officer-in-charge of Pakundia police station arrived in Shimulia with three police vans to rescue these two constables. But by that time, there was a huge gathering. When police approached the *mahfil*, Matiur's followers – either sensing that the police were trying to foil their programme or having been instructed by Mufazzal to get rid of them – chased the police team. Faced with an aggressive mob the police opened fire as a measure of self-defence. The crowd went wild when they found that one of their fellows had been hit in the leg by a bullet. They caught a police constable and beat him to death. They also snatched some of the policemen's rifles (Alam, 2020).

Once the death of the policeman had been reported to the Kishoreganj district police authorities, hundreds of policemen were deployed to cordon off Shimulia and its neighbouring villages by nightfall. By 9:00am the next day, they had approached to the epicentre – the settlements of Matiur and his disciples. The

police ordered them to surrender through their hand-mikes. Matiur's supporters not only defied the police order but used megaphones at the local mosque to repeatedly announce that whoever obstructed the teaching of Islam was an infidel and surrendering to infidels was *haram* (prohibited): rather, it was every Muslim's duty to fight infidels. By 9:30am police opened fire again, this time aiming at Matiur's Shimulia residence. According to contemporary news reports, Matiur and his men fought a battle with police forces for almost two days. But interestingly locals now (February/March 2020) tell a somewhat different story. According to these accounts, Matiur's men were playing a pre-recorded statement in cassette-player repeatedly through the amplifier of the mosque. Hence, by the time that the police opened firing, most of them had escaped. All the same, during the gunfight two policemen and 19 civilians died, though except for one female villager, these were all non-locals. Forty-nine more were arrested. Surprisingly perhaps, none of Matiur's local murids were injured or died. Matiur himself escaped serious injury and was duly arrested the next day (Alam, 2020).

Before proceeding further, let us look at the wording in the reports of this incident that appeared in prominent newspapers. On 12 December *Songbad* used the headline "Policeman died from bullet fired from a Pir's Den". Notably, the report was not derogatory about the Pir, or anybody involved. Even the word Pir was not put within quotation mark anywhere in the first report [see Figure 5].



পীরের আস্তানা থেকে গুলীতে
১ জন পুলিশ নিহত

কিশোরগঞ্জ, ১১ই ডিসেম্বর (নিজস্ব সংবাদদাতার ফোন)।- পাকুন্দিয়ার এক পীরের আস্তানার আটক এক পুলিশ কনস্টেবলকে আজ উদ্ধার করতে গেলে আস্তানা থেকে বন্দুকধারীর গুলীতে ১ জন পুলিশ নিহত ও ২ জন পুলিশ আহত হয়েছে। পুলিশ সূত্রে একথা জানা গেছে।

নিহত পুলিশের নাম মোহাম্মদ আলী। গুরুতর আহত আঞ্জাহার আলী এবং ইদ্রাহীমকে কিশোরগঞ্জ হাসপাতালে ভর্তি করা হয়েছে।

পীর মতিউর রহমানের আস্তানায় তিনদিনব্যাপী যে ওরস চলছে তাতে কিছু লোক চুরি

(শেষ পৃঃ ৬-এর কঃ দ্রঃ)

Figure 5: Scoop in Daily Songbad (12 December 1989).

The following day, when many more newspapers published detailed reports about the incident, the headlines had slightly changed. Now they placed a quotation mark around the word Pir (Figure 6). Although other newspapers such as *Observer*, *Azad*, *Banglar Bani*, and *Songbad*, published similar reports, none used the word fake- or

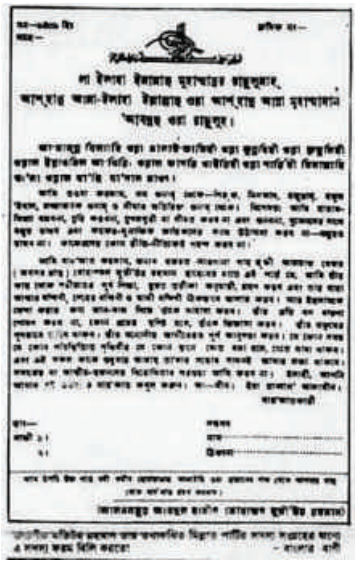
Figure 6: The headline in a national daily that reports gunfight between followers of a Pir and Police (Source: Ittefaq, 13 December 1989).

pseudo-Pir for Matiur. By the third day of reporting, however, the tone of the newspapers had entirely changed. All employed the label *bhanda-* or pseudo-Pir for Matiur (See Figure 7).

Consequently, Matiur served three years in prison for conspiring against the state and for ordering the killing of police personnel. He was released in 1993 and Matiur died unceremoniously in 2013. During this period, he could not regain his past reputation as Pir.

Figure 7: Newspaper report labelling Matiur as bhanda-Pir in its headline (Source: Ittefaq, 15 December 1989).

During my field visits to Shimulia in 2020 and 2021, I talked to dozens of its elderly residents. None hinted that they found anything objectionable in Matiur's approaches as a Pir and his connection with militancy ('Eta asra', 1989). However, villagers who are in their 30s or younger did not seem to maintain the same high regard for him. This set of events raises the question: Could Matiur earn the recognition of a Pir in his domain? The answer is an unambiguous yes. Indeed, Matiur was possibly one of the rare Pirs who invited questions from his murids and ordinary people as well (see Figure 8).



Full text of Murid's Pledge

I beg mercy from Allah for my sins of doing shirk, bidat, for violating what belongs to Allah, and what belongs to his creatures, for hidden sins and for crossing limits. I shall not steal or lie. I shall neither speak ill of others nor listen to the ill-speaking persons. I shall make friendship with Muslims. I shall neither mix with unbelievers, double-faced people and sinners, nor make friends with them. I shall not love the norms of the unbelievers.

I am pledge-bound with Hazrat Maulana Shah Sufi Alhaj Major (retd.) Muhammad Matiur Rahman to receive comprehensive education of sharia from him in accordance with Sunnah. And I shall apply that knowledge for properly living spiritual, physical and temporal life.

In order to enliven Islam, I shall help him with my labour and resources. I shall not hold any bad image of my Pir in mind. If any confusion arises, I shall ask him.

I shall be completely obedient to his nominated person too. In any circumstances I shall be obliged to go anywhere anytime. In doing so, only Allah's pleasure will be my goal. I shall not care the opposition of society or my family in this regard. O Lord, please help me fulfil my pledge. Ameen.

Figure 8: Pledges that a murid was required to make orally as well as in writing (Source: Banglar Bani, 15 December 1989).

Evidently, following the incidents of 11 December 1989 in Shimulia, primary limitation of Matiur's approach seems to have been that he could not demonstrate flexibility in dealing with State agencies. Matiur and his followers' activities in Shimulia were interpreted as a direct challenge to the local state apparatus. Consequently, the media, taking the side of the State, labelled him as charlatan.

Comparative analysis

The cases collectively illustrate that through consistent activism in their respective social domains these Pirs were successful in gaining a sizable following, i.e., canonised by people. Of them, Haider and Muhammad were (and still is) perceived to have possessed miracle working abilities. Only Muhammad and Matiur fulfil the expected criterion of having spiritual training

under Sufi masters. Haider is believed to have followed the *Chishtia* tariqa, but none could ascertain who had been his spiritual trainer and none has so far claimed to be his murid. All of them had received mainstream education attesting the fact that attending religious school is not a necessary condition for gaining recognition as a Pir in Bangladesh.

These Pirs' strategies for reaching out to potential target audiences significantly differed from each other. For example, Haider was characteristically silent. Nobody saw him addressing any mass gathering, not even at the *urs* that he used to organise. Muhammad used to organise *milad* and *zikr mahfils* in mosques. Initially his target audience had been moderately religious people who went to the mosque to say prayers. But once he earned a reputation, people came to him with the hope that his blessing would end their personal problems. Both Haider and Muhammad used to give sacramental water or oil to solve the personal problems of people when requested. In contrast, none saw Matiur blowing on water as a spiritual gesture. Rather he demonstrated creativity in generating employment for his murids as well as for his co-villagers.

If having spiritual experience under competent spiritual masters and winning over disciples and followers with personal charisma represent the decisive factors in gaining and maintaining recognition of being Pir, then these three persons would have been widely revered till today. But only Haider could maintain such reverence throughout his lifetime and thus create an after-death legacy. Unfortunately, Matiur and Muhammad now suffer the non-recognition and concomitant social stigma that is attached to a charlatan. Seen from another perspective, as Pir they had limited success: while they may have been recognised as Pir at interpersonal level, they failed to carry through the recognition in their interaction with other organised forces and state apparatuses.

The foregoing discussion points to the limitation of Sufi-related scholars' consensus on mass-canonisation, which probably stems from assumptions that the process of societal recognition – in our case, of a Pir – is spontaneous and apolitical. Neither scholars of Sufism nor Rottiers take into sufficient consideration the presence of organised socio-political groups and their role in this process of recognition. Neither do they say anything if the State, the Leviathan, plays any role in this regard. The result is limited understanding of social reality. For example, Rottiers frustratingly concludes that "the process of granting social recognition is *highly miscellaneous and random*" [emphasis added] (Rottiers, 2010), a conclusion that strikingly matches with that of Gellner who found sainthood unpredictable (Gellner, 1981, p. 40). This

limitation, however, may be overcome by drawing on Gidden's insight that in modern times nothing remains beyond "the scope of the administrative reach of the state apparatus" and "unabsorbed by the state" (1989, 21-2). Therefore, this paper has demonstrated that the role of organised social groups and state apparatus occasionally become crucial in the process of recognition.

These Pirs had different backgrounds, qualifications, styles, domains, and, above all, levels of success. But one thing was common to them all. None of them could avoid creating discontent in their surroundings and thus upsetting already organised relgio-political groups and then inviting agencies of the state to mediate. In the process of such mediation, their recognition in the interpersonal level is either reinforced or compromised. Haider's ultimate and decisive recognition came after his followers asserted his Pir identity by being engaged with the 'aggrieved' orthodox ulema. Then followed the mediation by political elites and state agencies. The recognition was made visible when local MP and presidium member of the ruling party, Nanak, whom the network of orthodox ulema still regard the key patron of madrasas in Muhammadpur area, was the chief guest at Haider's first *urs* held in 2015 (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Three pages of the invitation card to the first urs of Pir Haider held in 2015

Again, Muhammad's activities created feeling of discontent not only within his own family but also with the organised ulema of Bagerhat; and Matiur's

conversion of a minor Hindu boy into Islam disappointed members of minority religious community and thus inviting state agencies to put all his activities under scanner. When it came to facing state apparatuses, these two personalities seemed to mishandle them. Haider and Muhammad's relationship with local ulema, for instance, was that of mutual suspicion and competition. Taken together, all three cases indicate that emerging Pirs must face local religio-political forces: while non-recognition or indifference may weaken the Pir's relative position, while their sympathy and cooperation reinforce the claimant's Pir identity.

Each of our personalities, at different stages in their Pir-career, faced decisive micro-level conflict – experience of discontent – in their surroundings that necessitated interference of "official agents" (Emerson & Messinger, 1977). And it has been shown that the outcome of such interference was decisive. This paper suggests that if the state apparatuses (or alternatively official agents) are called into any discontent or conflict by the contending parties or by third party, then it may fundamentally shape the outcome of the intervention by imposing decisions (Emerson & Messinger 1977, p. 128). In our cases, those decisions came in the form of recognition and thus legitimation of individual Pirhood or alternative non-recognition. State apparatuses' recognition, therefore, has the capacity to trump previously attained recognition at the interpersonal and the societal levels only in negative way. That is, it can label an already recognised Pir as a non-Pir; whether it can label a non-Pir into a Pir is worthy of further investigation.

The precise mechanism of state-conferred recognition is indirect – it does not directly come from official state agencies, or coercive state apparatuses: (mis-) recognition was expressed through the media which is arguably part of the ideological state apparatus. Regarding the interconnectedness of state agencies and print (in recent years, electronic as well) media, we might recall Althusser's (2014, 93) maxim that "The overall unity of the system formed by all state apparatuses is ensured by the unity of the … state power and by the state ideology".

Conclusion

The examples of Pirs presented here testify to the arguments made by scholars on Sufism that acknowledgement at interpersonal level forms the bedrock of a Pir's recognition. But this article also argues that interpersonal recognition is only the first step involved in being acknowledged as a Pir. Some may indirectly label this stage as political; since there are political implications of many of the decisions that individuals take "even when these are not accompanied by traditional forms of political consciousness" (Mann, 1994, p. 31).

After gaining recognition within their relatively autonomous interpersonal space, Pirs in present-day Bangladesh need to interact with organised religio-political forces in wider society. And any engagement with organised political forces for survival, recognition or growth is obviously political in nature. At some stage Pirs and their supporters also have to deal with state agencies, and this engagement, as have been demonstrated, can either reinforce or negate their existing Pir identities. Hence, this paper's overall proposition is that recognition is inevitably a multi-layered political process: "everything is political" – and contains both micro-and macro-politics (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 213). Finally, it may seem that this paper has assumed that the state is omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient (Nandy, 1995, p. 43; Oppenheimer, 1926, p. 2). And our cases indicate that even with such attributes the state can misrecognise a Pir.

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