

**MUSLIM WOMEN MYSTICS AND FEMALE SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY
IN SOUTH ASIAN SUFISM**

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Abstract

Undertaken at the shrines associated with two Sufi saints, this study demonstrates how women can function as spiritual guides despite a lack of sanction by the mainstream Sufi orders. The discrepancies between discourses about women's roles in Sufism today and the practices described here serve as a point of departure for investigating two areas of concern: 1) how women's participation in the ritual life at Sufi shrines reflects Islamic, social, and cultural ideals about femininity, spiritual authority, and gender relationships; and 2) how the interplay of ambivalence and complex situational variables can produce dialogical understandings of prescriptive norms and subjective modes of action in the cases of the two women who are the focus of this study.

1 Points of Inquiry

The shrines associated with two Sufi *pirs* (1) in India, Mu'in ud-din Chishti (d. 1236), buried in Ajmer, in the north-western state of Rajasthan, and Sharaf ud-din Maneri (d. 1381), whose remains lie in Bihar Sharif, in the north-eastern state of Bihar, evoke a number of associations and sentiments among the pilgrims who visit them. While these shrines are spoken of as integrators – patronized by people from all classes, creeds, and religious communities, serving the spiritual and material needs of local pilgrims as well as those who come from afar – they also stand at a nexus of contradictions surrounding the visitation of shrines and the veneration of *pirs*. One of the contradictions with which this essay is concerned involves the ambivalences surrounding women's ritual activities in the world of Sufi shrines. The mystical side of Islam, in particular, is marked by an oscillation between admiration of the feminine, and of holy women from centuries past, and a condemnation of mystic and saintly women today. The censure is particularly acute in regards to the activities of women who have come to be recognized as powerful spiritual authorities, such that they are able to operate in the shrine setting as *de facto pirs*. In many cases they are not called *pirs*, but what is clear is that these women are able to engage in the kind of 'work' that places them squarely in the realm of *piri-muridi*. There are few studies of such women that suggest female *pirs* are a widespread phenomenon in the Subcontinent, and detailed historical and literary treatments of women's ritual activities in the Sufi shrine milieu are minimal. Nonetheless, investigations of Sufism and popular devotion to saints in various parts of the Muslim world (particularly North Africa) (2) suggest that many of the social, economic, and political changes occurring in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries increased opportunities for women to participate in the wider world of Sufi ritual practice, whether in conjunction with, or despite, the views of Sufis of the established, mainstream 'orders', or *silsile* (sg. *silsila*). These centuries witnessed the rise of movements for reform among Muslims which, though varied in orientation and approach, commonly sought to Islamize the Muslim community by bringing it into closer conformity with the model of the Prophet Muhammad, the authority of the Qur'an, and the guidance of Islamic *Shari'a* Law. Though contemporary forms of Sufi belief and practice were often the targets of attack by reformist Muslims, Sufis themselves took up the mantle of reform in different ways and with varying results. The ritual activities of women, particularly where these involved the veneration of *pirs* and the mediation of the spiritual power which these individuals embodied and symbolized, were especially singled out for criticism.

Those interviewed for this study drew from notions of *Shari'a* Law to explain why women could not become *pirs*. There is much evidence, however, to suggest that many women have done just that – not only today, but throughout the history of mystical Islam. Because it is an authority that is concerned with notions of transcendent reality and the relationships of human beings to this reality, one in which gender distinctions are rendered deceptive, and ultimately, meaningless in the face of God, female spiritual

authority is recognized as an accepted part of Sufi faith. Despite being an authority that encompasses and embraces inherent contradictions about gender relationships and prevailing social arrangements, however, it also represents, to many, a threat to a hegemonic order that idealizes female exclusion from communal ritual events, segregation of the sexes, and women's subordination to male authority. What can we make of the disjunctions among discourses about women, *pirs*, and shrines? A hermeneutic paradigm that privileges oppositionality cannot adequately explain the discrepancies between what women do and what is said about what women do in the shrine setting. Instead, discourses about the subject of women-as-*pirs* may be better understood in terms of ambivalence, and thus as modalities – in the sense that they involve references to simultaneous alternatives – operating in conjunction with mechanisms that shape, sustain, and modify them. Understanding, then, what mechanisms are at work in determining where, when, and how a woman may be considered, and operate, as a de facto *pir* in the shrine setting, is the main objective of this study. The larger issues to which the question of women-as-*pirs* speaks, issues that can only be intimated here, reflect persistent controversies among Sufis as members of a community of believers that strives to buttress a unifying definition of Muslim selfhood, particularly female Muslim selfhood, against internal and external forces which increasingly threaten to destroy it. Outlining how these controversies comment upon the concept of a normative, universal Islam with definable and inalienable parameters, is a secondary concern.

2 Women, Shrines, and *Pirs*: Descriptions and Discourses

In part, it is because of their openness to women, and their appeal to non-Muslims, that Sufi shrines have been labeled by their detractors as 'un-Islamic,' while *pirs* are sometimes accused of keeping their patrons steeped in ignorance and superstition. At times, criticisms of *pirs* and shrines focus on the supposed worship of both by pilgrims, though this charge misses the point of why both remain such an important part of religious life in the Subcontinent. Pilgrims visit shrines for reasons that vary widely. They come from near and far to participate in *'urs* festivals, which commemorate the death day of the *pir*(s) buried in the main burial shrine, or *dargah*; to celebrate *milad un-nabi* (the Prophet Muhammad's birthday) or the breaking of the fast during Ramzan; to remember the martyred Imam Husain during the month of Muharram; and to attend the musical assemblies that feature *Qawwali* music and singing. They may patronize the shrines closest to where they live for matters both mundane and spiritual. They visit the *pirs* and *khadim log* 'servants' attached to these places to obtain healing remedies, help with local bureaucratic authorities, prayer formulas, advice, or amulets. They sit in shrines to read the Qur'an, to pray alone, or in groups. Many pilgrims request a deceased saint's intercession through prayer and ritual supplication. They seek peace of mind. They visit shrines in conjunction with making 'vows', or *mannat*, fulfilling them, or giving thanks for prayers answered. Local children attend 'Islamic school', or *maktab* there. The representatives of Sufi orders convene at shrines and forge, or nurture, ties with their fellow Sufis. For many women, shrines are the only 'public' gathering places that are socially acceptable for them to visit, and they do so in great numbers, alone or in groups. Some pilgrims come as *murids*, or disciples of a *pir*, for instruction in the traditions of the particular Sufi order into which they have been initiated. Finally, the connections between shrines and governments in the Subcontinent reflect matters of political expediency. Indian politicians seek to garner support among Muslims by visiting shrines during major festival occasions. In Bangladesh, *pirs* such as Hafizi Huzur have run for political office (3). In Pakistan, shrines have been co-opted by the government since the time of Ayyub Khan's military regime (1958-69) in efforts to monitor their activities, undermine the influence of powerful landowning *pirs*, and push programs of Islamization (Ewing 1983).

There are many different kinds of shrines associated with deceased and living Muslim saints; many of these are not Sufi, strictly speaking. Local parlance accords the term Sufi to a number of individuals and phenomena that have little or no connection with the institutional forms of mystical Islam that began to appear in the 10th century CE. Many of the shrines that are popularly considered Sufi enjoy local or even regional importance as sites of pilgrimage, yet they do not all contain the mausoleums of actual *pirs*. Rather, as Richard Eaton and Asim Roy have argued in their respective studies of Islam in Bengal, the graves of individuals who had been locally considered holy men came to acquire a reputation for

miracles, thereafter becoming popular sites of pilgrimage (Eaton 1993, Roy 1996). Most shrines, Sufi or purportedly so, tend to be relatively unknown outside the districts in which they are located. This is not, however, the case with the burial shrines of the two saints mentioned here. Mu'in ud-din Chishti, who according to hagiography, was sent by his master from what is today Afghanistan to spread the teachings of Islam, is credited with founding the Chishti order in India. His *dargah* is popular and well-known throughout the Subcontinent. Sharaf ud-din Maneri is credited with systematizing the Firdausi order and spreading its fame in North India, the Deccan, and what is today Bangladesh and Pakistan, through the (posthumous) publication and dissemination of his letters and discourses. The Firdausi *dargah* is primarily visited by pilgrims from Bihar and Bengal, and by those who have migrated from these places elsewhere. *Khanaqahs*, the lodges that house the hereditary *pirs* of these orders, as well as members of their extended family, are also important as centers of ritual activity for pilgrims, for it is in these places that *pirs* hold office and entertain guests and supplicants. While the presence of women is noticeable at these two types of shrines, their activities, to all appearances, are the same as those of other pilgrims and disciples. The key to understanding that women can and do play very significant roles in Sufism today, not only as pilgrims and disciples, but in many cases, as de facto *pirs*, lies in the smaller spaces that are less well-known. These smaller, ancillary spaces are often part of a network of shrines where the (deceased) *pir's* power has manifested itself, and they are considered holy in their own right. They defy precise classification. They may be referred to locally as *astanas*, *chilla gahs*, *maqbaras*, and *hujra gahs*, but in fact these terms can mean different things in different contexts, not to mention locations. They are either part of a *dargah* complex, or located at a distance from one. While the *dargah* and *khanaqah* tend to be the primary sites of ritual activity for pilgrims who visit during major festival occasions, auxiliary shrines are often important sites of activity for pilgrims who reside nearby, particularly women.

The kinds of auxiliary shrines I focus on here are those whose functions were generally agreed upon across regional boundaries and contexts: the *hujra gah* of Sharaf ud-din Maneri, a private prayer chamber once used by him, and the 'Usmani *chilla* (4). The *hujra gah* contains a cell that has been plastered over and enhanced by the addition of a somewhat elaborate structure. The structure consists of two adjoining cells, separated by a locked gate; a raised, roofed but otherwise unenclosed prayer hall; a small metal gate leading to a sad and neglected courtyard; and just beyond that, a larger gate bearing an inscription of the shrine's identity. Originally, the *hujra gah* consisted of one simple cell that Sharaf ud-din used when he returned to the Bihar Sharif after many years spent wandering, meditating, and living in the hills of Rajgir, a nearby town that has become an important site of pilgrimage for Hindus, Muslims, Jains, and Buddhists. Today, the *hujra gah* is used chiefly by local women for prayer. Unlike Sharaf ud-din's *hujra* in Rajgir, which has become a popular tourist attraction and part of a complex of sacred sites, it seems to be relatively unknown by people from outside the area. On the other hand, the 'Usmani *chilla* in Ajmer plays an important role for pilgrims who are drawn to Mu'in ud-din Chishti and to the Gudri Shah Chishti order. The shrine and its land have been owned by the Gudri Shahs for several generations. It houses the *chilla gah* where Mu'in ud-din is reputed to have spent much time in meditation. Aside from this chamber, the 'Usmani *chilla* contains the graves of four of the *pirs* of the Gudri Shah order, male and female relatives of these *pirs*, and relics which reputedly belonged to Mu'in ud-din's *pir*, 'Usman Haruni. It is adjacent to the Sufi Saint School, founded by the current Gudri Shah *pir*, and accredited by the Government of India to provide secular education up to the eighth standard. Like many of the wealthier shrines in the Subcontinent, it is a multifunctional institution that plays an important role socially, culturally, and spiritually for local and extra-local pilgrims.

Although women's ability to engage in *piri-muridi* tends to be circumscribed at the large *dargahs* that are administered by *pirzade* (meaning here the *pir's* closest family members), associated with a particularly revered saint, and patronized by pilgrims on a state-wide, regional, all-India, or international level, the smaller, lesser-known Sufi *dargahs*, as well as the auxiliary shrines affiliated with large *dargahs*, afford much greater scope for women to operate as de facto *pirs* on behalf of disciples or clients. To a great extent, women's ability to do so depends upon perceptions about the importance of these sacred places, as well as the degree to which they are controlled by shrine management. Those shrines that are perceived by Sufis as well as pilgrims as being key centers of Sufi life outside of the immediate locality, those that are well-endowed, and those that draw pilgrims from a wide spectrum of classes,

castes, and religious communities often fall under the cooperative jurisdiction and management of the head of the order and servants of the shrine. These individuals are enjoined to uphold the traditions of the order (5), or at least to give the outward impression of doing so. Thus, they are able to uphold the shrine's status as sacred space, and their own status as representatives of a social and spiritual elite. By contrast, a smaller *dargah* or auxiliary shrine – less frequented by pilgrims, managed by a small number of functionaries (or none at all), and less subject to constant scrutiny – is unlikely to be rigidly controlled, thereby affording women scope to act with relative autonomy.

Today, as in the past, contradictions surrounding ritual activities at Sufi shrines pivot on the question of whether or not many of these activities are properly Islamic, or 'hybrid' or 'syncretistic' forms of local piety coated with an Islamic veneer (6). Although centuries-old debates over the nature of these ritual activities have never been settled among Sufis, or between Sufis and their critics, Sufism itself has rarely been condemned wholesale by those who decry its contemporary manifestations. Within the framework of devotion to Sufi saints, however, women's ritual activities have, more often than not, been regarded as problematic. Indeed, criticisms of women's visibility in the world of shrines, particularly during the final decades of colonial rule in the Subcontinent, have come to reflect a preoccupation with larger questions concerning the moral fabric of the Muslim community. This has especially been the case since the late nineteenth century, which saw the growth of Islamic movements for reform in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, and with innovations in print, transportation, and communication helping to facilitate pilgrimage by women to shrines on the one hand, and fueling the publication of demotic literature in the vernacular languages on the other (7). In South Asia, as elsewhere, such literature is distinguished by its many references to the fundamental sources of the Law – Qur'an, Hadis, and the writing of jurists – through which its authors attempt to articulate a blueprint for *sahih* 'authentic' Islamic faith and practice. Much of the demotic literature produced and disseminated during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as today, was written by men who combined the roles of Sufi and scholar of Islamic *Shari'a* Law. Notably, the propriety of 'innovative customs' *bida'*, in particular the belief in saints and pilgrimage to shrines, and the perpetuation of these customs by women, are prominent subjects within these popular texts, which otherwise vary widely in theme, genre, and subject matter.

Muslim reformers – particularly in the early twentieth century – sought to link the devotional practices of women to the moral and spiritual decline of South Asian Islam. These criticisms of women, however, were marked by ambivalence; as Gail Minault has pointed out, if women represented what had gone wrong with the Muslim community, they also symbolized that which was worth preserving in Islam (Minault 1998: 6, cf. Thanawi 1990: 1-2). In their efforts to bring Muslims closer to the ideal of an Islam of the Prophet Muhammad, with *Shari'a* as the measuring rod against which belief and practice might be judged appropriate, permissible, or forbidden, reformist Sufi *pirs* sought to undercut the ability of women to openly exercise authority in the shrine setting. This trend is marked not only in South Asian Islam, but elsewhere in the Muslim world, as some studies have demonstrated (Hoffman 1995).

The sense of authority intended here relates to a woman's influence upon major decision-making processes, and to her ability to bring about significant changes, help sustain the ideology or ethos of an order, or undermine it. It implies a woman's ability to engage in activities – such as making disciples or performing ritual acts on behalf of others, male or female – that are nominally forbidden to her. Broadly, it suggests the ways in which women may exercise agency within the confines of those boundaries that limit their self-expression, and begs the question of how subjective modes of expression can be made to conform to prevalent ideas about community identity while still allowing scope for outward behavior that apparently contradicts those ideas. A woman who crosses the boundaries into what is considered 'male' territory often must cloak her influence in the guise of modesty and compliance with an ideal of female subordination to male hegemony. This applies even – and perhaps especially – to those women who are able to exercise authority because of their relationship (by blood or spiritual ties) to a *pir*. According to both women and men I interviewed, the behavior of its women reflects the values and honor of a family. In the cases of the Chishti and Firdausi Sufis of Ajmer and Bihar Sharif, the behavior of the women of the family, articulated in terms of *'izzat* 'honor' or *sharafat* 'noble character', is linked to the preservation and protection of the social and spiritual status of the *pirs* and *khadim*, the hereditary caretakers of shrines, to whom they are related. For the women of these families, *'izzat* and *sharafat* are directly

related to their observance of *parda*, which may be loosely translated as veiling and seclusion, but which in practice encompasses a much wider range of connotations, meanings, and behaviors than is usually conveyed in discourse. Attitudes towards *parda* reflect a prevailing perception that it is, for Muslim women, as much an obligatory component of Islam as prayer or belief in the Prophethood of Muhammad, yet *parda* observance is highly subject to modification. The practice, and articulation, of *parda* today by the women featured in the cases described below, then, offer an especially compelling glimpse into how women's activities in the realm of shrines can reflect prevailing ideals about Muslim selfhood, Sufi identity, Islamic femininity, and female spiritual authority while simultaneously challenging and contesting some of these ideals.

3 Ritual Performances: Gender, Investiture, and *Piri-Muridi* among the Gudri Shah Chishtis

Within the Sufi orders, it is well known that women disciples who have shown exceptional promise, or a high degree of spiritual advancement under the guidance of their *pir*, may be invested with the authority to guide others, or, as *khalifas* 'delegates', to pass on the teachings of their *pirs*. Also well-known among Sufis is that the women of Sufi families, in particular the mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters of *pirs*, may perform the kinds of activities that are associated with the *pir* himself, such as providing counsel to disciples and pilgrims, healing the afflicted, or creating and distributing *ta'wiz*, *falita*, and *naqsh* or varieties of 'amulets'. These acts are sanctioned by *pirs* and are chronicled in Sufi oral and written texts (8). Among the women of the Gudri Shah order today, it is the *pir-ma*, the mother of the current *pir*, who stands out among the women of the order. Besides assisting with the details of ritual ceremonies presided over by the *pir*, (9) the *pir-ma* assumes responsibilities for many of the details of *piri-muridi*, including prescribing amulets to disciples and visitors, expelling entities from the possessed (a task which is in many cases forbidden to women, particularly those of menstruating age), and helping to conduct the *bai'at* ceremony (whereby disciples are initiated into the order) and various other ritual events at the *khanaqah* and at the 'Usmani *chilla*. The role of the *pir-ma* in *bai'at* demonstrates one of the ways in which a woman may perform the work of *piri-muridi* in conformity with the boundaries of tradition as they are established and articulated by a particular Sufi order.

The *bai'at* ceremony described here took place at the 'Usmani *chilla*. Those attending sat outside the tomb of the fourth Gudri Shah *pir*, in rows facing the current *pir* and the *pir-ma*, and behind the young man being initiated. Sitting next to her son and across from the prospective disciple, the *pir-ma* recited the first verse of the Qur'an, the *fatiha* (10), over the sweets and flower garlands used in the ceremony, in order to bless them. Next, she recited two *fatihas*: one in the name of the *panj-i pak*, or 'five pure ones': the Prophet Muhammad, Hazrat 'Ali, Hazrat Bibi Fatima, Imam Hasan, and Imam Husain (11), and one in the names of the five *pirs* of the Gudri Shah order. Reciting the *fatiha* in the name of the saints is said to transfer the blessing of recitation to them. Next, she told the young man to place the flower garlands on the tombs of the third and fourth Gudri Shah *pirs*. Afterwards, he draped one garland around the neck of the *pir-ma*, and one around the neck of the *pir*, in that order. The garlanding of the past and current heads of the order is an act whereby the disciple acknowledges the spiritual authority of the *pirs*, confirms his or her reverence for them, and promises to submit to their guidance. After this, the *pir* pronounced the oath of allegiance, which the young man repeated after him. Following this, sweets were distributed to all of the assembled guests. The blessings conferred upon the food by the *pir-ma*'s recitation of the *fatiha* prayer are thus transferred to those who ingest it. The significance of the *pir-ma*'s authority was again highlighted by her actions following the musical assembly held later that afternoon. Following the assembly, which featured cantillation of Qur'anic verses and the performance of Qawwali music, she made her way to the eastern door of the room in which 'Usman Haruni's relics and the remains of the third Gudri Shah *pir* are interred. From there, she conferred blessings by placing her hands upon the heads of those who knelt before her.

In the initiation ceremony, the *pir-ma* plays two very important roles: that of ritual agent and spiritual guide. First, she directs the performance of the *bai'at* by guiding the prospective disciple through the proper ritual motions and by taking the lead in reciting prayers to bless the ceremony, the ritual implements used for it, and its participants. The *pir* joins her in the recitation of some, but not all, of these prayers. Likewise, participants join in reciting some of the prayers, particularly the opening verse of the

Qur'an. Otherwise, they observe and pray silently along with the *pir* and *pir-ma*. Second, the disciple's act of garlanding the *pir-ma* before the *pir* underscores her clout. Although the *pir* is the formal head of the order, in many ways the *pir-ma*'s influence runs parallel to his. This is not meant to imply that she is able to make unilateral decisions, however. Rather, her ability to affect decisions concerning the order tends to revolve around the execution of ritual ceremonies and events. Although she is conceded a ritual status that, in some senses, may appear to be higher than that of the current *pir*, this has more to do with her identity as the mother of the *pir*, and as a senior female of the family with ample hands-on experience. As a link – through spiritual ties, marriage, and consanguinity – to the third, fourth, and fifth Gudri Shah *pirs*, she embodies a spiritual authority whose meaning is translated to believers on multiple levels, and via several channels. This idea is further elaborated below.

That afternoon, I asked one of the female disciples about the *pir-ma*'s role in the *bai`at* ceremony. Had she always played such a prominent part? The disciple affirmed that she had, in fact, even while the former *pir*, her husband, lived. In the opinion of the disciple, this was possible because of the *pir-ma*'s status as the wife of the former *pir* and mother of the current one, and because the training she had received from her father prepared her to assume this role. The ways in which these three relationships have shaped believers' perceptions of the *pir-ma*'s authority, spiritual and otherwise, can be partly understood in terms of the process by which knowledge (of the unseen world), power (to access and manipulate the forces it contains), and authority (to wield this knowledge and power) are translated from individual to individual in Sufi reckoning. The aspects of these relationships that serve as culturally and religiously coded signifiers of status and authority are not, however, limited to the spiritual dimension. Rather, social and spiritual relationships are closely related in South Asian Sufism, each informed by, mirroring, and shaping the other. By no means, however, are these correspondences limited to their South Asian context (Malamud 1996).

4 Social Status, Cultural Practice, and Spiritual Authority

In South Asia, Sayyid Muslims are considered to have 'foreign' (i.e. Persian or Arab) ancestry and to be descended from the Prophet through the progeny of his daughter and his son-in-law, Fatima and 'Ali (12). Although doctrinally, there is no sanction for caste in Islam, in the Subcontinent, Muslim social groups are differentiated from each other in ways that can approach caste-like distinctions, in part through patterns of endogamous marriage. The ideal of in-group marriage remains salient today: most of the *pirs* who are part of the established Sufi orders identify themselves as Sayyid, and this is true of the *pirs* and *pir-ma*'s of the Gudri Shah and Firdausi orders. As such, intermarriage with members of any group other than Shaikh (next highest on the social scale) is considered undesirable; in practice, however, these alliances do occur. Academic and British colonial attempts to classify Muslim caste groups have been largely inadequate, partly because of the flexibility of categories below the status of Sayyid and Shaikh, and partly because of a lack of consensus about the rank and social standing of any one group vis-à-vis others outside of these two (13). Nonetheless, most agree that Sayyids occupy the highest rank, and that this social prestige tends to be outwardly manifested through economic wealth, a high degree of literacy and education, and the respect accorded them (even if only nominally) by those who are their social inferiors. Be that as it may, the forces that have historically enabled Sayyids to maintain their position at the top of the economic scale have largely eroded since Partition (14).

'True' Sayyids are said to possess an inner quality known as *sharafat*, or 'noble character', that manifests itself in one's bearing, demonstration of fairness and equanimity in dealing with others, and adherence to the *Shari`a*. Those individuals who have acquired a reputation for having both the qualities and the social status of a Sayyid are often popularly regarded as the recipients of divine favor. It is no coincidence that many of the famous Sufi masters of centuries past are described in hagiography as belonging to the Sayyid classes (15). And the closing chapters of Tehmina Durrani's 1998 novel, *Blasphemy*, demonstrate how the importance, in Pakistan, of Sayyid lineage for Sufi *pirs* has led some to forge ancestral claims. In the Sufi context, the translation of social status into spiritual power is often informed by notions of descent -- notions bearing both spiritual and hereditary referents. Spiritual descent from a Sufi master through ceremonies of investiture transmit not only the authority to pass on

the teachings of the master and the order he represents, but also something called *bij*, or seed, which is akin to a kind of spiritual power manifest in the person of the saint. It is sometimes used synonymously with the term *barakat*, a charismatic power that resides in holy people and sacred objects, though unlike *barakat*, the transmission of *bij* is highly selective (16). When the transmission of *bij* occurs through a double process of investiture, its recipient is considered to be proximate to God and his saints in a way that ordinary people, and even other saints, can never be. One component of this double process is the transmission of *bij*, cemented with ritual acts of exchange that link the recipient to a chain of spiritual succession beginning with the Prophet Muhammad and ending with the outgoing *pir*. The other component is transmission through the bloodline (a spontaneous act that is said to occur at the death of the former *pir*), where the bloodline also stretches back to the Prophet Muhammad (17). The inherent nobility of character conveyed by Sayyid status may also be conflated with spiritual power insofar as the *panj-i pak* – the Prophet Muhammad, `Ali, Fatima, and their sons Hasan and Husain – are conceived of as powerful intercessors with God (18). It is through their connections, then, with a Sufi *shaikh* and with the *panj-i pak* that Sayyid *pirs* are able to provide a link between pilgrim and saint, and ultimately, Allah. This link is manifest in the performance of ritual acts like prayer, through which the power inherent in the individual, and passed down via the *panj-i pak* and the Sufi saints from which that individual is descended, is transmitted to others.

Marriage and spiritual links with her husband and father, and blood links with her father and son have conveyed a privileged form of authority upon the *pir-ma* of the Gudri Shah Chishti order. Another aspect of this authority is revealed in the concept of *suhbat*, which translates as ‘company’. Although to my knowledge she has not been formally invested with the insignia of spiritual descent, her association with these men has provided the kind of understanding of Sufi ways that the most intimate disciples strive to obtain from their masters. One important component of the disciple’s training involves spending as much time as possible in the ‘company’ of his or her master and fellow disciples (Maneri 1980: 289-93). There are inner and outer aspects of *suhbat* that produce transformations in the seeker: in one sense, by observing and imitating the *pir*’s outward actions, a disciple acquires the intimate knowledge of God that a perfected *pir* is said to possess (19). Another aspect of this involves the cultivation of mystical states among disciples, often through ritual activities such as prayer, meditation, or listening to devotional music (20). A Sufi *pir* may also instruct disciples through methods of silence that are aimed at erasing distinctions among them, taming their *nafs*, or ‘lower soul’, and protecting them from dangers and temptations during their journeys along the Path to God. While the *pir-ma*’s training may not have approximated those of her father’s and husband’s disciples – it remains unclear to what extent her father developed methods of instruction tailored to her needs in the way that he did for his disciples, and her own unwillingness or inability to participate in most of the assemblies held at the *khanaqah*, *chilla gah*, and *dargah* (at times out of necessity, since she has been largely responsible for running the household), marks her training as different from that of people who come seeking the *pir*’s guidance. Nevertheless, because of her predilection for the mystical life (21), and the fact that she enjoyed a level of access to her father and husband that even their closest disciples did not, the *pir-ma* is believed to have reaped the rewards of their company. These factors have translated into her moral and spiritual development as a seeker of God, and her practical training in the methods Sufi *pirs* use to aid their followers.

Where *parda* concerns restrict the interaction between male *pirs* and their female disciples, the notion of *suhbat* takes on added nuance. Indiscriminate mixing of men and women is viewed with concern and disapproval among many Muslims in the Subcontinent. In the Sufi milieu, such mixing is inevitable during the height of ritual fairs, but the holiness accorded the sacred space of the shrine, especially when this sacredness is mediated by a presiding *pir*, can serve to modify concerns about inappropriate behavior. This is true in both the Gudri Shah and the Firdausi orders. However, the ways in which *suhbat* and *parda* practices govern the relationship between *pirs* and their disciples differs considerably in these two cases. While female disciples are not prevented from interacting with the *pir* of the Gudri Shah order, the women of the Firdausi order observe a much stricter form of *parda* than their Chishti counterparts (22). The nature of *parda* observance among the Firdausis is such that female disciples are limited in their ability to develop intimate relationships with the *pir* and with male disciples. Consequently, it is the *pir-ma* who takes up the mantle of instruction for women, by conveying knowledge to them about the

traditions of the order, guiding them in their spiritual and moral development, and helping to control their interaction (at least in the space of the *khanaqah*) with male disciples. The position of the *pir-ma* of the Firdausi order, thus, is shaped by the fact that female disciples are discouraged or prevented from participating in ritual activities and ceremonies where men are present (23). In the Gudri Shah order, the *pir-ma*'s role in providing *suhbat* to others is less influenced by *parda* concerns. Rather, her close association with the *pirs* of the order (as daughter, wife, and mother), coupled with her predilection for the spiritual life (24), and the lack of strict gender segregation among members and associates of the order predispose male and female disciples alike to seek her out as a source of knowledge and authority. For disciples, her role complements that of the *pir*, but in a different sense than is the case with the Firdausis. While the Firdausi *pir-ma*'s work of counseling and guidance serves to reinforce and reproduce hierarchical, gendered relationships within the order (as they exist between the *pir* and disciples), the Gudri Shah *pir-ma*'s role as spiritual and ritual guide adds a dimension to the *pir*'s work that is not necessarily gender-specific. One way in which this is manifest is in her handling of what the present *pir* described as the 'details,' such as making and distributing amulets, reciting prayers to cure illness or possession, and other such aspects of Sufi practice. The last two *pirs* of the order placed more emphasis on cultivating love for the *pir* as an integral part of the spiritual and moral development of disciples, and shied away from these 'magic' aspects of Sufi practice. Because the *pir-ma* is willing and able to perform such tasks, it is often left to her to do so. The *suhbat* provided by disciples' interactions with the *pir-ma* of the Gudri Shah order, then, reveals another facet to that obtained from the company of the *pir*, rather than supplanting it because of *parda* concerns.

As in the Firdausi order, *parda* does inform the *pir-ma*'s interaction with others, but the type of *parda* practiced by the Gudri Shah women allows for considerably greater flexibility in its expression than is the case with the Firdausi women. *Parda* etiquette relaxes as one moves from the ritual shrine setting to the non-ritual setting of the outside world. The *pir-ma* and her daughters are conscious of the need to behave modestly and to maintain a degree of aloofness from others during ritual events and ceremonies at the 'Usmani *chilla*. They sit in a separate group during assemblies held at the *chilla*, and do not visit the *dargah* of Mu'in ud-din Chishti. They also do not attend ritual ceremonies held by Sufis of other orders (25). Outside of the context of ritual events, they interact with others somewhat more freely; for instance, they will sit with guests who come to visit the *khanaqah*, and women visitors are often invited to come into the 'women's quarters,' or *zenan khana*. In a study on *parda* practices conducted in the early to mid-1960's, Cora Vreede de Stuers highlighted the phenomena of 'intermittent' and 'absent' *parda*. According to her and others, these flexible types of *parda* seem to be the preserve of the middle classes (Vreede de Stuers 1968, Papanek and Minault 1982, Jeffery 1979). It must be noted, however, that the trend these days is for upwardly-mobile women of the lower-middle classes to maintain ever stricter forms of *parda* as an outward sign of respectability. For those of the higher social classes, *parda* can be maintained on the basis of inner intentions as well as outward actions. Far from being a simple matter of class, however, *parda* today also operates in conjunction with a complex variety of variables related to age/generational factors, environment or cultural milieu, education, and circumstance. The explanation of my research assistant, a thirtysomething, university-educated, Muslim, middle-class, married woman, underscored the importance of 'intention', or *niyyat*, as being integral to the concept of *parda*:

One kind of *parda* is *parda* of the body, [another] kind is *parda* of the gaze [which is this]: don't look wrongly and no one may look at you wrongly. This is *parda* of the gaze. If your gaze upon another is cast in a wrong way, then your gaze is without *parda*. But you have to exercise so much control over your gaze, over your eyes, so that your gaze does not fall in a bad way (i.e with bad intentions or thoughts behind the gaze) (26).

When speaking of *parda*, the younger generations of educated, working Muslim women tended to emphasize a spectrum of physical manifestations of modesty, psychological factors, and acts of deference before unrelated males, while men and women of the generations above them tended to speak of *parda* observance in somewhat narrower terms. In communal ritual settings, however, the Gudri Shah *pir-ma* was able to maintain *parda* inwardly, while sitting in an assembly filled with people of both sexes. This was perhaps the most obvious instance of her ambivalence towards *parda* practice, in the disjunction between her insistence that the women of the family did not attend musical assemblies and their presence

in the assembly held on the occasion of the fourth *pir*'s *`urs* or 'death-day anniversary celebration'. On one hand, her aloofness marked her as being of a higher order, conscious of her need to appear respectable. On the other, her presence at the *`urs* and at the *bai`at* ceremony described earlier identifies her as the member of a saintly lineage, demonstrates that she is respectful of her husband's memory, and locates her in ritual settings as an important family member who possesses the know-how to assist in the execution of these events. At the same time, she is able to remain physically and psychologically separate from others by sitting apart from them (with her daughters and a small group of women), thus conveying her status as a *parda*-observant woman worthy of the respect and deference that others accord her.

There are several other, inter-related factors that determine the Gudri Shah *pir-ma*'s ability to exercise authority as a spiritually powerful individual; they can only be hinted at here. Some of the most important factors include her personality; age; knowledge of and adherence to the kind of Islam that is described by my subjects as being in conformity with the laws of the *Shari`a*; knowledge of the history of the Gudri Shah order and of the teachings of its *pirs*; and the spaces in which she works. As the strong-willed, often outspoken, elderly, and *parda*-observing matriarch of a family of Sayyid Muslims, she is responsible for overseeing the affairs of the household. As a person who is observant of the fundamental ritual obligations of mainstream Islam, intimately familiar with the traditions of the Gudri Shah Chishti order, and acquainted with the wider world of Sufism through the teachings of, and her travels with, her father and husband, she is regarded as knowledgeable and capable of instructing and advising others. As an important member of a line of Sufis who are the rightful and legal owners of the Sharib House *khanaqah* and the *`Usmani chilla*, she is in her element when performing ritual services for others.

Another important factor that must be taken into consideration is the outlook of the Gudri Shah order itself. The openness of the its last three *pirs* to initiating disciples from Western countries has done much to shape the present character of this particular *silsila*, in part by facilitating two key developments. First, it has aided the expansion of the order into Europe, Canada, and the United States. Second, the women disciples from the West, women less bound by social rules of comportment and gender segregation than their Indian (particularly Muslim) counterparts, began to participate in the ritual activities of the order, which encouraged other women disciples to participate. To these numbers one must add the English-speaking, convent-schooled, and highly educated Hindu and Muslim women disciples, similarly coming from a different cultural context than most of the *parda*-observant women who belong to the order. Indeed, the opening of attitudes towards women's participation in the order began noticeably with the third *pir*, Nawab Sahib. As his favorite (and only surviving) child, the current *pir-ma* was adored by him, and her demands to be taken wherever he went were usually entertained, particularly when she began to demonstrate a predilection for the way of Sufi mysticism. His efforts later in life to increase the participation of women in ritual life must have been influenced, at least in part, by his attitude towards his daughter. Yet she, like the other members of the Gudri Shah order, finds the notion of women receiving official sanction as *pirs* somewhat problematic. Part of the reason for this is the way that the figure of the *pir* is conceived.

5 Women as *Pirs*: Implications, Interpretations, and Condemnation

A Naqshbandi *pir* who is related through marriage to the current *pir* of the Bihar Sharif branch of Firdausis explained two senses of the term *pir*. First, there are those who become *pirs* through formal master-disciple relationships established through an oath of allegiance. They are given 'sanction', or *ijazat*, to guide and counsel others on the Sufi path. Second are those who have developed a close relationship with God through constant prayer, observance of the Law, and purification of their minds and souls. While according to this *pir*, women may not become the first kind, they could, and did, achieve recognition as the second kind (27). Informally, the term *pir* (or its female equivalents, *pir-ma*, *pirain*, or *pirani*) may be used to refer to a female spiritual guide, particularly one who is married to a *pir*, as in the example provided by Joyce Flueckiger (Flueckiger 1995) (28). Indeed, the idea of *pir* may lend itself to various levels of interpretation.

In what scholars have long referred to as Sufism's 'classical' form, the *pir* is a guide and the leader of a Sufi order, invested through a well-documented chain of succession of *pirs* with the authority to develop

the moral and spiritual character of disciples who, through ritual ceremonies of investiture, have pledged 'allegiance', or *bai'at*, to him. In such an arrangement, the disciple aspires to ascend the various stages of spiritual perfection through a process of self-examination, discipline, and total submission to the authority of the guide. Other models of *piri-muridi*, or the 'master-disciple relationship', also existed early on in institutional Sufism, models that do not necessarily presuppose a goal of ascent through the stages of the Sufi path, and that do not strive towards the ultimate conclusion of this mystical journey, union with the Divine. Commonly, individuals are referred to as *pirs* even though they have few or no links to an established Sufi order. A *pir* may be someone who has acquired a reputation for sanctity as a *maulwi* or *maulana* (scholars of the Islamic sciences), or as someone who has acquired forms of 'secret' knowledge (such as how to interpret dreams, communicate with the unseen world, make amulets, and cure illness) and can use this knowledge to provide spiritual and material services for others. It is this last form of *piri-muridi* that has occupied a morally ambiguous place in the history of Sufism, as in Islam. And it is this form of *piri-muridi* with which women have often been associated, particularly in the literature produced by European travelers, Orientalist scholars, and servants of the British *raj* during the colonial period of Indian history (29).

How has the title of *pir*, as conferred upon a woman, translated in historical context, and how do these examples suggest the ambivalences inherent in explanations of the 'proper' place of women in the Sufi milieu? Ruth Roded's work on women in Islamic biographical collections suggests that women *pirs* did not officially assume the leadership of Sufi orders per se, but rather, led Sufi centers; organized prayers, Qur'anic recitations, and communal assemblies (such as *zikr*, or the ritualized repetition of the names of God); and instructed and preached to residents of Sufi *khanaqahs*, *ribats*, or *zawiyas* 'hospices' (Roded 1994: 106). The evidence for this being the case in North African Sufi orders and hospices is ample. Documented cases of women who led Sufi orders and managed hospices in North Africa despite immense social pressure, and despite a lack of formal recognition of their authority outnumber those of women in the South Asian setting (30). In these settings, the terminology remains highly flexible and dependent upon local understandings of the identity of *pirs*. While *pirs* like Bon Bibi of Bengal represent semi-mythical figures around whose shrines cults have arisen, (Fruzzetti 1975: 198) others are called *shaikhs* or *pirs* because of the high degree of their spiritual knowledge and piety. The biographical work *Mirat ul-kaunain* names one woman, Bibi Maimuna, who achieved renown as a *hafiz*, or one who has memorized the entire Qur'an, among a list of six "*shaikhs* of Islam in India" (Firdausi n.d.: 235-36). Sharaf ud-din Maneri himself referred to a saintly woman who was so great, and had received so many spiritual benefits, that she was called a *shaikh* (Maneri 1986: 144, Diwarkar 1959, 443). What is suggested in the biographies, letters, and discourses by and about Sufis is that certain women were popularly referred to as *shaikhs* or *pirs*, although the leadership of the established orders did not acknowledge their status as such through ceremonies of investiture, as would have been the case for male *pirs*. The attitude of many *pirs* was to acknowledge the existence and spiritual rank of such women, although the literature they and their disciples left behind remains, for the most part, silent on the subject of whether or not women should be given official sanction. One exception is the correspondence between Shaikh 'Abdul Quddus Gangohi and his disciple, Bubu Islam Khatun, in which the Shaikh indicates his regret about being unable to endow her with the insignia of *pir*-hood, since it was not an accepted practice among Sufis. Instead, he confers upon her 'sanction', or '*ijazat*, to pass his teachings on to others as his 'agent' (Askari 1957:16).

Up to this point I have concentrated primarily upon the milieu of the established Sufi orders. There is, however, another dimension of *piri-muridi* that is popularly identified with Sufi practice. This dimension was referred to by most of my Sufi interviewees in Bihar as *bazaari* Sufism, while its practitioners were considered to lack sanction from the established orders, in part because *bazaari* Sufism (by their interpretation) is based upon client-patron relationships that privilege cash transactions. The phenomenon of *bazaari* Sufism, as described to me, seems to be predicated on the idea of *pir* as more of a service provider than a spiritual guide. In many of the early lexicons and guidebooks of Sufi practice (these were widely used among members of the orders in the Subcontinent), such as as-Suhrawardi's *Kitab adab ul-muridin*, or Sharaf ud-din Maneri's *Maktubat-i sadi*, there is a marked emphasis upon the spiritual path as a cultivation of the master-disciple relationship in accordance with precedents that had been long-established in a particular *silsila*, but that were also adapted to the individual needs of the disciple.

Beginning in the late colonial period, the symbols of the Prophet Muhammad and *Shari`a* Law acquired considerable importance among believers; as a consequence, the ideal of the *pir* also began to reflect the prevailing authority of these symbols for popular devotional practices. The *pir* was expected to be knowledgeable in matters of the Law as well as of the spirit, and many of the orders, such as the Naqshbandi, began to shy away from some of the more controversial, “magic” aspects of *piri-muridi*, shrine visitation, and saint veneration (Buehler 1998). The association of such types of devotion with women’s ritual practice sparked the publication of literature aimed at modifying women’s beliefs and practices in accordance with the laws of Islam (as interpreted by each author). This vision – of Sufi ritual practice married with *Shari`a*-focused Islamic orthopraxy -- is cultivated within the scope of the established orders, but it has also become a means by which those of the established orders differentiate themselves from those they call *bazaari*, or ‘marketplace’ and *naqli*, or false Sufis.

The idea of the *bazaar* figured in the discourses of my Sufi subjects as a ‘public’ setting where little is regulated, and anything can happen. Although the term *bazaar* denotes ‘marketplace’, *bazaari* Sufis may be found working out of their homes. It is the idea of the *bazaar* as an uncontrolled, unregulated arena of activity, rather than the semantic value of the word, that figured into my subjects’ explanations, and into their characterizations of the *bazaar* as a place that is unsuited and undesirable for the work of ‘true’ *piri-muridi*. The crux of the *pir-murid* relationship, as they articulate it, is that the *pir* or *shaikh* represents part of a succession of authorities stretching back to the Prophet, is entrusted with the spiritual and moral perfection of his disciples, and must employ his knowledge of the Law to do so. As part of a ‘chain’, or *silsila*, of spiritual command that is (ideally) handed down by highly regulated means, the ‘true’ *pir*’s authority is both subject to and representative of the authority of previous representatives of the order. *Bazaari* Sufis, I was told, do not conform to this model of authority, and because of this, they are in no position to offer appropriate guidance to others.

As my next example shows, the transmission of spiritual knowledge, charismatic power, or ritual services outside of what is perceived as the normative framework of the *pir-murid* relationship is alternately considered by the Sufis of the Gudri Shah and Firdausi orders an embarrassment to the spirit of ‘true’ Sufism, a contradiction of the laws of Islam, and a necessary, even desired element of popular devotion. Explanations of *bazaari* Sufism underscored a widespread conviction that spiritual power is, by its very nature, ambiguous and uncertain, the trajectory of its unveiling impossible to explain by either ordinary individuals or God’s saints. Such views of spiritual power can help to explain the ambivalence with which local residents regarded the woman I met in spring, 1999, at the *hujra gah* of Sharaf ud-din Maneri in Bihar Sharif.

6 *Bazaari Tabib*: The Marketplace Doctor

Mannat mangna, the ritual of ‘petitioning’ which we performed – the woman as my guide and medium, and I as the petitioner – unfolded over the course of a week. Because of the length of this ritual performance, I describe only its first day in detail, while highlighting some of its main aspects thereafter. First, a few notes about the woman are in order. The first day we met she was very dirty, with a torn purple shawl thrown over her shoulders, underneath which she wore a purple sweater over a yellow tunic and royal blue trousers. Her shoes, deposited outside the second gate leading to the *hujra gah*, were worn, blue and white plastic sandals. Her hair was partly matted and slightly bleached by the sun. Her teeth protruded significantly and she seemed to have some advanced form of gum disease. Her eyes were bloodshot and large and sometimes riveted on you, sometimes seemed to be looking straight through you. She appeared to be somewhere between 35 and 40 years old, although she could have been much younger. Hard living and chronic health problems cause the poor to age much more quickly than nature intended. Some might say she looked like a madwoman.

I told her that I had heard there were women who, being perceived by others as especially close to God, prayed for and presented petitions on behalf of other people. I asked her if she could do this, and she immediately said yes, and inquired whether I had brought any money with me. I handed over fifty rupees, but she said it would be better if I had one hundred, so I handed over another fifty. She explained vaguely that the money would be used to carry out the work of petitioning on my behalf, and told me that

she would give it to a man in her village to procure ‘amulets’, or *ta`wiz*, for me. She showed me some of the ritual paraphernalia she had brought along that day (scented oils, a small clay lamp, incense, and several *ta`wiz* printed on pieces of paper), explained that she was doing this same type of work for another client (a man), and told me I had nothing to fear. I left it at that, and told her the subject of my petition: recently an opportunity had opened up for my husband and me to teach middle school in Saudi Arabia. She reassured me that I would get what I wanted.

The woman, who told me her name was Shahida, said that by the end of the week she would give me two *ta`wiz*, for which I was to pay her two hundred rupees. I was to wear one *ta`wiz* on my right arm, and the other she told me to fasten on my husband’s arm. She instructed me to meet her here again tomorrow and pay her another one hundred rupees, for which she would offer prayers to the saints on my behalf. In two days I was to bring her two hundred rupees, again for the *ta`wiz*. I can only assume that her demands for these sums had nothing to do with her perception of me as a rich American, as I did not divulge the details of my identity to her. Rather, I spoke with her entirely in Urdu and simply explained that I had come from Delhi, knowing from past experience that once I admitted to being American, conversations had a curious way of being diverted to the subjects of money and the U.S.’s status as a ‘rich country’. As many people I met in India had assumed I was Indian (though most could not tell exactly what kind of Indian I was), I thought it best not to mention otherwise, unless Shahida specifically asked. Fortunately for me, she didn’t.

This first day, Shahida had me write out my husband’s and my names, as well as the address of Sharib House, where resides the man I told her I considered my spiritual guide (referring to the current Gudri Shah *pir*, though I am not formally a member of this, or any other Sufi order). She looked at the words I had written in Urdu and read them back to me slowly and with some difficulty, but ultimately satisfied, she took the paper and wrapped it around the money I had given her. Then she began to recite prayers in Urdu on my behalf – a simple statement of my problem and request. Handing me a piece of string she had retrieved from the gate separating us from the *hujra*’s innermost chamber, she instructed me to recite whatever prayer I knew, since I didn’t know how to recite the *durud*, a prayer to bring blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad, then to tie the string to the gate again. When my prayer is answered, she said, I must return to the *hujra*, remove the string, and throw it into the inner chamber. At the end of the week, I was to buy a bottle of good scented oil (and she admonished me to spend no less than ten rupees for it), and distribute it along the threshold of the innermost chamber of the cell. Procuring a second string from the gate, Shahida told me to hold it while reciting the *fatiha*. She then led me upstairs to the adjacent prayer hall and had me tie this string to a cloth-bound copy of the Qur’an, which she referred to as the *qalam sharif*. I had never heard this phrase before, and she did not explain its exact meaning, but it seems to point to an important association among the pen, or *qalam*; the act of writing, which is especially relevant to the task of producing amulets (31); and the Qur’an, from which are derived the prayers used in making amulets. She also said that at the end of the week, I should apply some of the scented oil to the stacks of cloth-covered books that sit inside the niches in this prayer hall, and to the *mihrab*, or niche indicating the direction of Mecca.

We spent the entire morning and some of the afternoon sitting inside the *hujra gah*, praying together that our respective petitions be granted. For herself she requested a husband, in-laws, and the return of property which had recently been stolen. Most of her prayers seemed impromptu to my ears, but she repeated these words several times:

O Allah, please accept my prayer
In the name of God please fulfill my goal
May a husband be granted to me
And please return my belongings to me
Send me my belongings
Allah most high, you are my only support
There is no other support
We have no other support (32)

She said that the man she wished to marry – a servant of a small mausoleum located in Paharpura – had demanded a dowry of thirty thousand rupees, (around USD \$1000 at the time: an enormous sum for

someone of Shahida's position). Strangely enough, she did not request the money for her dowry, although I did hear her request many other things, gifts that are given to the newly betrothed, like kitchenware, appliances, clothing, and a Hero Honda scooter. Addressing Allah, she explained what she had already done to encourage a favorable response:

Agarbat jala diya... (I have lit [some] incense...)

Added to these prayers was a curse directed at the ones who had wronged her:

Please make blood flow from their noses and mouths
I will recite the *milad sharif* (33) and the Qur'an
Please pray, *Hazrat*, that I get my belongings back
In the glory of God most high
In your glory may I get my belongings
Allah, send my troubles far away (34)

After five nonstop hours of prayer, conversation, and reciting petitions, I left Shahida and the *hujra gah* that day exhausted, but thrilled that the information I had been seeking for so many months was finally coming to light.

Over the course of the week, I learned that Shahida's real name is Rafat, which she confirmed by using it in her prayers. The ritual petitioning followed a broad outline that remained fairly steady, while certain aspects of our performances fluctuated according to her perceptions of my needs and ability to pay the sums she demanded. Generally, the ritual was framed by the recitation of prayers to God, to a number of Sufi saints, and to other individuals who are evidently perceived by Rafat as being spiritually powerful. Some of these prayers were Qur'anic and/or formulaic, while others seemed to be ad hoc. Most of the prayers were recited orally, while a few, especially towards the close of the week, were written out in Urdu by me, at Rafat's dictation. She either kept these pieces of paper, or folded them up and threw them beyond the gate, into the locked part of the *hujra* cell. The prayers always ended, at the close of our session each day, with Rafat extracting dried flowers from the garlands draped over that same gate. She always gave me a handful of them to take home as *tabarruk*, or sacred substance that has become imbued with *barakat*. What fluctuated most during our ritual performance were her instructions to me regarding how long we were to remain in the shrine to pray, and how much I was to pay for her services. The amounts which I agreed or refused to pay also had a direct impact upon how, and to what extent, the details of the ritual performance were carried out. For instance, on the fourth day, Rafat suddenly and unexpectedly asked that I give her three hundred rupees the following day. Because I wanted to get a sense of whether or not she is willing to do the work of petitioning regardless of a person's ability to pay for her services, I balked, and the next day brought only fifty rupees. In any case, she accepted this money, explaining that she would use it to buy some scented oil and rose water which would be used in conjunction with her work on my behalf. In light of the fact that I did not bring all the money she had requested, she agreed to forego a part of the ritual – applying scented oil to the lintel leading to the locked *hujra* chamber – but insisted that I bring two hundred rupees the following day. (I brought half the amount.) Other aspects of the ritual performance open to modification were the saints in whose names she prayed. It was only after my mention of them that Rafat began to incorporate the names of two Sufi *pirs* into her prayers: Khwaja Sahib (Khwaja Mu'in ud-din Chishti) and Sharda Pir Sahib (this is the phrase she used to refer to the current *pir* of the Gudri Shah order, who lives in Sharib House). She also included the names of many other *pirs*, saints, and spiritually powerful people in her petition, such as Dada Jan (Yahya Maneri, the father of Sharaf ud-din); Dadi Jan (Bibi Raziya, the mother of Sharaf ud-din); Sharfa Bihari (a local designation for Sharaf ud-din); Bibi Kamalo (the maternal aunt of Sharaf ud-din and a famous saint in her own right who lies buried in a shrine in Jahanabad district, some hours' distance from Bihar Sharif); and Pir Jagjot, Sharaf ud-din's maternal grandfather.

Bibi Kamalo, Bibi Daulat,
We have come Bibi Kamalo,
We have come, Bibi Daulat,
Bibi Kamalo, Pir Jagjot Shahab ud-din, May God have mercy upon them,

We have come, grandfather (Dada Jan)...
O Khwaja baba, fill our sacks
Fill our sacks, Khwaja baba, great king of India
O Prophet, fill our sacks, fill our sacks (35)

More surprising to me was that, in some of her appeals, Rafat included the names of the sixteenth-century Afghan ruler Sher Shah Suri, who lies buried in Sasaram, roughly 150 kilometers southwest of Patna, Bihar's capital, and Harun ar-Rashid (d.809 C.E.), who is none other than that famed 'Abbasid Caliph of the Arabian Nights tales, the Righteous Ruler of Baghdad. The names she chose to include in her prayers and appeals were not as random as they might initially seem. She emphasizes those spiritual influences that I have shown – by mentioning them to her – hold meaning in my life, namely, Mu'in ud-din Chishti and the Gudri Shah *pir*. And her petitions are chiefly directed toward those Sufi *pirs* and saints who are relevant in a local context: the *pir* in whose prayer chamber we sat, and four others who are linked to him by ties of kinship. These five saints of the Firdausi and Suhrawardi orders – Yahya Maneri, Bibi Raziya, Sharaf ud-din Maneri, Bibi Kamalo, and Pir Jagjot, are among the most popular and well-known in the area. A reasonable explanation of why she included the names of two Muslim rulers in her petitions might also look to their local importance as symbols of temporal and spiritual power (36). Similar associations have been noted by other observers: for instance, in her book on *Qawwali* music in India and Pakistan, the ethnomusicologist Regula Burckhardt Qureshi maintains that *Qawwali* poems which focus on a local saint tend to display a variety of associational links. Poems in which these links are central address figures of the Sufi hierarchy, including God and the Prophet Muhammad, and sometimes living *shaikhs* as well (Qureshi 1995: 86). Yet these associations, at least as they emerged in the ritual performance described here, also reflect a tension between what may be loosely described as 'mainstream Islamic,' and local forms of ritual practice. The differences between the two calls attention to changing class dynamics, wherein the aspirations of the lower and middle classes to some of the outward manifestations of upward mobility has occasioned more precise interpretations of *Shari'a*-minded Islam. It is through their accommodation of certain aspects of *Shari'a* – that is, as it is understood in particular contexts, with some of the key symbols of 'mainstream Islam' (the unity of God, the Prophethood of Muhammad, the authority of the Qur'an, and for women, the importance of maintaining *parda*) occupying center stage in ritual practice – that disenfranchised women have been able to exercise ever greater agency as de facto *pirs*. This, accompanied by the increased access of such women to the tools of ritual power, has modified the ways in which their clientele, and even their detractors, have come to see them as spiritual authorities.

7 Ritual Practice through the Lens of *Shari'a*-minded Islam

In the eyes of critics of women like Rafat, women who perform the work of *piri-muridi* for clients (presumably for remuneration), the key problem with this kind of local devotional practice is its lack of sanction by what is presented as the normative values of tradition, whether 'mainstream Sufi' (37), Islamic, or both. The tension also manifests itself in the ritual performances of the actors involved, who for their part, are at pains to demonstrate – in themselves as actors and in the ritual performances they conduct – a conscious integration of the local (because of its meaning to believers) and the Islamic. The (mis)use of spiritual power in the eyes of local residents, both critics and performers, is closely linked with notions of what is 'proper' and 'improper', or in other words, what has been sanctioned and proscribed in Islamic and Sufi traditions. The sanction or proscription of local customs and beliefs with reference to their position vis à vis the major prescriptive sources – in this case, *Shari'a* Law and Sufi precedent – has been a prominent theme in reformist discourse, yet there is little consensus on the parameters of the use of these sources as interpretative tools. In the case of Firdausi Sufi tradition, the 'proof', or *dalil*, lies in two main sources of authority: the status quo, as defined and perpetuated by the current *pir* (although this draws heavily upon the *Shari'a* and the notion of precedents established by the forebears of the *silsila*), and the writings (letters, discourses) of the Firdausi order's most eminent scholar-saint, Sharaf ud-din Maneri. Sharaf ud-din's didactic works rely almost exclusively on Qur'anic referents and Prophetic 'tradition' as 'proofs,' and as a consequence, the notion of *silsila* tradition is closely bound to the ideal of *Shari'a* Law as its foundation. One matter on which the saint was clear was his

disapproval of the kind of ritual activity in which women like Rafat engage. In the case of the Gudri Shah Chishti order, there are similar sources of authority, although the order's affiliation with several Sufi lineages (Suhrawardi, Uwaisi, and Naqshbandi) allows them to draw upon a wider range of sources. In the case of professedly Islamic sanctions or proscriptions, the proof is found in the notion of *Shari'a*, or Islamic law. In discourse, the notion of *Shari'a* is often presented as a continuous and succinct formulation comprised mainly of Qur'an, Hadis, Prophetic *sunna*, or 'precedent', and their interpretation by Islamic scholars of the law (in the case of the Firdausis, Sharaf ud-din's interpretations of the law were often recalled). In practice, the notion of *Shari'a* often remains ambiguous and without specific reference to any particular legalistic aspects. What is most important to note in Rafat's practice of performing vows was that she herself seemed aware of the discrepancies between local practices and Islamic or 'mainstream Sufi' injunctions, as, for instance, against the de facto worship of *pirs* and saints.

The importance of following certain procedures in the work of petitioning underscored the centrality of Islamic symbols, many of which serve to emphasize the *sahih*, or 'authentic' character of the ritual. A charge that has been leveled against popular devotion to the saints, and indeed, against some of the more 'heterodox' Sufi orders, is that they do not emphasize the primacy of Allah and the importance of key Islamic symbols – for instance, Qur'anic prayers – in their practices and rituals. Perhaps in response to the occurrence of de facto worship of *pirs* living and deceased, many *pirs* today insist that one should not attribute any of the miracles that might occur through the medium of the Sufi *pir* or saint to that person him or herself; rather, one should recognize that all power comes from God, and acknowledge that recognition verbally. Although it is difficult to determine to what extent this advice is followed by the disciple of a *pir*, or ordinary pilgrims to a Sufi shrine, among the *pirs* and Sufi families I have had access to, there is a marked emphasis upon the fundamentals of Islam – most significantly, the importance of following the *Shari'a*, and belief in the supremacy of a single, unique God. Rafat's practice of addressing Allah before the beginning of some of her recitations, as well as her use of the names of God (among others) in the *ta'wiz* she distributes suggests the importance of acknowledging the sources of the spiritual power that believers tap into. In the case of this ritual of petitioning, the sources are manifold. Although it would be difficult to argue that Rafat always conceded the primacy of Allah, or even the Prophet Muhammad in her litany of recitations, the fact that she often included these two names indicates that she is at least aware of their importance in the work of petitioning. Regardless of the prayer or petition being presented, she always prefaced her words with an address to a powerful source such as God (for instance, by reciting the *bismillah* prayer: 'in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate,') the Prophet Muhammad, or one of the saints who, it is believed, can provide a direct link to God, such as Yahya Maneri (38). What is more evident is that her use of Qur'anic prayers (*durud*, *fatiha*) before, and sometimes after, reciting the petitions highlights the importance of these symbols of authentic practice in Islamic reckoning (39).

8 Women, Ritual Agency, and Divine Madness

The notion of authenticity has also colored debates about spiritual ecstasy in Sufi belief and practice, and attitudes towards ecstasy among Sufis and their followers have hardly been unanimous. It is, however, possible to outline a few of the major lines of thought that seem to have had an impact upon contemporary attitudes towards ecstasy, divine madness, and the individuals in whom these are manifest. Overall, the existence of spiritual ecstasy as a genuine and valid state of awareness of the Divine has not been questioned in Sufism; rather, the subject of its manifestation, particularly in public, and particularly where this involves the female ecstatic, has been more controversial. Many of the early manuals and treatises of Sufism sought to explain states of ecstasy as forms of witness to God's power and presence in the world. In his *Kitab at-ta'arruf li madhhab ahl at-tasawwuf*, al-Kalabadhi (d. 990) characterized ecstasy as an incomplete and effervescent kind of knowledge of the Divine, dividing it into two forms: 'weak,' which is displayed publicly, and 'strong,' which is controlled and hidden (Kalabadhi 1977: 107). One can discern a greater acceptance of manifestations of ecstasy that occur in conformity with textual or scriptural paradigms as these were explicated by the originators and elaborators of Sufi metaphysical and philosophical doctrines (40). Such acceptance often contained an underlying presumption that 'scripted' ecstasy came as the result of progression through stages of ascent towards the Divine Beloved (and under

the supervision and guidance of a Sufi master), though spontaneous ecstasy which arose as a result of Divine grace was also acknowledged by mystics like Jami' (in *Nafahat al-uns*). Others such as the 14th century scholar-Sufi Sharaf ud-din Maneri acknowledged the value of spontaneous ecstasy, but felt that such ecstasies were unfit to be teachers of others (Maneri 1980: 67-68). Spiritual ecstasy, as Vincent Cornell has shown in his study of Moroccan saints, was not, however, the permanent state of many 'ecstatics,' whose erratic actions were, rather, tempered by a strong sense of social responsibility (Cornell 1998: 67ff, 155).

Yet there are differences in the treatment of ecstasy among male and female mystics. The hagiologies of male ecstatics do often imply such responsibility, or alternatively, portray them as catalysts for the spiritual awakening of rational-minded or 'sober' Sufis (or scholars), as in the story of Fakhr ud-din 'Iraqi (d. 1289), described in his *Lama'at* ('Iraqi 1982: 34ff), and this is also a characteristic of many of the stories of women ecstatics contained in the Sufi *tazkira*, or biographical compendia. What is also marked in these accounts, however, is the overwhelming association of female ecstatics with the 'folk,' 'unlettered,' or 'esoteric' elements of belief and practice, despite the simultaneous acknowledgement that many female saints who demonstrated states of ecstasy were well-versed in matters of Sufi doctrine as well as Islamic *Shari'a* Law (41). In some cases the association of female ecstasy with the 'folk' or 'esoteric' element may be explained by paucity of information: not much more than single incidents were known about the majority of female saints whose lives have been recorded. Yet by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there seems to be a marked shift among the authors of *tazkira* and other works on Muslim mystics to a more negative and narrow view of contemporary women mystics, while those of centuries past continued to be praised. The association of female ecstatics with the 'folk,' 'esoteric,' and even 'un-Islamic' aspects of faith tends to be most pronounced in the majority of Orientalist, ethnographic, anthropological, and survey (e.g. gazetteer) literature that has been produced in the past century and a half. These associations have likely had an impact on views today about contemporary female mystics and ecstatics. And if one considers the continued importance, at least among Sufis of the mainstream orders, of spiritual instruction from a perfected master, coupled with the widespread perception that, with few exceptions, contemporary Sufism is merely a "name without a reality," to quote the famous Sufi adage, the fact that Rafat's work as ritual agent is called into question, even where the possibility of her 'sainthood' is not ruled out, is unsurprising.

Her association with the 'folk' and esoteric elements of popular devotion to saints undoubtedly influenced responses to Rafat's ritual activities among my interviewees, the (Maner and Bihar Sharif) Firdausi and Gudri Shah Sufis, and local residents of Bihar Sharif who regularly visit the *khanaqah*, *dargah*, or *hujra* shrines, yet these responses also exposed certain ambiguities about the subject of women ecstatics as ritual agents. While in the eyes of my male Firdausi Sufi interviewees, Rafat fell unequivocally into the camp of *bazaari*, the women of the Firdausi order seemed to have more ambivalent attitudes towards her. While condemning her actions as being 'against Islam', 'forbidden', ineffective, or indicative of a lack of social respectability (and it must be noted that women like Rafat tend to belong to the lower classes, or are otherwise socially marginalized), they were also willing to acknowledge that the women who do the work of petitioning at the Maneri *hujra gah* fulfill a need for people who may have (or perceive themselves as having) no other viable (or desirable) recourse. In a state like Bihar, a so-called 'backwards state', a place where corruption, caste-based violence, and poverty tend to be more acute than in other states, people from the lowest social strata are extremely reluctant to go through official channels in order to solve their problems. Indeed, the poor in Bihar – as elsewhere – often view dealing with official channels as an invitation to trouble. Instead, they tend to rely on what is locally referred to as a 'source', or *zariya* – in other words, an agent of considerably higher social and/or spiritual rank and influence than themselves – for help. A 'source' may be sought out for various reasons – to intercede with local, state government, or police authorities, or to present a petition to a (deceased) Sufi *pir*, a saint, or God. In order to solicit the aid of Allah or Sharaf ud-din Maneri, for instance, believers may enlist the services of a *pir* who is attached to a Sufi shrine or the head of a Sufi order, the disciple of a *pir* who has been authorized to teach others, or a person who is related to a Sufi *shaikh* by spiritual or blood descent. For many of the women who frequent Sharaf ud-din's *hujra gah* in Bihar Sharif, however, this course of action is not always desirable. While the functionaries and hereditary families attached to

the Firdausi Sufi shrines are widely perceived as being sympathetic towards men and women of any social standing, they are also viewed with a mixture of apprehension and misgiving.

Explanations of how, despite a lack of official sanction, the women who perform the work of *piri-muridi* could be seen as legitimate, rest upon several criteria. Skill and knowledge of procedure stand out as two such criteria. One should know and be able to articulate which prayers and rituals are appropriate for which occasions, as well as how they should be performed, and one should be able to provide *ta'wiz* or prayer formulae as needed. The *pir-ma* of the Gudri Shah order received her knowledge from her father, and in that sense, her training is seen as being in line with the accepted parameters of *silsila* tradition. Rafat had no such authority to draw upon. Although she claimed to be the disciple of the previous Firdausi *pir*, who died in 1997, the nature of that discipleship is called into question by the fact that many such bonds of allegiance are rather loose, associational ties as opposed to the close bonds that characterize the relationship between *pirs* and their inner circles of disciples. Associational relationships may be formed for a variety of reasons, but it is widely believed that by imbibing the teachings of *pirs*, or by spending even small amounts of time in their company and thereby gaining knowledge of their ways, an individual may acquire some of the spiritual power and authority associated with them (42).

Rafat's knowledge and skills may indeed derive from her association with the former *pir*, but more important to note is that she is able to effectively present herself to believers as having the requisite knowledge. Moreover, she is able to provide amulets and other ritual implements for clients, and demonstrates familiarity with those locally known and commonly accepted procedures for petitioning a spiritual source: formulaic, Qur'anic prayers; devotional poetry praising the Prophet, Allah, and the saints (*na't*, *hamd*, *manqabat*); and the modes of prayer practiced by local women (43). Rafat's use of Qur'anic and other prayer formulas and her familiarity with symbols that are well known among believers are intended to signal to others that her skills are authentic and efficacious. Ultimately, others' acceptance of this premise is determined by the efficacy of her rituals – as one Firdausi Sufi exclaimed, referring to how a woman is considered a saint, “people believe when they see results!”(44)

There are several factors that facilitate acceptance, from the point of view of the established Sufi orders, of a woman performing the work of *piri-muridi*. As an indication of the importance of identity – ‘true’ versus ‘false’ Sufis, ‘Islamic’ versus ‘non-Islamic’ or ‘un-Islamic’ – the practice of *parda* was often linked in discourse with the (perceived) insistence in Islam on *parda* for Muslim women as a medium of ‘social normativity’(Salvatore 1997: 48). On the other hand, Rafat's failure to observe accepted *parda* standards was linked with her image among locals as a mentally disturbed person, an ‘ecstatic’ (*majzub*, *divanavar*, *mastani*) in Sufi terms, and, on one level, could be ‘explained away.’ The ambivalence with which some respondents spoke of her reflects some of the more prevalent attitudes towards ecstatic forms of devotion among South Asians, regardless of religious faith. While the idea of spiritual ecstasy is acknowledged as very real, such an idea has a complex relationship with the spiritual ecstatic as living being. For instance, according to June McDaniel, ecstasies who are possessed of divine madness (as opposed to ordinary madness) are often described as being not defective or weak in mind, but rather, filled with the presence of and subject to visions of the Divine, (McDaniel 1989: 4, 5, 8, 10), which makes them desirable as mediums, but unfit for the role of spiritual guide, although many famous guides such as Caitanya and Ramakrishna, were, in fact, highly prone to fits of ecstasy. Ambivalent attitudes towards Rafat can be explained in several ways. On one hand, the actions of women like her represent a threat to the authority of the Firdausi *pir* (with whom Rafat is, in effect, in competition for clients), and as ‘madwomen,’ their behavior is seen as uncontrolled, unpredictable, and potentially dangerous to the maintenance of social order/control. Even so, some people were willing to admit the possibility that the basis of spiritual power upon which women like Rafat relied for their authority and effectiveness was very real, indeed, and several female respondents even acknowledged that such women provided a necessary service for poor people with few resources. This admission suggests that many people understand the nature of spiritual power itself to be ambiguous, unpredictable, and indeterminate, which makes its characterization problematic, its explanation fraught with contradictions. (45). What I suggest is that my subjects understand that sainthood cannot always be explained, rationalized, or understood, and that some women may be recognized as spiritual authorities in spite of the fact that they stand outside accepted norms of behavior. Yet the reluctance with which most of my subjects spoke about this demonstrated that

while the recognition of female spiritual authority as an accepted part of Islamic and Sufi faith could serve as proof of the appeal of such faith (in that it encompasses and embraces the contradictions), nevertheless, this authority also threatened to undermine the hegemonic order by which many women defined themselves and their place in society, in the world of the Sufi orders, and indeed, in the wider world of Islam.

9 Conclusion

As encountered in the cases presented here, the issue of women becoming *pirs* (whether in name or in deed) highlights several significant points of debate in the world of Sufis, shrines, and saint-cults. First, it exposes persistent controversies over the proper place of women in ritual spaces. In the major Sufi shrines of the Subcontinent, administered and owned by hereditary caretakers who represent, in many cases, a spiritual and social elite, the gendering of space serves to convey and reinforce the hegemony of male authority and privilege, while growing instances of women usurping what are considered traditionally male spheres of influence (the right to become *pirs* and minister to pilgrims, for instance) threatens to undermine this hegemony. Second, the issue of women-as-*pirs* points towards continued critiques of saint and shrine cults and calls for their reform among Sufis as well as their detractors, reform that will divest them of their ecstatic, 'superstitious,' and 'magic' characteristics (frequently associated with 'women's religion') and bring them into greater compliance with what is conceived of as a 'normative' or 'orthodox' type of Islam. In the case of the Gudri Shah and Firdausi Sufis, the overarching framework of an implied 'normative' Islam is closely connected by them with the idea of the 'mainstream' form of Sufism they represent, discernible in part by documented chains of succession (*silsile*), to the most eminent orders and outstanding saints of bygone times, and in part by their outward conformity to Islamic *Shari'a* law. For the *pirzade* women of these orders, compliance with *Shari'a* law necessitates their observance of *parda*, although as I have demonstrated, *parda* practice among such women is flexible and has been modified by a variety of factors. Third, and more broadly, the issue of women-as-*pirs* suggests rival claims about Islamic womanhood. On the one hand, within the hierarchical structure of the orders (and the family), women who have achieved a certain status (as mothers of *pirs*, for instance), are able to circumvent boundaries that might otherwise prevent them from doing the work of *piri-muridi*. This is precisely because as women of high social and spiritual status, they are able to operate with the sanction of senior males of the order, and because their place within the order (and/or the family) gives them a considerable sphere of influence by which they are able to work in partnership with the presiding *pir*.

There is another point of debate that the issue of women-as-*pirs* reflects, however, which is that despite the prevalence of 'Islamicizing' discourses that seek to restrict women's mobility outside the home (and/or in the 'public' realm), and that promote an ideal of sex segregation and female subordination to male authority, space does exist for counterhegemonic, or alternative discourses about women's rights to self-determination and the spiritual superiority of some of them over men. What this has meant in practice is a process of association and disassociation: in spite of arguments against women being able to perform the work of *piri-muridi*, arguments which tend to cite Islamic *Shari'a*-based referents, and (mainstream) Sufi precedents, it is also possible to draw from these sources to support women's mediating activities in the world of shrines. I have highlighted three references to the Islamic and the Sufi in this paper in order to show where association and disassociation can occur. First, the importance of affiliation with one of the established orders invokes conformity to an ideal that seeks to link the teachings of mainstream, established, and sober, rather than 'ecstatic' Sufi *pirs* with notions of conformity to Islamic *Shari'a*, particularly where ritual practice is concerned. For Sufis, this conformity can serve as defense against critics' allegations of 'un-Islamic-ness' or inappropriate practices. Yet it can, and does also operate as justification for the greater inclusion of women in the ritual life of an order. In particular, the teachings of Sufi masters prominent within the orders (which have been recorded in the biographical, epistolary, and homiletic literature composed by and about such masters) figured significantly in this respect, as examples of women participating in communal ritual events, performing the work of *piri-muridi*, and/or being sought out by eminent Sufis as powerful teachers and intercessors

with God, can be found within (46). Second, the notion of *parda* practice as a normative standard of 'proper' Islamic womanhood underscored many of the negative comments I encountered about women performing the work of *piri-muridi* in the shrine setting. Most women and men insisted that the reason women could not become *pirs* was because of the *Shari'a*'s directive that all believing Muslim women observe *parda*. Yet, as I have demonstrated, *parda* – particularly for women of the privileged classes – is observed in varying degrees and with a measure of flexibility that is determined in part by situational factors and in part by more complex factors such as family dynamics, age, and marital status, which has meant, in practice, that interactions between *parda-nishin* women and *ghair mahram* or 'unrelated' men do take place. On the other hand, conformity to local and commonly accepted *parda* norms can serve as both constraint and medium of exercising agency in the shrine milieu, particularly where *parda* dictates a fairly strict separation of the sexes. In such cases, senior *pirzade* women can hold a privileged position as mediators of the power and authority of the *pir* for female disciples, though they may also do so for male disciples (while still maintaining a physical separation from such men) in the absence of the *pir*.

Finally, both institutional Sufism and some of the more commonly-encountered forms of Sufi saint cults have made spaces in which divine madness is understood to be a manifestation of God's favor, although the ecstatic as living being is more problematic, especially in the role of *de facto* or *de jure* ritual/spiritual guide or *pir*. In the final case example provided here, Rafat's status as a marginalized woman (one who was poor, had a tenuous affiliation with the Firdausi Sufis, and 'mad') served both to condemn her activity and to explain the potential legitimacy of her spiritual authority. What emerged in my interviews and observations was that for both men and women, the process of interpreting the roles and actions of women as spiritual authorities (or saints) was particularly complex, and as varied as the criteria elaborated by my subjects for sainthood in itself. The ambivalence with which the idea of female spiritual authority was treated by my subjects underscored the ways in which female sainthood as a concept was closely linked with their own conflicting views about the propriety of women's agency, authority, and visibility in the 'public' milieu, phenomena that are still fairly recent, but that seem to be on the rise.

The process of association and disassociation briefly outlined in this paper suggests that in the field of practice, discourse about women and *piri-muridi* – operating as a mode of explanation, denial, and/or reasoning – is one among many strategically chosen perspectives that seek to account for, or deny, the work that women do in the world of Sufi shrines. Alternatives to discourse in such modes are numerous, and have only been hinted at here: among them are the language of the body, including comportment and the conveyance of gestures that can communicate defiance or compliance; manners of ritual observance, including considerations of what is added or left out, the simplicity or elaborateness of a ceremony or event; and numerous other ways of communicating group belonging or association. However, if discourse is a deliberate choice in many circumstances, it must also be said that strategy – or intentionality – is not always at the heart of the disjunction among articulations of the place of women in the milieu of Sufi shrines. Rather, I have surmised that such disjunction suggests an ambivalence that points to constantly shifting understandings of discourses of exclusion and inclusion. This point has been cogently argued by Katherine Ewing (Ewing 1998: 160-63, 180). The value of ambivalence as a hermeneutic tool for analyzing the production of dialogic understandings of the prescriptive (in this case, the boundaries that prevent women from exercising agency in the shrine milieu) and the practical (the ways in which they can push those boundaries to exercise greater agency than discourse would suggest) cannot be overstated. As a mode of evaluation, it enables the researcher to avoid some of the pitfalls of dichotomizing by allowing for the re-evaluation of categories of analysis to allow for more flexibility in their interpretation. The ambivalence of my subjects on the subject of women-as-*pirs* suggests that, rather than assuming the gulf between discourse and practice to be evidence of contradiction or challenge, we must consider that the categorizations upon which we as researchers rely are in themselves precariously balanced against the weight of our 'evidence,' and that the choices we make are reflective of the biases, contradictions, and inconsistencies inherent in the process of interpreting, understanding, and representing phenomena that ultimately resist the boundaries in which we seek to enclose them.

Endnotes

1. In Islamic mysticism, the term *pir* or *shaikh* can convey many different meanings. They are also referred to as saints, although the English term does not encompass the same range of meanings as the two above do. Strictly speaking, a *pir* or *shaikh* is a holy man who possesses *barakat*, charismatic power, who has been invested by his predecessors with the authority to make disciples and guide them along the path to intimate knowledge of Allah, and whose aid in matters spiritual and material is sought by pilgrims and disciples. He is often, but not always, the head of a Sufi order. The terms *pir* and *shaikh* are used synonymously and are interchangeable with the term saint, especially in local parlance. Here, I have chosen to privilege the term saint, because of the frequency with which it is used, and *pir*, for it evokes a much wider range of associations in the Subcontinent than does *shaikh*.
2. See, for instance, Valerie Hoffman, *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), and Pamela Ryden Johnson, 'A Sufi Shrine in Modern Tunisia', (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Berkeley, 1979).
3. Pir Hafizi Huzur ran for president in the 1986 election.
4. *Chilla* refers to the forty-day period of seclusion and abstinence which many Sufis underwent as part of their spiritual training. It has also come to refer to those shrines where these kinds of retreats took place.
5. Discourses among Sufis about the traditions of the order fluctuated according to time, circumstance, and a number of other variables. Often, however, the teachings of the *pirs* of the order, written and oral, were cited as being a major part of these traditions.
6. The problems with this kind of center-periphery model – as applied to theories of conflict and syncretism – is explored in an article by Tony K. Stewart, 'In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter Through Translation Theory,' *History of Religions*, vol. 40, no.3 (2001), 260-287.
7. Anand Yang points out evidence demonstrating that, during the course of the colonial period in India, the number of women pilgrims rose considerably. This is true for religious festivals and fairs of all kinds. He also connects the increased visibility of women at fairs with the proliferation of literature that criticized women's participation in these events at the turn of the twentieth century. See his *Bazaar India: Markets, Society, and the Colonial State in Gangetic Bihar* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2000), 157. Another trend that indicates the growing participation of women at Sufi shrine fairs is the increase in female *Qawwals* who are invited to perform in the name of a saint; an article in the *Indian Express* (New Delhi) that appeared on February 2, 1995, states that female *Qawwali* singers are a recent phenomenon given impetus by the *Qawwals* of Bombay.
8. There are numerous, though sporadic, examples of this in the biographical and hagiographic texts of the Sufis. Some of the important Indian Sufi texts that describe the spiritual power with which women of Sufi lineages were endowed include the *Mirat ul-kaunain*, by Maulwi Ghulam Nabi Firdausi; the *Sair ul-aqtab*, by Ilah Diya Chishti 'Usmani; Jamali's *Sair ul-'arifin*; the *Asar-i Kako*, by 'Ata Kakovi; the *Asar-i Maner*, by Sayyid Shah Muhammad Muradullah; the *Akhbar ul-akhyar* by Shaikh 'Abdul Haq Muhaddas Dihlavi; and Asih ud-din Balkhi's *Tazkira-yi niswan-i hind*.
9. Such details include making sure that rituals are observed at the proper time and on the proper days according to the Islamic lunar calendar, and assisting with the preparation of meals for disciples and guests at the *khanaqah* and the 'Usmani *chilla*.
10. Within the Sufi context, several types of *fatihas* exist: the *fatiha* that is the first chapter of the Qur'an, and *fatiha* prayers recited in the name of, for the blessing (by God) of, or to commemorate a saint, holy person, the Prophets, or some other person who has died. The *fatiha* prayer as it is recited over food and ritual implements contains several elements which may vary. I did not record the prayer as the *pir*-ma performed it, although one example of the structure of a *fatiha* recitation is as follows: a) the *durud* prayer, a prayer calling blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad and his family, is recited three times b) the first verse of the Qur'an, the *sura-i fatiha*, is recited three times c) verse one hundred and twelve of the Qur'an the *sura-i akhlas*, is recited twelve times d) the *durud* prayer is again recited three times. In the Gudri shahs' *fatiha*, the *shijara*, or names of the Gudri Shah *pirs*, as well as other figures important in the spiritual genealogy of the order, was also recited.
11. These five are alternately referred to as the *panjtan pak*. 'Ali was the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, as well as the fourth Caliph. Many Sufi orders claim a line of *pirs* or *shaikhs* originating with him, after the Prophet transmitted to 'Ali 'secret knowledge' of the unseen world. Fatima is 'Ali's wife and the favorite daughter of the Prophet. Hasan and Husain are their sons, each of whom was murdered young. The names of the *panji-pak* appear on most of the amulets I have seen. Moreover, these five names are painted on the entryways to most of the large Sufi shrines I have visited in India and Pakistan.
12. Forged or false claims to Sayyid or Shaikh status, however, are not uncommon.
13. There have been many efforts among academics to classify Indian Muslims. A few of these include the following: Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchus: the Caste System and its Implications* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1980 ed.), 205-211; Imtiaz Ahmed, ed. *Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims in India* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1978); F.R. Faridi and M.M. Siddiqi, *The Social Structure of Indian Muslims* (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 1992); and Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981). Slightly more balanced accounts of the Muslim social categories and their relevance today are Shadbano Ahmad, 'Methodological Problems in the Study of Muslim Women', in Mohini Anjum, ed., *Muslim Women in India* (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1992); and S.H. Askari and Qeyamuddin Ahmad, eds., *The Comprehensive History of Bihar* vol 2 pt. 2 (Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute, 1987), 379-380.
14. For instance, the hereditary properties of the landholding classes, of which Sayyids formed a large part, have been greatly reduced.
15. In hagiographical accounts, both Mu'in ud-din Chishti and Sharaf ud-din Maneri are said to have belonged to the Sayyid classes. In fact, the first lines of the biography *Mirat ul-kaunain's* section on Sharaf ud-din emphasize the saint's descent from

the Prophet Muhammad's own tribe, the Quraish. See Maulvi Ghulam Nabi Firdausi, *Mirat ul-kaunain* (Lucknow: Matba' namah Munshi Nawal Kishore, n.d.), 350.

16. Saints are believed to possess, wield, and leave behind *barakat* after their deaths. While *bij* implies person-to-person transmission, *barakat* is a force that may be manipulated by others through contact with the people or inanimate objects in which it resides.

17. The importance of a chain of spiritual succession linking the *pirs* of an order to the Prophet Muhammad should not be understated. Most Sufi *silsilas* in existence today document, or claim to have, such a link. Consanguineous links to the Prophet tend to be less important, while such links between outgoing and incoming *pirs* seem to be more important in the eyes of many of those interviewed for this project. By some accounts, the failure of a *pir* to name his successor does not prevent the transmission of *bij* to his offspring, and thus, the leadership of an order may be assured (though it may be hotly disputed among its members, causing orders to splinter into two or more groups). Usually, the recipient is a son, although stories of transmission to the daughter of a *pir* are not unknown. It is not uncommon for a *pir* to name a non-relative as his successor, particularly in cases of childlessness (or incompetence of the son), but in the South Asian context, it is widely considered more appropriate that succession pass to the son of a *pir*.

18. Attitudes toward these notions of investiture vary, however, and these days, descent from the Prophet's family does not automatically convey spiritual power of the kind I have referred to above.

19. *Taqlid*, or 'imitation', has been criticized by Sufi masters like Jalal ud-din Rumi. See, for instance, William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: the Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1983), 125ff. Sharaf ud-din Maneri underscored the imitation of the Prophet Muhammad's example as being key to the spiritual perfection of Sufi masters. See his *Khwan-i pur ni'mat*, translated by Paul Jackson (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1986), 8.

20. These states are temporary and do not necessarily represent advancement along the Sufi path. They are said to 'descend' upon the disciple from the unseen world.

21. This is demonstrated, for instance, through her visitation of shrines, along with her father, at a young age; her knowledge of the writings, and teachings, of eminent Sufi masters -- in part through her own initiative, in part through interactions with her father and husband; and her practices of Qur'an reading, non-obligatory prayers, and various forms of mystical contemplation of God and the unseen, which she presumably learned from her parents.

22. There are two branches of the Firdausi order in Bihar. The Bihar Sharif branch was founded by Sharaf ud-din, while the Maner branch was founded by his father, Yahya Maneri. When referring to the Firdausi *pir-ma*, I mean the *pir-ma* of the Maner branch. However, most of what I write about her applies equally to the Bihar Sharif *pir-ma*. An illustration of the kind of *parda* practiced by the Firdausi women is provided by this example. Upon my first visit to the Firdausi *khanaqah* in Maner, I was accompanied by Father Paul Jackson, a Jesuit priest who has translated Sharafuddin Maneri's *Hundred Letters*, among other works, and who has lived in the area for over 30 years. Although he and the Firdausi *pir* had been close friends for much of this time, Father Jackson had never once seen the *pir-ma*, who nevertheless seemed to know everything about Father Jackson! I myself never saw the *pir-ma* leave the house, though her daughters told me that when she did, she wore the full *burqa*. Her daughters, it must be noted, are more flexible in their interpretation of the practice. This is partly because all of them have been university-educated and most work outside of the home. Still, their practice of *parda* was significantly stricter than that of the Gudri Shah women, who are also educated and (except for the *pir-ma*) employed outside of the home. In contrast to the Firdausi *pir-ma*, the *pir-ma* of the Gudri Shah order only covers herself with a *burqa* when leaving her *muhalla* 'neighborhood'. Otherwise, she drapes a *dupatta* 'scarf' loosely around her head and shoulders.

23. In both branches of this order, the *pir* will hold separate and parallel ceremonies for women in the *khanaqah*. Although these days, a few women insist on sitting on the outer edges of musical assemblies, they are prevented or discouraged from participating in private ritual events outside of the festivals held in the main, public *dargah*.

24. This predilection stands in contrast to the attitude of her daughters, who also attend ritual ceremonies at the *khanaqah* and the 'Usmani *chilla*, and assist in the preparations for these ceremonies, but who demonstrate much less interest than their mother in pursuing the goals of spiritual and moral development that are associated with the Sufi Path.

25. This is partly a matter of preference. However, the youngest daughter of the former *pir*, a college student, frequently attends ritual events, especially if her attendance will prevent a disciple from being the lone female in the gathering!

26. From interview with Sa'ida Varsi, *dargah* of Sharaf ud-din Maneri, Bihar Sharif, February 25, 1998. My translation.

27. From interview with Shamim ud-din Munammi, Mitani Ghat *dargah*, Patna, February 19, 1998.

28. See also Amit Dey's brief work, *Sufism in India* (Calcutta: Ratna Prakashan, n.d.), 9, which refers to a donation of three hundred and sixty-five *bighas* (1 *bigha* = 5/8 acre) of land in the name of Pirani Raushan Ara. What differs here from Flueckiger's account is that the term is applied to Bibi Raushan Ara despite the fact that she was not married to a *pir*, though her elder brother, Hazrat Gorachund Razi of Balanda, was indeed one.

29. The district gazetteers provide ample material on women who practice this form of *piri-muridi*. See for example, L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bihar and Orissa District Gazetteers*. Patna. Reprint of 1912-1916 series, revised by J.F.W. James, I.C.S (Patna: Superintendent, Bihar and Orissa Government Printing, 1924), 67ff. Descriptions in Orientalist literature include the following: Ja'far Sharif, *Qanun-i Islam*, translated by Herklots, revised by Crooke as *Islam in India* (Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1972), 139; Murray Titus, *Indian Islam: a Religious History of Islam in India* (London: Oxford University Press, Humphrey Milford, 1930), 141; and V.R. & L. Bevan Jones, *Women in Islam* (Lucknow: the Lucknow Publishing House, 1941), 328-329.

30. A few of these stories are contained in the work by Julia Clancy-Smith, 'The House of Zainab: Female Authority and Sainthood Succession in Colonial Algeria', in Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron, eds., *Women in Middle Eastern History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 254-274, and Valerie Hoffman, op. cit.

31. On the importance of writing in the Islamic healing context, see Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, 'The Vision was of Written Words: Negotiating Authority as a Female Muslim Healer in South India,' in David Shulman, ed. *Syllables of Sky* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 255-257.
32. At the *hujra gah* of Sharaf ud-din Maneri, Bihar Sharif, February 22, 1999. My translation.
33. I am not certain what she meant here, although I assumed that she was referring to a particular form of devotional poetry to the Prophet Muhammad.
34. At the *hujra gah* of Sharaf ud-din Maneri, Bihar Sharif, February 22, 1999. My translation.
35. At the *hujra gah* of Sharaf ud-din Maneri, Bihar Sharif, February 25, 1999. My translation.
36. Unfortunately, I was not able to investigate this idea.
37. I use the phrase 'mainstream Sufi' to signify Sufism of the established orders, those with well-documented chains of succession that stretch back through the centuries, that are known throughout the Subcontinent, and that can claim a large number of adherents both locally and regionally.
38. I was struck by the fact that she infrequently called upon the name of the Sufi *shaikh* whose at whose shrine we were performing this ritual. Rather, Sharaf ud-din's name was one of many she included in a litany of appeals to the saints.
39. The importance of reciting Qur'anic passages at the beginning and end of the Sufi musical assembly, for similar reasons as I note here, is underscored in Regula Burkhardt Qureshi's *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Sound, Context, and Meaning in Qawwali* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 115-116.
40. For instance, in 'Abd Allah Ansari's *Manazil as-sa'irin* (Way Stations of the Travelers), Ruzbihan Baqli's *Kashf al-asrar* (the Unveiling of Secrets), and al-Hujwiri's *Kashf al-Mahjub* (The Unveiling of the Mystic).
41. For many examples, see as-Sulami's *Dhikr an-niswa al-muta'abbidat as-Sufiyyat*, translated by Rkia Cornell as *Early Sufi Women* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999).
42. In her study of a female Muslim healer in Hyderabad, Joyce Flueckiger notes that in the eyes of many believers, having a connection with a *pir* is necessary for the work of healing. See quotes in Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, op. cit., 261-262, 265.
43. This is a wailing and crying mode of prayers that is strongly disapproved of by the Firdausi Sufis of Bihar Sharif.
44. From interview with Yasser 'Ali Imam at his home, Patna, March 31, 1998.
45. For a discussion of the problems inherent in characterizing South Asian attitudes towards madness using hermeneutic paradigms derived from Western discourses, see Jurgen Wasim Frembgen, 'The *majzub* Mama Ji Sarkar', 140-159, and Katherine Ewing, 'A *Majzub* and his Mother', 160-83, both in Pnina Werbner and Helene Basu, eds. *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality and the Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).
46. Some examples are found in Shaikh 'Abdul Haq Muhaddis Dihlavi, *Akhbar ul-akhyar*, Urdu translation by Maulana Iqbal ud-din Ahmad (Karachi: Dar ul-Isha'at, 1973); Mir Khurd, *Sair ul-auliya*, Urdu translation by 'Ijaz ul-Haq Quddusi (Lahore: Central Urdu Board, 1980); Jami, *Nafahat al-'uns* (Tehran: Sa'di, 1958); and in English, Farid ad-Din 'Attar, *Tadhkirat al-awliya*, transl. by A.J. Arberry as *Muslim Saints and Mystics* (London and New York, Arkana, 1990); Javad Nurbakhsh, *Sufi Women* (Khanaqahi Nimatullahi Publications, 1990); and Muhammad ibn al-Husayn Sulami, op. cit.

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