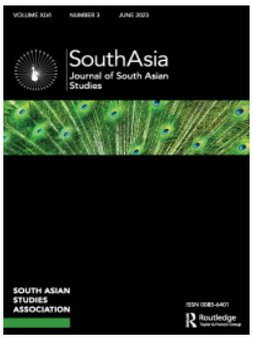

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Remembering Heterodox Pre/Colonial Oral Cultures in (Re)Organising Bengali Dalit Literary Histories

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores what a (re)organisation of the existing histories of Bangla literature from Dalit literary perspectives can offer. Towards this end, it examines some of the early questions on the formation of literary standards and how that remained directly connected with caste hierarchies. It turns briefly towards late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Calcutta as a discursive-material site to explore symptomatically how such organising of dominant literary standards works its way through various forms of exclusion. When seen from the perspective of these exclusions, what does the question of Dalit literature offer in transforming the very idea of 'literariness'? Also, what can the vernacular literatures offer in the reception of Dalit literatures in their multiplicity while resisting the tendencies of homogenising their volatility? Addressing such concerns, the paper turns towards a conceptualisation of Bangla Dalit literature as offering a poetics for multiple forms of dwelling.

KEYWORDS

Bangla Dalit literatures; different modernities; diversity; literariness; literary history; orality; vernacular

Introduction

Organising the literary histories of Dalit literature, like the organising of any literary history, remains exposed to the discursive-material nature of knowledge production and embodied perspectives. However, since the organising of the literary history of Dalit literature remains shaped by the discursive-material concerns of caste, it also remains dependent on an assertion of alterity—that is, generating counter-hegemonic literary histories that, while asserting Dalit identities and cultures, also counter or question the hegemonic literary standards of Brahmanical modes of knowledge production. Here I wish to clarify that in discussing the discursive-material nature of knowledge production, I intend to highlight that the ideological and material

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concerns of knowledge production share a co-constitutive relation. I will do this also through a brief tracing of the coexistence of diverse forms of vernacular literary cultures in nineteenth century Bengal and how they had to negotiate with the dominant (often caste-based) frameworks of thinking literary creativity. In other words, generating a genealogical coexistence of Dalit literature through a symptomatic reading of literary cultures of early nineteenth century Bengal remains shaped by the negotiation of two concerns: (1) the question of literature or 'literariness'; and (2) its meeting with the categorical adjective, 'Dalit'. While the first category remains characterised by the suspending potentials of imagination, the second one remains determined by a specific social register relying on the assertion of difference. In a context where hegemonic social categories (like caste) largely determine the category of literature in terms of the dominant expectations, thinking literary histories from or of the margins thus calls for (re)organising the ignored, silenced voices that assert the irreducibility of the multiple. That is why I emphasise that while organising a history of Dalit literature essentially calls for negotiating two intertwined concerns—the generality and suspending potentials of 'literature' (or voicing one's presence through a play of language that gets determined as 'literary'), and the specificity of a caste-based identity bracketed as 'Dalit'—it also cautions one to become accountable for one's situatedness and become alert towards the discursive-material nature of one's embodied perspectives. This approach doesn't rely on surface meanings since what is readily available for sight, accessibility and interpretation is also a result of the power dynamics regulating not only what is to be made visible but also how to make visible and how to see what is visible. I emphasise that, especially when seen from the context of caste, such becoming invisible is shaped by the hegemonic frameworks in circulation that regulate not only what, how and for what ends we read, but also, to echo Gadamer,[1] what is to be remembered and what is to be forgotten. Such an approach thus remains alert to histories, texts and meanings in their spectral and symptomatic resonances in order to examine the ideological-material nature of knowledge formation and its mediations and embodiments. Such a symptomatic reading of existing histories thus probes deep beneath the surface of established canonical histories so that one can simultaneously '… assess and assert the realities of the ground, as well as the status of this ground, by "redescribing the dwelling places that have become invisible"'.[2] With this intention, I attempt here to reassemble some of the ignored lower caste compositions of nineteenth century Bengal to offer a symptomatic reading of the constitutive cuts shaping the literary histories of the time. I also explore the mediated discursive-material nature of such cuts in order to highlight how a re-reading of the existing canonical histories from the perspective of ignored voices could help generate alternative, counter-hegemonic frameworks of interpreting these histories differently.

1. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London and New York: Continuum, 1975).
2. Esther Peeren, 'Suspicious Minds: Critique as Symptomatic Reading', in *The Ends of Critique: Methods, Institutions, Politics*, ed. Kathrin Thiele, Birgit M. Kaiser and Timothy O'Leary (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022): 197–216.

The discursive-material nature of embodied knowledge and its role in shaping the principles of organising literary histories

Alertness to one's situated knowledge and becoming accountable makes one realise that the ideological-material negotiations of belonging to a society don't operate in a singular way, and awareness of the linguistic-cultural diversity within the vernacular (like, for example, the Bangla language) adds to the multiplicity within such forms of negotiation. A literary history of Bangla Dalit literature therefore essentially turns towards such forms of negotiation while simultaneously emphasising the multiple forms of dwelling within the vernacular. Though he wrote in a different context (namely, identifying the historical unfolding of tendencies to separate Islamic elements within Bangla literature as 'foreign' and reconstituting a Sanskritised Bangla language and body of literature as 'native' and canonical), one can recall here Sudipta Kaviraj's words on how the writing of early literary histories in colonial Bengal was shaped by an 'ideological principle of organization' that attempted to organise a selective version of history as the 'normative' and 'native' by ignoring and marginalising other aspects as either 'foreign' or 'irrelevant':

> It is important to note at the outset that even the question 'What is Bangla literature?' is not an innocent or noncontentious one. Writing the history of Bangla literature was part of the project of literary modernity, and since this was entirely dominated by a Hindu upper stratum of society, the initial historical accounts tended to ignore Islamic elements by suggesting either that they belonged to a separate cultural strand (called Musalmani Bamla) or that these texts were not of sufficient literary quality to find a place in an exalted history of literary art.[3]

In this process, while the Persian and Islamic elements of Bangla literature came to be constituted as 'foreign' elements, the multiple forms of oral compositions, stories, myths and dispersed heterodox religious beliefs among the lower caste communities were also dismissed as either 'obscene' or 'irrelevant', depriving them of any serious consideration for being included within the thinking of a canonical Bengali 'literary' culture. Organising a literary history of Bangla Dalit literature also needs to remain alert to the embodied caste norms of evaluating literary standards and how they influence acts of organising existing histories. It therefore also calls for gathering or bringing together such otherwise ignored multiple forms of dwelling within a community that refuses to submit to the dominant versions of history, which makes this a task of (re)organising existing histories from the perspective of the other. The question of multiple forms of dwelling remains applicable in the context of thinking Dalit literatures as well, since, just like the thinking of dwelling within a society, the thinking of a Dalit identity also cannot be reduced to a single register. The organising of a Bangla Dalit literary history therefore depends on two unavoidable functions: (1) organising an existing history from the perspective of Dalit experience that not only resists the existing forms of hegemonic histories but also addresses the diverse specificities of identity formations; and (2) asserting such specificities of experience also to emphasise the uniqueness of a vernacular community that refuses to be reduced to

3. Sudipta Kaviraj, 'The Two Histories of Literary Culture in Bengal', in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003): 503–66; 504.

any singular framework of thinking Dalit experience (for example, the universalising reductions operating under the category of 'national'). Bangla Dalit literature thus also emphasises (like Marathi, Tamil, Oriya and other forms of vernacular literature)[4] the specificities of linguistic diversities, their heterogenous forms of becoming, and their dispersed roles in constituting the multiple forms of dwelling of a community that, along with spatial and temporal concerns, also remains shaped by linguistic and cultural diversities. As a result, any attempt at (re)organising Bangla literary histories from a Dalit perspective essentially demands remaining alert to these diverse forms of negotiations that continuously permeate each other. This is where the paper aims to highlight how turning to the diverse histories of vernacular Dalit literatures—in their richness and the specificities of linguistic and cultural diversities, and their heterodox forms of religious faith—offers assembling genealogies of Dalit literary traditions without reducing the cultural-linguistic diversity of Dalit literary traditions. Rather, as I attempt to show here, such a tracing of the heterogenous genealogies of alternative non-Brahmanical forms of literary traditions makes one realise how existing histories can be read differently, beyond the existing Brahmanical frameworks of thinking literary canon, to overcome an uncritical reliance upon the interpretative frameworks of the secular modern, and to explore how vernacular histories offer fluid sites for realising multiple forms of dwelling within modernity.

Turning to the literary histories of Bengal offers one such symptomatic reminder of how canonical traditions or works came to be constituted through the established hegemonic principles of organisation and their influential role as boundary-making practices. The cut, for example, which Kaviraj identifies concerning what he calls two trends of literary cultures (between Islamic elements and Sanskritised elements), or Sumanta Banerjee identifies as separating the literary cultures of '*bhôdrôlok*' and '*itôrlok*', can be seen as not only performing a deeply discursive-material role in regulating what, how and for what ends one reads, but also to realising the historical sedimentation of these hegemonic frameworks of literary canon formation. The unfolding of such frameworks, as scholars like Jaaware, Nagaraj, Guru and Sarukkai have shown,[5] can be traced back to Vedic times, when only the upper castes were allowed to read the scriptures and thus exclusively regulated the value and meaning of the written 'word'; the castes that were left out remained passively at the receiving end of whatever meaning the Brahmans chose to give the scriptures. As Jaaware points out, since that time, the grammar of caste has been constituted along these sedimented roles that continued to settle with the passage of time and to determine other concerns as well:

> The mimamsakas devoted their venerable ancient, conflicting but collective intellects to the service of interpretation and reflectively to the science of interpretation ....

4. For a brief overview of such explorations in other vernacular languages and how such vernacular becomings have remained threatened by the dominant frameworks of Sanskritisation, see Sheldon Pollock, ed., *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
5. See Aniket Jaaware, 'Eating, and Eating With, the Dalit: A Re-Consideration Touching upon Marathi Poetry', in *Indian Poetry: Modernism and After*, ed. K. Satchidanandan (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2001): 262–93; D.R. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays: The Dalit Movement in India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010); Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

> The tradition has commentaries and commentaries on commentaries and later on various guides to these in turn. As is well-known, and practised today, only those who have been initiated have the right to study the Vedas, or perform vedic rituals …. That the three varnas are specifically mentioned (the sentence does not say 'people' should be initiated), means that the varna not mentioned is meant to be excluded from the purview and domain of application of the sentence. Sabara states clearly: 'vede hi trayanam nirdeso bhavati vasante Brahminam upanayita, grisme rajanyam saradi vaisyamiti vedabhavadasamarthah sudro yastum tasmannadhikriyate' (The Vedas indicate/mention only the three … the sudra is powerless to perform rituals because he is absent from the Vedas. Therefore he does not have the right) …. It is this interpretation then which prohibits the sudra from learning the Vedas or doing anything that the Vedas enjoin upon people.[6]

What is interesting here is the concept of the intimate cut that determines (and continues to determine) the separation without being always directly dismissive. This separation is not only shaped by the ideological standpoints of caste hierarchy but shares a co-constitutive relation with the material concerns of distribution of wealth and power. Therefore, in a context like caste, where the limiting of the interpretative openness of caste relations shares a direct relation with material practices of caste discrimination, realising the discursive-material nature of embodied knowledge plays a crucial onto-epistemological role in not only examining the hegemonic sedimentations of caste but also in generating—from the perspective of the marginalised voices of history—alternative frameworks for organising literary histories.

That is why in order to situate why generating alternative non-Brahmanical histories of literary cultures acquires an ethico-political necessity, this paper, along with tracing how the embodiment of the hegemonic Brahmanical standards of literary canonicity plays an influential role in regulating literary standards, also examines the discursive-material nature of this intimate cut within the organising of early Bangla literature. Concerning the intimate cut, Jaaware says that the fourth *varṇā* is within the system and definition of society, not 'outside' it (as 'enemies' would be, for example):

> It is not as if they are completely outside. But they are not exactly 'inside' either. A strange ambivalence, one which gets repeated throughout the history of society: from the transformation of the Vedic society to Hindu society from Hindu society to modern Hindu society (the Samskara reforms) and then through the colonial to the post-colonial Hindu society.[7]

However, Jaaware acknowledges that though the category of caste, its functioning and relations have undergone immense change in different shifts of history, both Brahmanical orthodoxy and Dalit orthodoxy have maintained an unchangeable identity in this tradition—one claiming thousands of years of unchanging permanence of knowledge and wisdom and purity, the other claiming years of exploitation and injustice.[8] The significant point that Jaaware makes here is the totalising image of power domination/injustice, which has acquired a kind of universal framework and fed into the social imagination. When seen from this perspective, the essential task in

6. Jaaware, 'Eating', 262–63.
7. *Ibid.*, 263.
8. *Ibid.*, 263.

any attempt to reorganise literary histories is unsettling the existing hegemonic superior–inferior binary that has limited literary reception in terms of caste positions. It is in this context that Jaaware stresses the necessity of differentiating between what he calls the 'birth-mark' (one's identity based exclusively on birth and lineage) and the 'doing-mark'/'action-mark' (moving through one's actions beyond a prescribed identity premised upon birth and lineage), and he emphasises how Dalit aesthetics, premised upon Dalit politics, needs to concentrate upon the importance of the 'action-mark' to counter the burden of the 'birth-mark' of caste. In a similar way, Jaaware emphasises how the organising and division of speech in terms of the purity–pollution dyad has characterised caste for generations, thereby making the speech of certain sections and castes in predetermined terms 'impure' language (one can track here the historical references to such identifications of 'impure' language with Dalits back to the division of the Aryans and the Dasyas).[9] Jaaware therefore asserts that in its use and organisation of poetic language, Dalit poetry moves between the realms of doing-marks and saying-marks, and is therefore always already between politics and aesthetics,[10] and a reading of the literary histories also needs to remain alert to the political nature of (re)organising such histories.

A symptomatic reading of lower caste literary compositions in nineteenth century Calcutta[11]

It is in this context that I turn here to the early literary histories of Bengal to symptomatically trace some scattered instances in which the doing-mark and saying-mark functioned as the key factor in disregarding the birth-mark of caste. I propose that one way of tracing the coexistence of alternative forms of literary composition is by identifying the genealogies of non-Brahmanical literary histories that refused to follow caste and were composed in non-Sanskritic styles. In the context of eighteenth and nineteenth century Bangla literature, for example, while the hegemonic organising of the canons of Bangla literature in the colonial period had emphasised Sanskritised, erudite, rhetorically sophisticated styles and forms for determining 'literariness' (which was also influenced by exposure to European literatures, print culture, and the colonial/European celebration of Sanskrit), it needs to be remembered that there were other forms of composition that had coexisted for generations that had not always relied on such sophisticated styles. If the separation between the two trends of literary cultures is often associated with the shift from the late eighteenth to the early

9. Thapar says that the word 'Aryan' was used initially to identify the language of the foreign race that invaded India, and based on the improper use of that language, the native non-Aryans or 'Dasyas' were differentiated (the latter were mocked as '*mridhra-vac*' or '*mleccha*' for their improper usage of the language). Later, the colonial readership came to associate these words with racial purity. In a similar process, '*mleccha*' became generalised and associated with the lower castes and impure or mixed races: see Romila Thapar, 'Multiple Theories about the "Aryan"', in *Which of Us Are Aryans? Rethinking the Concept of Our Origins*, ed. Romila Thapar et al. (New Delhi: Aleph Book Co., 2019): 30–93. For further details on the role of comparative philology and German romanticism (especially the philological affinities between Sanskrit and Western classical languages) in the shaping of the Aryan myth and linking it with caste, which further shaped the German Indological and French Orientalist views, see Dorothy M. Figueira, *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins: Theorizing Authority through Myths of Identity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).
10. Jaaware, 'Eating', 269–70.
11. Calcutta is now known as Kolkata.

nineteenth century, then we also need to recognise that this transition period consisted of enmeshed zones of cultural contact not only between the colonisers and the natives, but also between the elites and the poor, the urban and the rural. Caste roles were also affected by this volatility of contacts exposed by colonialism. Therefore, the upper caste '*bhôdrôlok*' and the lower caste '*itôrlok*' often shared spaces of contact, rivalry and assertions. In such spaces of contact, the two were not essentially divided into two purely unbridgeable binaries: there were forms of entertainment where they often shared space as performers, composers, patrons and receivers (as audience and reader), overcoming their caste differences. Among such forms of entertainment, both oral and written, we can also trace the continuity of the heterodox non-Brahmanical trends (*lokayata*, *dehavad*, tantra, *Sahajiẏā Vaisnavism*, among many others that had not always accepted caste) of religious belief that had been cemented into many such communities over time. Different forms of oral compositions enjoyed enormous popularity, most of which regularly involved lower caste participants, and among them a brief mention needs to be made of *kobigān*, *jātrā*, *khē'ur* and *kīrtan*.

However, just like the tendency to separate these dialogic encounters into two separate trends is a historical phenomenon, the dwelling together also can be traced back historically to earlier times. As a starting point we may begin with a mention of the *pādabalī kīrtan*, which formed a major element of *kobigān* in nineteenth century Bengal. *Pādabalī kīrtan*, which is said to have been developed into a distinct genre in fifteenth century Bengal by Chandidas and Vidyapati, and which presents the love of Radha and Krishna in human and homely romantic terms, enabled the celebration of divine love within and through the forms of the human body that *Sahajiẏā Vaishnavism* and *kīrtans* also explored. It is this trend of domestication and corporealisation of divine beings that passed into many of the later oral compositions of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Bengal. As Sumanta Banerjee rightly points out,[12] the tendency to separate the two trends of Bangla literature in the nineteenth century (between the literary cultures of the *bhôdrôlok* and the *itôrlok*) needs to be realised as the late product of a historical unfolding that started quite earlier, and can be traced back to as early as the fifteenth century, when the domestication of the divinities and the narration of their exploits in the familiar language of the people (as used by Chandidas and Vidyapati) stood in sharp contrast to the earlier lyrics of Jaydev, the Bengali poet who composed in Sanskrit. When seen from this perspective, it can be seen that unlike the conventional poems about Hindu gods and goddesses, while Bharatchandra's *Bidyā-Sundar* enabled the treatment of a secular love story—the allegorical love between Bidyā (literally 'knowledge'), daughter of the king of Bardhamān, and Sundar (literally 'beautiful'), son of the king of Kāñci—it also depended heavily on court culture for its language and style.[13] Parallel to these early poetic traditions of Bangla literature which, while enabling treatment of secular themes, remained heavily dependent on Sanskritised rhetorical norms and structures, also ran another course of literary traditions that emphasised portrayals of rural pictures of daily life (despite dealing with divine figures and issues) in ordinary or

12. Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1989).
13. *Ibid*., 79.

everyday language. Prominent among these is a series of *Maṅgalakābyas* or poetical narratives in praise of Cāndi (another form of the goddess Kālī) or Manasā (a local Bengali goddess of serpents). Sumanta Banerjee says that the songs did not always involve anthropomorphising the divine, but also dealt with ordinary human characters that had nothing to do with divinity and celebrated the dissolution of hierarchies through love and companionship. Examples of this can be found in two popular ballads from Mymensingh (now in Bangladesh): one called '*Andha-Bondhu* (Blind Friend)', about a blind flute player with whom the wife of a prince fell in love, and the other called '*Śyāma Rāẏ*', about a prince called Śyāma Rāẏ who wanted to marry a low caste Dome woman.[14] Banerjee also reminds us that the kingdom and patronage of Maharaja Krishnachandra Ray (1710–82)—under whose influence Nabadwip became a major centre of learning, religious movements, and art and culture, and witnessed the rise of Bharatchandra Ray (1712–60) and his *Bidyā-Sundar*—were also responsible for hosting folk-poets like Ramprasad Sen who composed in everyday colloquial Bangla. Bharatchandra received a monthly salary of Rs40 from the maharaja, and Ramprasad, Rs30; however, Ramprasad refused the maharaja's invitation to serve as a court-poet because he preferred composing independently.[15] Bharatchandra preferred the traditional romantic vein of the Sanskrit classics, alliteration and Sanskritised words and sounds, as we see, for example, in the following couplet from *Bidyā-Sundar*, which describes the goddess Kali with a necklace of fierce-looking skulls and a mass of matted locks flapping around her head:

Chanda-munda munda khandi khanda-munda māliké,
Latto-patto deergha jatto muktokesha jāliké.[16]

Bharatchandra drew his imagery from the opulence and luxury of Krishnachandra's court. But, perhaps because Ramprasad had served as a clerk in Calcutta, he used contemporary colloquial Bengali and drew on everyday life and experiences for his imagery, even though he had also received training in Sanskrit and Persian. Sumanta Banerjee cites one such example in which Ramprasad sings about the goddess Kali using clerical terms:

Āmāye dāo ma tahbil-dāri,
Ami nimak-hārām noi Shankari
Make me your cashier, O mother;
I'm not ungrateful, O Shankari[17]

According to Sumanta Banerjee, Ramprasad offers two significant contributions to the development of the folk literature of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Bengal: (1) the domestication of divinities wherein divine characters are treated as ordinary mortals with human feelings like love, jealousy, vengeance, lust and selfishness (as distinct from Bharatchandra's elevation of them into ethereal realms); and

14. *Ibid.*, 80.
15. *Ibid.*, 80–81.
16. *Ibid.*, 81.
17. *Ibid.*, 81.

(2) the ability to versify extempore (a convention in the oral literary tradition which gave birth to the form known as *tarjā*, where two poets or groups of poets engage in poetic duels).[18] These two features later continued to form a major element for late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Bengali folk compositions, especially within the genres of *kobigān*, *jātrā*, *khē'ur* and *kīrtan*, among others, which brought together different castes (as both composers, performers and audience) without essentially determining them in terms of their caste positions. Though Krishnachandra's patronage of Bharatchandra (as well as his support for Ramprasad) was also aimed at resisting the increasing influence of Chaitanya and Vaishnavism,[19] Ramprasad's *Śākta* compositions shared some similarities with Chaitanya's call for self-surrender and rejection of all earthly hierarchies (like caste), which can be found among the *Sahajiẏās* as well. In other words, though their paths were different, these non-Brahmanical sects had, at least in their initial stages of development, rejected caste hierarchies as worldly discriminations (unlike the Brahmanical scriptural assertions of caste as 'divine'). As many scholars have shown, even though Chaitanya's Vaishnavism and Bhakti cult, *Sahajiẏā Vaishnavism*, tantra and other heterodox non-Brahmanical practices were later either appropriated within Brahmanical forms of religious worship and *varṇāśram dharma* or marginalised,[20] yet examining the early histories of these sects and their diverse narratives and compositions show how counter-hegemonic, non-Brahmanical, non-Sanskritic forms of religious practices had also coexisted and found their sedimentations since the fifteenth century. That is why, as Partha Chatterjee and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay argue,[21] tracing the early histories of these scattered non-Brahmanical sects—for example, the Bālāhadī sect among the Hadis of Nadia district, the Koch/Rajbansis of north Bengal and the Bhuimalis of Mymensingh district—offer a symptomatic reminder of not only how they contained the possibilities of constituting an alternate domain of politics but also to realise and examine the ideological-material concerns through which such diverse forms of non-Brahmanical religious practices came to be contained within the framework of a hegemonic Hindu nationalism and its valorisation of Sanskritic, Brahmanical religious systems and beliefs.

Akshaykumar Dutta identifies the coexistence of different non-Brahmanical religious sects in nineteenth century Bengal.[22] And in keeping with these heterodox religious beliefs that had found their sedimentation within different parts of Bengal for the last many centuries, the oral compositions of the lower caste poets of late

18. *Ibid*., 82.
19. Malcom McLean, *Devoted to the Goddess: The Life and Work of Ramprasad* (Albany: State University of New York, 1998): 40–42.
20. For further details, see Edward C. Dimock Jr, *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaisnava-Sahajiyā Cult of Bengal* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1966); Shashibhusan Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1969); Ramakanta Chakrabarty, *Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal: 1486–1900* (Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1985); Hiteshranjan Sanyal, বাংলা কীর্তনের ইতিহাস (*Bānglā Kīrtanēr Itihāsa*) (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1989); Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nation and Its Outcasts', in *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993): 173–99; Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Domination in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004).
21. See Chatterjee, 'The Nation and Its Outcasts'; and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947* (London: Curzon Press, 1997).
22. Akshaykumar Datta, *Bhāratabarsīẏa Upāsaka Sampradāẏa* (The Religious Sects of the Hindus) (Calcutta: Sanskrit Press Depository, 1870 [Bengali year 1792]).

eighteenth and early nineteenth century Bengal also drew heavily from non-Brahmanical religious beliefs and everyday lived experiences and the ordinary Bangla language. Their experiences, along with their imaginative capacities, enabled them to (trans)form poetry out of everyday life, and seek and explore transcendental issues in everyday forms. These forms of oral composition often included creative forms of satire or protest against the strong Brahmanical influence that shaped the contemporary society along discriminatory casteist lines. Sumanta Banerjee cites a few examples of such compositions:

Keu khele māchher muḍo, keu khele bonduker huḍo.
[Some were treated to the delicacy of fish-heads, others to the thrust of the musket-butt.]

Belgāchhiār bāgāné hoy chhuri-kāṅtār jhanjhani,
Khānā khāoār kato majā,
Āmrā tār ki jāni?
Jāne Thākur Company.
[Knives and forks are clanking in the Belgachhia garden house; what fun with all that food around! But what do we know of it? It's all an affair of Tagore Company.]

Dulol holo Sarkār, Okkur holo Dutta,
Āmi kinā thākbo je koibotto sei koibotto!
[Dulol became Sarkar, Okkur became Dutta,
I remained the same Kaibarta forever.][23]

However, that doesn't mean that their compositions or performances circulated only among the lower orders. They were also in demand among the first generation of rich *kāẏāstha* Bengalis who had ascended in their caste position through their success in business (the *bania*-turned-urban landlord), among whom many like Nabakrishna Deb of Shobhabazar, Ashutosh Dey or Chhatu Bābu, the son of the millionaire Ramdulal Dey, or the Dutts of Hatkhola even acted as their patrons. Nor were these *kobis* (poets) or composers ashamed of their professions and caste identity and they had the agency to respond immediately when faced with challenges. Banerjee recounts a contest between the lower caste poet Bhola Moẏrā and the Portuguese Christian migrant poet Antony Phiriṅgī. During the contest, in a mock-devotional mood, Antony Phiriṅgī turned Bhola into Bhōlānātha (one of the names of Shiva) and sang a hymn in his praise, which prompted Bhola to come out with a song which gives an excellent description of his profession and beliefs:

Orey, āmi shey Bholānāth noi,
Āmi shey Bholānāth noi,
Āmi Moira Bholā, Horur chelā
Bāghbājārey roi.
Oh no, I'm not that Bholanath. I'm Bhola the Moira, the pupil of Horu [Thakur]. I stay at Baghbazar.[24]

23. Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets*, 87–88, translations are my own.
24. *Ibid.*, 100.

He then proceeds to describe his occupation: 'I cook all the year round…. Whatever I earn I spend on the *kobi*-contests. Surely, I'm not a poet like Kalidasa. But if I meet a *kobi*, I never back out, however notorious the rascal might be. I don't believe in castes. My only salvation lies in Krishna'.[25]

These contests and competitions were open to *kobis* of all castes and religions, as is evident from the records of the poetic duels between Bhabani Bēnē (of the lower caste of spice dealers) and the Vaishnavite Netai Bairāgī, which were so popular that they gave rise to the popular contemporary Bengali expression '*Nitē-Bhabānīr loṛā'i*' (meaning 'Netai-Bhabani duel') to express any debate in general. Other popular contests were between Bhola Moẏrā and the Christian Antony Phiriṅgī, and between the Brahman Horu Thākur and Nilmoni Patni, who belonged to the lower caste of ferrymen. Women *kobis* also had free access to such contests, and we can find references to Jogyeshwari (a contemporary of Horu Thākur, Ram Basu and Bhola Moẏrā), Sbarṇāmani, Paraśamani, Bidhukāminī and Ādarmanī (the latter four were reported to have moved listeners to tears with their narrative talent).[26] Similarly, in other performing genres of nineteenth century Bengal too we see the strong presence of lower castes. *Khēmṭā*, a jaunty dance form which became popular because of the *jātrā* troupe of Gopal Uṛē (Uṛē, a Bengali colloquial for Odiya), is said to have been brought from Chinsurah by Kēśē Dhōbā (a washerman).[27] *Jātrā* plays, especially '*jātrā*-duets', included and represented characters from lower castes such as manual labourers, *dhōpā-dhōpāni* (washerman and washerwoman), *mēthar-mētharāni* (sweeper and sweeperess), the *bhisti'oẏālā* (who kept the streets clean by watering them) and his wife, the gypsy and his girlfriend, which provided comic relief while at the same time satirising the habits of the upper caste *bābus*. Sumanta Banerjee cites an example in which we can see Kāluā the sweeper asserting his agency:

> *Bābu, nagdi rojgār, sab se guljār*
> *Nokri jhakmāri, bābu parentazār*
> *Kām hamāri, parentazāri (bābu) …*
> *… Bole kaṅhā raete Kalua jhaḍudar!*
>
> *Babu*, I work for ready cash. It's grand! The work is difficult, but the *babu* has to depend on others. The work is mine, the dependence is the *babu*'s…. He keeps asking: Where is Kalua the sweeper?[28]

Similarly, in other *jātrā* troupes, we come across the names of Lokenath Das (a washerman who was known as Lōkō Dhōbā), Boko and his brother Sadhu (two Muslims, who were reported to have staged *jātrās* featuring episodes from the *Ramayana*), and Gobinda Adhikari (who came from a poor Vaishnavite family), among others.[29] Because of the popularity these genres enjoyed in those days, we find

25. *Ibid.*, 100.
26. *Ibid.*, 101.
27. *Ibid.*, 105.
28. *Ibid.*, 105–6.
29. *Ibid.*, 106.

frequent mentions of *kobigān* and *kobir-loṛā'i* in the *Sambād Prabhākar*,[30] which are described as a major source of entertainment among the upper caste elites of nineteenth century Calcutta. Among the many notable composers of *kobigān*, we also find mention of Gōm̐jalā Gu'in (from a caste of cowherds), Kēṣṭā Muci (a cobbler), Raghunath Das (variously described as a blacksmith or a weaver), Bhola Moẏrā (a sweetmeat-maker) and Kukur-Mukhō Gōṛā (Dog-Faced Gōṛā), among others. As their names and surnames suggest, they came from the lower castes or professions pursued by the lower orders. Some among the *kobis*, who came from the upper castes, even took lessons from these weaver and cobbler poets, like the Brahman *kobi* named Horu Thākur (Harekrishna Deerghangi) (1738–1808), who accepted Raghunath Das as his teacher.

If nineteenth century Calcutta marked one crucial phase in the reorganising of literary histories and styles of Bangla literature that was premised upon constituting a canonical body of Bangla language and literature following Sanskritic ideals,[31] then tracing these brief scattered mentions of lower caste poets bears out that the scenes of nineteenth century literary creativity were not limited exclusively to upper caste writers and Sanskritic styles of literary compositions. Apart from the ideological preferences, material differences also played an equally significant role in shaping the limitations of the lower caste poets. Because they belonged to the lower untouchable castes, they were not permitted education and thus were not trained in the erudite scholarship of Sanskritic and Western poetic styles as were many of the celebrated upper caste writers of contemporary Bengal like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Michael Madhusudan Dutta, who expected them to follow these high standards; Bankim Chandra Chatterjee dismissed Iswar Gupta as an orthodox thinker and 'poetaster' unfit for the time, which, according to Chatterjee, was the dawn of modernising literature.[32] Thus, deprived of education, the lower caste poets depended solely on their imagination to compose their works, and in that context too, often their financial burdens prevented them from pursuing literary composition as their professional occupation. As a result, despite having rare talent at composition, the *kobis* from the lower orders had to stick to their original occupations because *kobigān* did not provide them with the financial means to support themselves, and their low caste and lack of education meant that they could not find any other means of livelihood. Kēṣṭā Muci, therefore, continued to earn his living as a cobbler and composed songs in his spare time. Bhola Moẏrā ran a sweetmeat shop on Baghbazar Street in north Calcutta.[33] This is a situation that has not changed

30. Benoy Ghosh, ed., *Samayik Patre Banglar Samajchitro: 1840–1905, Vol. 1* (Calcutta: Bengal Publishers, 1955): 5.
31. For further details, see Amiya P. Sen, *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal 1872–1905: Some Essays in Interpretation* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993); Sudipta Kaviraj, 'The Two Histories of Literary Culture in Bengal' in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003): 503–66; Sumit Sarkar, *Essays of a Lifetime: Reformers, Nationalists, Subalterns* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019).
32. See Giuseppe Flora, 'The Evolution of Positivism in Bengal: Jogendra Chandra Ghosh, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Benoy Kumar Sarkar', *Supplemento n. 75 agli ANNALI, Vol. 53* (Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1993): 17; also see Rosinka Chaudhari, *The Literary Thing: History, Poetry and the Making of a Modern Cultural Sphere* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014): 60–65.
33. Ghosh, *Samayik Patre Banglar Samajchitro*, 92.

drastically even today:[34] while on the one hand, the compositions of Dalit writers face the prejudicial receptive tastes of a casteist society and its hegemonic standards of judging 'literariness', on the other hand, facing economic deprivation, they have no alternative but to continue the menial jobs assigned to Dalits for generations. This continuity of the interweaving of infrastructural concerns and caste apartheid therefore directly affects the ideological and material reception, recognition and circulation of Dalit literature as an aesthetico-political category. This is where I submit that the ideological framework of caste remains intertwined with the infrastructural framework, and Dalit literature stands as a reminder not only of the discursive-material nature of othering, but also has the potential to cut through and transform such exclusionary frameworks. Dalit literature thus becomes political not only by its sociological implications but also by its diversity and imaginative potentials.

On thinking a politics of Dalit literature beyond the colonial frameworks of the secular modern

Apart from highlighting the diversity of Bangla literary traditions, these compositions also help us realise how the colonial Western frameworks of thinking the category of 'secular modern' as a binary opposite to issues of religious faith may not necessarily fit all contexts of evaluating the diversity of Dalit literature. Critics like Debjani Ganguly and Aniket Jaaware have already pointed out many of the contradictions and assumptions characterising the uncritical application of the category of 'secular modern' to the reading of Dalit literature.[35] One such example that Ganguly offers is the diverse meanings of the vernacular term '*jāti*' and how such diversity is often inclusive of both secular and non-secular elements and cannot be homogenised in terms of the secular, colonial anthropological projections of 'caste' as a racial-occupational category.[36] Another problem of the colonial secular projections of caste is the categorisation of a selective Indian past as essentially despotic and framing caste as a product of that corruption, which, by contrast, the exposure to colonial modernity promises to eradicate. Such colonial anthropological projections consistently framed caste as premodern or non-modern and

34. As a recent example, one can take the case of Manoranjan Byapari (*b.* 1950), who, despite being widely recognised for his writing and having received many prestigious literary awards, had to continue working as a rickshaw puller initially, then as a cook in a school, and still later as a librarian. Recently, in recognition of his contribution and as a step to strengthen the literary—and also political—voice of the Dalit writers of Bengal, the state government of West Bengal, under the All India Trinamool Congress, constituted a body titled West Bengal Dalit Sahitya Academy and offered him an honorary position on it. Byapari has since risen to political power as a member of the state legislative assembly after winning the Balagarh assembly election for the assembly constituency of Hooghly district. However, the idea here is not to examine the individual case of Byapari, but to recall the infrastructural problems and discrimination which the Dalits, despite proving their potential, are compelled to face at every level, whether social, economic or political. For further details about Manoranjan Byapari, see Shiv Sahay Singh, 'From a School Kitchen, Bengali Writer Manoranjan Byapari Can Now Work *among His Real Love—Books', The Hindu*, accessed January 9, 2021, https://www.thehindu.com/books/manoranjan-byapari-from-a-school-kitchen-bengali-writer-can-now-work-among-his-real-love-books/article32450113.ece; and Alisha Rahaman Sarkar, 'Manoranjan Byapari: From Rickshaw Puller, Cook and Author to TMC's MLA Bet from Balagarh', *The New Indian Express,* accessed January 9, 2021, https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2021/mar/20/manoranjan-byapari-from-rickshaw-puller-cook-and-author-to-tmcs-mla-bet-from-balagarh-2278793.html, among many others.

35. See Debjani Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity: Notes on a Postcolonial Hermeneutics of Caste*; Aniket Jaaware, *Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

36. Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism*, 3–5.

as the central obstacle in India's modernisation, a view that continued to influence post-colonial Indian sociologists as can be seen, for example, in Srinivas' views on caste. Ganguly attempts to trace the embodied continuity of relying upon such colonial anthropological frameworks of thinking caste and modernity, and to do so, she cites two essays from Srinivas' celebrated book, *Caste in Modern India* (1962), titled 'Castes: Can They Exist in the India of Tomorrow?' and 'The Indian Road to Equality', to explain how the colonial making of the category of 'secular modern' often projected Third World pre-colonial religious practices as despotic, and how the post-colonial secular readings of caste often continue the latent embodiment of such colonial conceptual frameworks.[37] Ganguly harks back to Ranajit Guha's argument concerning how a latent tendency dominates Western liberal political theory/Marxist historiography, which tends to often categorise non-bourgeois life practices and mass mobilisations as 'pre-political', and how turning to the diversity of the narratives of protest (as Guha does in the context of peasant insurgency)[38] against colonialism may not always follow 'the logic of secular-rational calculations inherent in the modern [Western] conception of the political'.[39] In a similar way, pointing out the conceptual contradictions within the homogenisation of caste in terms of 'nation', Jaaware highlights that the Western liberal, secular views of 'nation' may not fit all contexts of thinking caste and its diversity of practices, and how, rather, the vernacular Marathi word '*samaj*' highlights a thinking of multiplicity of clans or communities instead of the colonial applications of 'caste' as an umbrella term for categorising all units and subunits. However, Jaaware also warns that '*samaj*' should not be seen as a nativist, uncritical, messianic turning towards native words to show that native concepts were good: '*samaj*' is not a happy plurality, it is segmentationalist, and it performs its segregation through intimate cuts ('We interact with but will not relate to that other *samaj*. The members of that *samaj* are not from ours').[40] The point I want to highlight is that while one needs to be alert to the embodied conceptual frameworks prompting one's return to pre-colonial and vernacular meanings of caste, and to avoid the tendency to search for uncritical, disembodied, messianic possibilities within such acts of returning, yet one needs to realise the diversity of practices that such pre-colonial and colonial histories offer when read from the perspective of their vernacular diversity, and how such diversity often resists easy categorisation and homogenisation into frameworks of the 'secular modern'.

That is why by returning to the early roots of Bangla literature I attempt here to briefly look back at the diversity of literary cultures and how the act of organising literary canons remains shaped by the discursive-material nature of embodied perspectives. This diversity of literary compositions highlights the coexistence of heterogenous, non-Brahmanical religious practices within a community that drew its survival and

37. This is an issue that Partha Chatterjee and Nicholas Dirks also discuss in an attempt to trace how, through the Nehruvian framework of reading caste through a synthesising approach that attempts to blend Indian spirituality within Western material prosperity but refuses to completely give away caste, it found place within post-colonial democratic politics. For Chatterjee, the early roots of this problem can be traced back to nineteenth century reform approaches and within Bankim Chandra's renewed Hinduism. For further details, see Chatterjee, 'The Nation and Its Outcasts'; Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Sen, *Hindu Revivalism*.
38. For further details, see Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).
39. Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism*, 134.
40. Jaaware, *Practicing Caste*, 171.

resistance through its imaginative powers. As examples, one may turn towards the Sāhēbadhanī, Bālāhadī, Jaganmōhinī, Bā'ul, Matuẏā, Kartābhaja or Namaśūdra communities to realise how the interweaving of everyday social and religious beliefs constituted their poetic capacities and enabled them a vocabulary that is simultaneously about survival as well as resistance. Sekhar Bandopadhyay points out that while the process of coming together, made necessary by a common faith, enabled 'opportunities for social mobilization' and helped them to 'evolve an articulate community consciousness',[41] the Matuẏā songs 'often contained messages for boosting self-confidence and the collective ego of a depressed community'.[42] In one such later attempt to reconnect with the scattered Matuẏā narratives, the poet Kalyani Thākur Charal explicitly associates the collective identity and unity achieved by the Dalits with the Matuẏā sect in her poem, 'They Who Have No King', and quotes from Guruchand Thākur: 'যার দল নেই, তার বল নেই (He who has no group, has no power)'.[43] Generally categorised as 'religious', it is the dissolving power of imagination that enabled them (the Matuẏā faith, the Bālāhadī sect, the Sahajiẏā *kīrtans*, *Kobigāns*, *Khē'ur*, etc.) to transform and draw from religious stories and myths their political strength to resist and survive. Partha Chatterjee talks of how the various mythical stories of Balaram Hadi led the followers of different untouchable castes to take him as their mythological god and not only reject Brahmanical superiority but even claim an equal caste position with the Brahmans. Here's one such story that Partha Chatterjee uses from Akshaykumar Dutta's *Bhāratabarṣīẏa Upāsaka Sampradāẏa* (*The Religious Sects of India*):

> Balaram had gone to bathe in the river, when he saw some Brahmins offering tarpan to their ancestors. Imitating their actions, he too began to throw water on the river-bank. One of the Brahmins asked him, 'Balai, what do you think you are doing?' Balaram answered, 'I am watering my field of spinach'. The Brahmin asked, 'Your field of spinach? Here?' Balaram replied, 'Well, your ancestors aren't here either. If you think that the water you pick up and throw back into the river reaches your ancestors, then why shouldn't the water I throw on the river-bank reach my fields?'[44]

Similarly, there are also many stories associated with the birth of Balaram Hadi,[45] which have inspired his followers for many generations and enabled them to draw the strength and courage to organise their community; these stories therefore function to tie the community together. Citing S. Chakrabarti's *Bālāhadī Sampradāẏa*, Sekhar Bandopadhyay too talks of the simultaneous unifying (the community together) and dissolving (the caste hierarchies) potential of such imaginary stories through which the Dalits continued to draw their vocabulary of survival and resistance:

> *Taba jale pak anna*
> *Bhed nai chhatris varna*
> *E sansare aar ke pare*
> *Hadiram bhinna.*
> (Rice is cooked in your water, which makes no distinction between the thirty-six castes. Who can do it except Hadiram?)[46]

41. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture*, 12.
42. *Ibid.*, 96.
43. Sipra Mukherjee, 'Creating Their Own Gods: Literature from the Margins of Bengal', in *Dalit Literatures in India*, ed. Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak (London: Routledge, 2018): 138–52; 142–43.
44. Chatterjee, 'The Nation and Its Outcasts', 189.
45. *Ibid.*, 190.
46. Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Culture*, 95.

Such transforming capacities of imagination therefore draw their material from everyday forms of dwelling and resistance, as, for example, we see in the narrator of Jatin Bala's short story, 'On Firm Ground'; Bala transforms the older tale of Balaram Hadi into an inspirational one for all those who have been oppressed because they belong to a low caste. The narratives associated with such diverse non-Brahmanical religious beliefs thus offered scope for the imaginative suspension of caste hierarchies (however short-lived they may have been) and the coming together of the community in solidarity. That is why Ganguly emphasises that Dalit mythographies and imaginative writings (such as short stories and poetry) offer a way of realising how the lived experiences, heterogenous religious beliefs and practices, diversity of human(e) relationships, and struggle against oppression can permeate each other without reducing the volatility of relations and their meaning-making, and can offer fluid explorations of the much more complex relationship between the past and the present configurations of caste:

> Narratives reveal the multiple nodes that link the political as a worldly response to the vicissitudes of history. In their dilations and diversity and in their fragmented non-authoritativeness, narratives herald the political as a worldly orientation that heeds no absolutes in terms of the instrumentalities of programmes, shibboleths or mass movements.[47]

Sipra Mukherjee makes the point that in such situations the religious and secular interweave into each other to assert the alternative, multiple forms of dwelling that refuse to be reduced within any singular dominant framework. Mukherjee reminds us of Ranajit Guha's words on the Santal rebellion:

> Religiosity was, by all accounts, central to the hool. The notion of power which inspired … [was] explicitly religious in character …. It is not possible to speak of insurgency in this case except as religious consciousness.[48]

It is this multiplicity within a community and its heterogeneous forms of dwelling and practices that often gets reduced within the making of a singular defining category of the 'national'; tracing the multifarious genealogies of Bangla Dalit literatures (among other vernacular Dalit literatures), therefore, not only helps in realising the linguistic-cultural diversity of Dalit literatures but also in identifying the constitutive cuts through which canonical literary cultures get constituted.

These narratives, in their entwining of secular and religious concerns of caste, while being derived from the diversity of lived experiences, also highlight how genealogies of Dalit literature don't remain constituted only of autobiographical narratives but have always involved imaginative engagement with one's dwelling within a (caste-based) society. In this context, while autobiographies form one important element of such imaginative engagement, it does not mean that the histories of Dalit literature lacked non-autobiographical narratives. While these compositions and narratives from nineteenth century Bengal, even though ignored by the upper caste literary tastes of contemporary society, can be seen as a symptomatic reminder of the always coexisting strain of lower caste non-Brahmanical imaginative writings, similar coexistence can be identified within other vernacular literary cultures too. As Sipra

47. Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism*, 129.
48. Mukherjee, 'Creating Their Own Gods', 142–44.

Mukherjee briefly points out, Dalit literatures have often been subjected to various objections (even prejudices), which are obviously symptomatic of the continuity of the cut influencing the lack of acceptance of Dalit literatures as 'mainstream' or 'canonical' literature. In fact, the aesthetics of Dalit literature has often been criticised or questioned for being self-pitying, monotonous, overtly ideological, narrow and propagandistic; as infused more with passion than with concern for literary effect; and as autobiographical testimonies rather than works of art, personal chronicles rather than artistically conceived texts, lived experience rather than poetic experimentation, all of which are more suited to the study of anthropology than that of literature.[49] Retuning into these scattered compositions and narratives of nineteenth century Bengal, we see not only the inadequacy of such complaints but also realise their imaginative potentials that, while generating its subject matter from everyday lived experiences, also experimented and formed from their everyday language a vocabulary of protest and solidarity. These compositions thus highlight not a strain of self-pitying narrative but the relational agency of a community that draws its strength from its diverse experiences. This is where, I submit, lies the suspending potentials of Dalit literatures that, because of being drawn from everyday experiences, dissolves boundaries and enables one to connect irrespective of one's position, unlike a specialised, esoteric, scholarly knowledge that is 'accessible' only to the selectively 'trained' (like those who were 'selected' to be the initiators in the Brahmanical Vedic tradition, as, for example, in the extract from the *Mīmāṃsakas* used in Jaaware's essay). That is why I emphasise how tracing such heterogeneity within any attempt to assemble a genealogy of Dalit literary histories offers the realisation of the democratic and imaginative/suspending function of literature that has the potential to connect with everyone. That is also why, for the Dalit literary critic A.C. Lal, the word 'dalit' is a beautiful word because it transcends narrow national and sectarian frontiers and embraces the sufferings, frustrations and expectations of the entire cosmos, and for the famous Dalit writer and activist Om Prakash Valmiki, it represents an irreducible spirit of inclusivity, while for the Dalit literary critic and activist Professor Savyasaachi, 'a prostitute is as much a Dalit as is the spouse of an upper caste patriarch who is ill-treated, as are the victims of ethnocide and communalism irrespective of whether they are Hindus, Christians, Muslims or Sikhs'.[50] The inclusivity of the heterogeneous religious sects in early Bengal, in their imaginative oral compositions and diversity of narratives, weave into the diversity of the lower caste identities and cultures of that time, and, therefore, if one turns towards those sects, one may realise the enmeshed relationship between the religious and political concerns of caste. Take, for example, these lines from a song of the Sahebdhani sect:

> Allah Muhammad Radha Krishna
> merge into the same body and soul …
> My father is Allah, and my mother is Allahdini,
> What do I make of this puzzle?[51]

49. *Ibid.*, 148.
50. *Ibid.*, 149.
51. *Ibid.*, 149.

Such stories and the volatility of receptions and identifications, as well as their multiple interpretative points and suspending potentials, remind us repeatedly about the irreducibility of such multiple forms of dwelling within a community, and thereby function as a continuous reminder of the constitutive cuts to which acts of 'organizing' literary histories remain exposed.

Conclusion

By conducting this brief reading of the diverse lower caste compositions and narratives of nineteenth century Bengal, I have tried to offer a symptomatic analysis of the irreducible plurality of Dalit literary traditions in their different vernacular literary registers. To use Ganguly's words, '… narratives of caste are constituted of a heteroglossic language-weave invoking disparate temporalities that co-exist'.[52] Tracing the diversity of the vernacular non-Brahmanical literary histories as they coexist and overlap with and encounter hegemonic Brahmanical frameworks offers a symptomatic reminder of such layered, multiple forms of dwelling within modernity where the domains of the religious and secular may not always be easily separable. The diversity of the Bangla Dalit literary traditions offers a similar symptomatic reminder of the otherwise ignored diversity of vernacular literary traditions. Besides, it also points to why reassembling genealogies of Dalit literary traditions, if one has to assert the richness and diversity of its roots, from the diverse linguistic-cultural variety of India acquires an ethico-political democratic force. Dalit literature has for a long time been seen in terms of its sociological importance; however, notwithstanding its sociological significance, the task remains also to recognise, cultivate and extend its aesthetic function, which has always been within its inclusive spirit and suspending potentials that draws its vocabulary from the dispersed forms of the everyday social. Dalit literature is essentially creative, and therefore, for a community forced to suffer caste apartheid for generations, the poetics of Dalit literature is also a poetics of rage, rage at the caste system, and a dream of creating new worlds without caste discrimination. Dilip Chitre says:

> Can we aestheticize dehumanization? Is there an art-form that corresponds with genocide? What sort of nursery rhymes can be written about child-labourers so that upper-class children will be aware of their poorer contemporaries? Or should our poetry seek a divorce from this chaotic republic that has somehow not collapsed? … Fifty years of freedom have only pushed poetry against a wall. So let poetry deal with what besieges it, what starves its language of democratic inputs. Inputs from dying dialects, imperilled oral traditions, voices of minorities … .[53]

As long as the dream of 'equality' remains unfulfilled, and the 'birth-mark' is repeatedly used to deny all potentials of the 'doing-mark', rage will continue to form the creative impulse and driving force in imagining other worlds and (re)claim it.[54]

52. Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism*, 129–30.
53. Dilip Chitre, 'Key-Note Address: A Home for Every Voice', in *Indian Poetry: Modernism and After*, ed. K. Satchidanandan (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2001): 1–14; 3.
54. For further details, see Sharankumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*, trans. Alok Mukherjee (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2004); Nagaraj, *Flaming Feet*; K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, ed., *The Exercise to Freedom: An Introduction to Dalit Writing* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2013).

However, Dalit literature is not about rage only, and that is an essential point that we need to keep in mind if we are to remake Dalit literatures in its newer possibilities for newer possible worlds. It is also about inclusivity and diversity, and that is where the immense possibilities and potentials of different cultural histories within different Dalit communities also need to be recognised. It is towards this task, I submit, among many other possibilities, that the vernacular dimensions of Dalit literary cultures need to be recognised, explored and extended, and (re)organising the literary histories of Bangla Dalit literature awaits the unearthing of that immense potential.

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