

A REVISED NARRATIVE OF PIRS' ROLE IN ISLAMISATION OF BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the historical context in which the institution of the Pir evolved in Bengal from the medieval era to the colonial period. Drawing on varied sources – authoritative studies and primary data – it sets out the processes of Islamisation that took place in Bengal, in particular drawing on Richard M Eaton's theoretical model for the pre-modern period. In what follows it highlights that Pirs had played significant role in this process, but not necessarily in the way that is often popularly perceived; thus, this article partially revises the traditional Pir-centred narrative of Bengal's Islamisation.¹ In later periods, Pirs mobilised deltaic people for clearing the forest and enhancing rice production, they acted as mediators between the rulers and the ruled, and contributed to the institutionalisation of Islam locally. Over time, Pir-centred norms, rituals, and practices became so entrenched in the region that some factions of nineteenth-century Islamic revivalist movements, which shook Bengali Muslims with their enthusiasm for introducing 'pure' Islam by eradicating Pir-centred practices, were themselves 'tainted' by Pirism.
