The Appeal

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Editor's Preface

Deepra Dandekar
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It gives me great pleasure to present our readers with the December 2022 issue of *Nidān: International Journal for Indian Studies*. As usual, we bring you a rich array of original academic contributions, reviews and presentations that I am sure, will make for enjoyable reading and excellent reference material. Before proceeding to the contributions, there are one or two questions I would like to answer—questions that often come up in conversations about Nidān. What is the purpose of our 'book presentation' section? Why would some of our reviewers want to additionally interview authors, when other journals do not do the same? The answer is two-fold. The first part of the explanation is linked to the time-frame in which I inherited the editorship of Nidan in 2021. While I had earlier worked with Professor P. Pratap Kumar; 2020 was already the first year of the COVID pandemic. It was a time when scholars were apprehensive about physical contact—a time when all research endeavours languished: fieldwork, library and archival visits. This standstill continued in 2021, and has lingered on in 2022, at least in pockets, as scholars struggle to recalibrate research goals while keeping in mind their changed situations. Even though COVID has somewhat abated, ambivalence about research spending and traveling has become a prolonged concern due to allied reasons: an energy crises accompanied by a looming recession in 2023, as we continue to struggle with gaining consensus on what constitutes 'moderation' in our times: generosity and participation, with a premium on self-preservation combined with ecological protection.

All this time, research writing and publications have continued unabated albeit with diminished fanfare. Scholars responded to lockdowns by making online presentations—evident, for example, in the way the American Academy of Religion conducted its panels on 'new books' in the last two years. There were myriad virtual discussions, and the virtual mode became our new reality—researchers adapted to it well and fast. Nidān's innovative 'book presentation' section is cued, precisely to this online atmosphere where podcasts about monographs make for easier distribution and sharing of research. Our 'book presentations' are exactly like smaller written versions of podcasts, used for academic outreach to an even larger global public. The interview section of our reviews fosters a similar aim. Instead of making critical comments, reviewers can now ask authors to clarify their arguments. These interviews appended to reviews, opens up new avenues for authors to explain any perceived lacunae or elucidate arguments that might have been inadvertently obfuscated. It is helpful for student readers too. We have had reasonable success with our 'review + interviews' in the last two years with many authors showing an enthusiasm to engage with questions. Our interview section is, thus, again, exactly like podcasts, cued into the general environment of the virtual mode that despite the new demand placed on 'presence', remains popular among readers. The second 'fold' of the reason behind doing 'book presentations' and 'review + interviews' is more easily explained: journals, in my humble opinion, are more than just publications—they reflect, reformulate, and consolidate research communities where physical and social distances between scholars and scholarship can be reduced, if not entirely transcended, and where academic conversations can be facilitated.

For this December 2022 issue, Nidān remains indebted to its contributors, authors, peer-evaluators, reviewers and book presenters who have engaged closely with the editorial process, and have cooperated with my demands of increasingly aiming their writings towards student readers from resource-poor backgrounds. Though there has been a slight reshuffle, I thank the Nidān team for making this December 2022 issue a great success. With every ending comes a new beginning, and though we feel sad that our folklore guest-editor Lopamudra Maitra-Bajpai decided to leave Nidān before the December 2022 issue, we bid her a fond farewell and wish her a wonderful future full of exciting new endeavours. On the other hand, we have been joined by Westin Harris from the University of California (Davis), who will henceforth take care of our book reviews. We welcome him to the Nidān team and definitely expect some academic fireworks from him in future! Professor P. Pratap Kumar has remained a guiding beacon—a continuing source of support that provides the Nidān team with a strong sense of continuity. If Nidān were to be imagined as a river into which all of us—new tributaries flow, then it is Professor P. Pratap Kumar who reminds us of our roots, our values, and the history of our journey so far that can, going forward, guide the journal's mission statement.

I would briefly mention some errors in Nidān's July 2022 issue that have come to light. There has been a typographical error in the heading of Professor Kusumita P. Pedersen's review of Enrico Belramini's *Passage to India* (p. 80), where Beltramini is misspelled as Beltrami. The second issue that has been brought to my notice by a senior colleague is an unnecessarily harsh and personal book review. Though Nidān declares that all its articles reflect the views of their authors, I see it in the general interest of my goal of building an academic community through Nidān to take a pause here. Nidān is more than a random conglomerate of published pieces, especially as we work with special issues and intertwined intellectual focus groups. Moreover, my aim of creating a community through Nidān includes the task of caring and controlling all that passes through my editorial hands. While I reiterate that Nidān is non-partisan, I would also gently remind future authors that negative reviews are more common than we realize. Our 'review + interview' mode is exactly aimed at mitigating an eventuality of unprecedented criticism that now allows reviewers to ask authors questions. There is also the additional possibility of review responses after the review is published. That said, unwarranted personal attacks cannot be entertained either since they are polemical—they can neither be meaningfully engaged with, nor constructively answered; they hurt scholars and scholarships and besides, undermine the journal's integrity and quality. Promoting and publishing personal attacks is outside the purview of my role as Nidān's editor even as I remain welcoming of a critical engagement with my editing and management of the journal and its academic content. Nidān has no personal agenda of vendetta, nepotism, or any intention to cause harm.

Coming to Nidān's encouragement of critical studies as part of our academic content, three out of five book reviews in this December issue (by Runa Chakraborty Paunksnis, Evgeniia Muzychenko, and myself) discuss caste and race-critical, feminist concerns. While Chakraborty-Paunksnis explores V. Geetha's brilliant exposition on the vicissitudes of Ambedkarite thought in terms of its engagement with Marxist theory, Muzychenko explores Sonja Thomas's seminal book on Syrian Christians and their upper caste positioning, analysed from a feminist perspective. My review of Joel Lee's book explores how Dalits constitute a deceptive part of postcolonial India's claim of being a Hindu majority society—a subject hitherto inadequately investigated. While Anantanand Rambachan's review is an excellent analysis of Kusumita P. Pedersen's book on Sri Chinmoy's philosophy, Erik

Ranstrom provides a perceptive and brilliant discussion of Beltramini's presentation of Panikkar's Christian theology. It must be noted that Ranstrom has taken particular care to include student readership, unfamiliar with the subject of Catholic theology and its history in his review. The 'book presentations' for this time are equally interesting and exceptionally insightful with Felicity Jensz's brilliant analysis of missionary education policies that cover almost a century after the Charter Act of 1830. James Taneti's overview of the history of Telugu Christians in the colonial and postcolonial period with special reference to caste is also greatly insightful. We have a special presentation this time on women characters in Satyajit Ray's films that is analysed from a gender perspective.

There are five excellent research articles in the Nidān December 2022 issue. The very first article by Sanghamitra Rai Verman (*Tribal Textiles of Northeast India*) provides a comprehensive overview of the weaving patterns and styles encountered in Northeast India that are associated with the traditions of Tribal masculine honour. Verman's description of textiles and weaving traditions, functions almost as a metaphor of what is a larger discussion about social relations in the Northeast, reflected in the indigenous community's craft preservation. The second article by Mrinal Pande (*Generational Practices of Diaspora*) discusses the intergenerational popularity of an everyday and performed Hinduism that evolves around Morari Bapu's *Ramkatha* discourse, transforming him into a religious leader with global outreach among Gujarati expatriates. Camellia Biswas's article (*Reimaging Human-Nature Interactions and Reclaiming Marginal Identity*) presents us with the beautiful and mysterious world of the Sundarbans that is analysed from an insider's perspective, further consisting of meticulous descriptions of subaltern rituals and deities. Shyma P.'s article (*Of Hunting and the Hunted*) carries a similar charge describing how regional folklore and rituals from the Malabar become reproduced as part of an unmarked *savarna* discourse that perpetuates pejorative biases about 'backwardness'. Praggnaparamita Biswas's article (*Translating the Religiosity and Gender Politics of Manasa Myth*) is all about subversiveness, where the goddess Manasa's ritual story becomes a frame for articulating romantic relationships and the human rights concerns of the LQBTQ community in West Bengal, expressed through theatrical narratives. There is a tremendous amount to be learned from the articles, book reviews, interviews, and presentations contained in Nidān's December issue. While Pande and Biswas's articles analyse performance, Camellia Biswas's and Shyma P.'s articles speak to each other in a united exploration of the production and reproduction of subalternity for vulnerable communities and ecozones. This highlight on the vulnerability of region and community, reflected in the preservation of handicrafts, is perfectly summarized by Verman.

I hope that you, our readers will enjoy the articles, reviews, interviews, and presentations contained in our Nidān December 2022 issue, and I take the opportunity of wishing you all a wonderful happy new year 2023. Nidān has much to share in terms of new developments along with a brand-new focus on the theme of space and history in 2023. We will transition from our long association with Nidān's current publisher (Sabinet, South Africa) to Heidelberg University's publication division in 2023: Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing (HASP). While Nidān is indeed sad about leaving Sabinet, we look forward to an exciting future and new beginning with HASP.

Tribal Textiles of Northeast India: A Survey of Folk and Natural Elements

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Textile occupies a prominent place in the life of human beings from the beginning of civilization. Topographical variations, mineral resources, water, flora, and fauna are all contributory factors to the emergence of a distinct textile heritage of India. Traditional Indian textiles are deeply rooted in the rural background, natural elements, and folk culture. The present paper would try to delve into the study of indigenous tribal textiles of Northeast India which are deeply influenced by natural elements and soaked with folk flavours. The topographical conditions of India's north-eastern states are diverse, ranging from the plains of Tripura to the upland flats of the Imphal valley in Manipur, to the predominantly hilly and mountainous regions of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh. Traditional textiles, being essentially culture-specific have been greatly influenced by ecology and language that spill across political boundaries. While patterns and motifs can enjoy transpositions across communities, these are modified to fit into the local repertoire and enjoy symbolic attributes in terms of both conferment of rank and performance of rites of passage. Every fabric thus woven is bestowed with the potency of a certain symbolic hue and design scheme bereft of which it is reduced to the mere pattern. The present paper delves deeply into a description and analysis of tribal textiles from Northeast India and tries to locate the rationale behind using particular folk patterns, motifs, and hues on them that essentially uphold and represent their unique cultural traditions. The paper tries to decipher the linkages between tribal weaves and the ecological biodiversity of the region. It also traces the ecological consciousness of the tribes of the Northeast and their relationship with nature in an organic manner. The paper also tries to locate the means of economic empowerment of the women weavers through weaving of tribal textiles. It also tries to look into various approaches used by the contemporary weavers to keep the relevance of tribal weaves in the wave of modernisation.

Northeast, Textiles, Weaving, Tribals, Rituals

Introduction

The manipulation of threads through a variety of techniques results in the production of fabrics. Weaving has been an important occupation of human beings since the beginning of civilization. Depending on the environmental condition man has been concerned with the making of utilitarian fabrics for a long time and also came to realize that it offers a good medium of expression of his aesthetic genius. This is the reason why the history of textiles reveals a close co-relation between cultural progress and the development of mankind itself. India has been a storehouse of the immense variety of traditional textiles which are deeply rooted in folk and natural elements. The Northeast states of India are no exception to this. It is a unique land fondly called the Land of Seven Sisters representing seven unique states known for their creativity, artistic genres, and culture. Textile in this land is unique in respect of technology, style and designing are concerned. Northeast Indian states produce a great variety of textiles and ornamental accessories which are unique in their representations. The present research paper is an attempt to study indigenous tribal textiles of Northeast Indian states. The intricacies and logical underpinning of the thematic content of these predominantly folk and tribal textiles of the Northeast states of Nagaland, Meghalaya,

Manipur, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, and Tripura will be our primary focus of study. But why the textiles of Northeast India are important for our discussion? For the tribal people of Northeast India, their indigenous textiles are an integral part of their belief system and their ideologies, and it is inalienably linked with their specific cultural heritage. The myriad textiles produced by them using indigenous techniques and naturally procured raw materials are also synonymous with the ecological biodiversity of their habitat. Thus, a discussion on tribal textiles is significant and relevant to show how the tribes of north-eastern states continue to sustain their organic and natural lifestyle despite continuous and immense pressure of globalization.

Cultural and Historical Background: Beliefs associated with Textiles

The different geographical terrains of India's Northeast are diverse, ranging from the plains of Tripura to the upland flats of the Imphal Valley in Manipur, to the hilly mountainous region of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh. Textiles in such communities have symbolic value, and thus patterns and ornamentations are different according to the occasions on which they are worn. While patterns and motifs can enjoy transposition across communities, these are modified to fit the local repertoire and enjoy symbolic attributes in terms of both conferment of rank and performance of rites of passage (Basu et. al. 2004: 19). Different kinds of textiles are customized as per occasion and requirements. Thus, the demand for indigenous textiles that are used during tribal rites and rituals also ensures sustainable earnings for the tribals of northeast India to a certain extent. And in present situation, weaving has become second important means of occupation after agriculture. Almost all tribal families especially women are engaged in weaving not only for the family consumption but to earn a livelihood and to help to run family expenses and in turn move towards economic self-sustenance.

The tribes of Meghalaya mainly consist of the *Khasi* and *Garo*, while in Nagaland the principal tribes are *Ao, Angami, Lotha, Sema*, *Konyak,* and *Nagas*. Among the tribes of Mizoram the *Mizo* or *Lushai*, *Kuki*, *Hmar* are prominent, while *Meitei* and *Tangkhul* are important tribe of Manipur who primarily dwells in Imphal valley. In Arunachal Pradesh, the picture is almost similar where different groups of tribal population are found. They are *Monpa, Aka, Sherdukpen, Siang, Nishi, Apatani, Galong, Khamti, Singhpo, Mishmi, Wancho, Nocte,* etc. The *Monpa, Sherdukpen, Khamti,* and *Singhpo* are Buddhist while the *Nocte* follow *Vaishnavism*. Similarly, Tripura is the habitat of many tribes like *Kuki, Chakma, Riang* along with the *Tripuri*. The language of the tribal people of Northeast India is derived from the Austroasiatic group of languages, which are mainly comprised of the *Munda* and *Mon-Khmer* subcategories (Basu et al. 2004: 4). The *Bodo*, *Naga*, and *Kuki-Chin* tribes mainly speak a language that belongs to the Tibetan-Burmese group of languages, linked in turn with the *Munda* category. The *Khasis* and *Konyak Nagas* on the other hand are more closely associated with the language of *Mon-Khmer* group (Dalton 1973: 36).

The textiles of Northeast tribes are certainly related to their belief system. It is generally believed by them that the clothes they wear, and the accessories they use, carry a deep symbolic meaning. An *Ao* Naga would only wear cloth that is woven by his wife. They practice various rituals to ward off bad luck, like brushing a newly bought item five times by a bunch of nettle leaves in order to avoid bad luck. This does not end here as many tribes also pull out a thread from a newly woven cloth before selling it, or believe in washing ornaments before

their use. Weaving is integral to their lives. *Mishmis* of Arunachal Pradesh believes that the absence of weaving is a punishment not only in this life but in the afterlife as well. The Manipuri *Meities* believe weaving entails a cosmic connection. Every tribe has its own rituals and beliefs associated with weaving. Among the *Ao Naga*, women are forbidden from weaving during the agricultural season (probably because their labour is required in agricultural activities during that time) whereas they are permitted to spin the yarn which will be used at a later time. In Arunachal Pradesh, the *Adi* tribe depicts symbolic potency through the coloured hues which they use on their woven clothes, and it is known as *pore*. Clothes woven with dog and goat hair dyed with red are also considered symbolic to a great extent (Ganguly 1986: 209). It not only gives a plumed relief to the textiles but is also symbolic of the act that annihilates enemies. It seems therefore that textiles are a canvas that brings painting of tribal heroism to prominence (Zothanpari 1986: 85). Tattoo patterns are also popularly copied on textiles (Varadarajan 2010: 28). Here it is interesting to note that tattoos signified act of valour among the tribes of Northeast mainly the *Nagas*. Traditionally tattoos were inked on the face, neck, and torso of the tribal chiefs who were honoured for their (brave) head hunting acts. Tattoo replaces ornaments and is considered priced possession of a women too. Tattooed women are sought after as they can be identified by her husband even after death (Sinalei Khayi, email conversation: October 8, 2022).

Head Hunting Ritual and its Reflections on Tribal Textiles

Many *Naga* tribes along with some *Mizo* and *Garo* tribes used to practice head hunting. Head hunting was a tribal tradition involving inter-clan warfare, culminating in taking the life of the enemy by chopping off his head and bringing it to the victorious tribe. The reason underlying the practice of 'head hunting' is probably to bring the soul force of a community back with the help of an enemy's head, and subsequently that would add to the fertility and prosperity of the village. Such warriors were greatly honoured by society (Dalton 1973: 31). It was further believed that the *Naga* men would have difficulty in getting bride if he did not have a single head to his credit! Even women and children were not spared in head hunting rituals. Though women couldn't go to head hunting, they could be hunted. Surprisingly, Women's heads were considered a prized trophy as women were given maximum protection in a society. Taking a woman's head therefore meant penetrating deep into the adversary's domain. In fact, the heads of women and children were highly prized and were held in greater estimation because in order to get them, the warrior had to enter the interior of an enemy village which was well guarded. The man who brought back the head of a woman or child belonging to a hostile village was deemed to have done a very heroic deed, because in such times the women never ventured far from the villages, unless protected by armed men and thus it proved that the brave man had penetrated the enemy's own stronghold. Other reason for eyeing on women prey, probably was to reduce the enemy population. Thus, valour and merit earned through head hunting was recognized by hosting another popular tribal ritual i.e., 'feasts of merit'. Feasts of merit was performed for the welfare of the entire village. Deeds of valour and material wealth were considered to invite overt forms of social recognition. There were various rites associated with this ritual, in which the donor was accorded honour that was said to hold steadfast in life and death. And as a mark of distinction for performing such acts there was embellishment of their dwelling, honorific dresses, and adornment (Alemchiba 1968: 90).

Textiles here act as a marker of social rank and almost all tribal practices especially head hunting are reflected in their apparels till today. Although head hunting stopped but it continued to get reflected in the tribal textiles. A head hunter was a hero of the tribe and was entitled to wear certain special headgears known as *kui guilop.* Among the *Tankhul Nagas* of Manipur the head hunter used to wear a coveted shawl known as *raivat Kachon* shawl. *Raivat Kachon* shawl was also an indispensable warrior's dress as he goes to war, he wears it crisscross across the chest. If he gets the victims head, he used to wrap it in this shawl and came back in great triumph. But in case he was the victim himself his mortal remains was to be covered with this shawl. This was how respect was shown even after the death by the *Nagas* (Sinalei Khayi, email conversation: October 8, 2022).

Image 1.1: Raivat kachon shawl of the Tankhul Nagas of Manipur. These are mostly decorated with zoomorphic, faunal, geometric designs. The headhunters used to wear this much-coveted shawl after hosting the three Feasts of Merit ceremonies for villagers (Displayed in the Textiles Gallery of the National Crafts Museum and Hastkala Academy, New Delhi). Image Courtesy: Author.

Head hunting became banned practice with the establishment of the British colonial rule. Although head hunting forays were reportedly made in eastern Nagaland even till the 1970s. Although tattooing continued even after head hunting was banned, as the tribes conducted mock head-hunting sessions. But it stopped when the British started arresting anyone who was freshly inked. Experts say Christian missionaries told the people tattooing was a 'sin' as they were defacing the image in which God had created them (Das 2022). Although the origin of the practice of head hunting is unclear (Tuisem Ngakang, email conversation: October 4, 2022). Tuisem Ngakang, who teaches History at Hindu College, University of Delhi says 'while trying to understand the practice of head hunting, we should start with the assumption that no matter how barbaric a people might be, they will not kill their fellow humans without a reason. Warring villages would first try to resolve differences through negotiation. Head hunting was probably the last resort and the deeply devout *Nagas* believed that God would intervene on behalf of the aggrieved party.' He further opines that the practice of head hunting was regulated by strict customary law, the violation of which by a village was punished by the combined armed forces of the neighbouring villages. Most of the *Naga* tribes considered success in head hunting as a sign of having transitioned from adolescence to

maturity. Among the *Tangkhul Nagas* there was a certain kind of shawl which could only be worn by a person who had brought home the heads of his enemies. Among the *Ao Naga* also certain kind of insignia was permitted only to those who had proven their head-hunting prowess. Head hunting should be studied carefully since one wrong interpretation may distort our history says Dr. Sinalei Khayi who teaches History at Pettigrew College, *Ukhrul*, Manipur. She says 'It was not a game randomly carried out to show off ones' pride and skill but was carried out for certain reasons and there were rules to follow; it is not a game as reduced by the orientalists.

Image 1.2 (above): Naga shoulder cloth worn by the male head. The cowries stitched in a circle denote that the wearer is a head-hunter and has offered the Feasts of Merits. The colour read symbolizes blood and power. Cotton, dyed and woven on a loin look (Displayed in the Textiles Gallery of the National Crafts Museum and Hastkala Academy, New Delhi). Image Courtesy: Author

Image 1.3 (left): Hand-painted Ao shawl worn only by head-hunters. The depiction of bulls and hens indicates that their sacrifices were performed during the Feasts of Merits Ceremony. Image Courtesy: Author (personal collection).

Designs, Patterns, Raw Materials, Dyes and Pigments

Woven pieces are generally decorated with geometrical motifs on the edges, comprising mainly of stripes, and zigzag lines (Alemchiba 1968: 87-93). *Mizos* of Mizoram and *Mishmis* of Arunachal Pradesh are greatly inspired by the design patterns of Myanmar (Elwin 1959: 50, 126). Cotton is still widely used in weaving, and is mostly traded in the region by the *Garos, Lhota, Rengma,* and *Ao* Nagas (Dalton 1973: 65). The use of silk is very limited and only used in the garments from Meghalaya and Manipur, and that too not on a major scale. Although silk weaving in India is historically associated with the *Bodos* of Assam. *Bodos* may have provided a fillip to the weaving of wild silk in Northeast India (Varadharajan 1988: 566). *Muga* silk *Mekhlas* (a two-piece dress which almost looks like sarees) are enormously popular among the women of all ages across India. In the absence of wool, bast fibre are extensively used by tribals for making blankets. Bast fibre are also used in making winter quilts, like the Naga *Kethrora*, the Manipuri *lashing phee,* and the Mizo *puan puite*. In Arunachal Pradesh a special type of fibre known as *Tasha* is obtained by retting certain type of forest plants. Plant fibre thus obtained is woven on the *tatu* or a type of back-strap loom (Dutta and Duarah 1990: 61-64) to make blankets and quilts. A simple loin loom or a foot-braced loom is used throughout the region. Since weavers traditionally abstained from using metals in earlier

times, even finished products were cut by a bamboo knife, and not with scissors. The borders that had a narrow width were also sewn by bamboo needles. It is significant to know that Manipuri *lashing phee* has off late made its global presence. It has become quite a name in modern fashion because of its unique look and utility. *Lashing phee* is a cotton quilt which is made by weaving cotton with bright coloured threads. Threads are also coloured by using natural dyes. Cotton is used because wool is not found in this region, and it is widely used in Manipur during winter.

We find abundant use of natural fibres in the textile manufacturing. In the *Phek* district of Nagaland weaving is carried out by extracting fibre from a certain kind of nettle plant called the *thevora rahe* (Stiern and van Ham 2003: 148). *Bakha*, a kind of male wristband which is worn popularly by the men of *Chekhesang* tribes of Nagaland is woven from the fibre of a shiny grass known as *lotu*. *Bakha* is quite symbolic as it is the mark of the prestige of possessing quite a few numbers of women (Varadarajan 2010: 25). In Nagaland, the leaves of wild date palms are twisted and knotted together, used to make the outer garments known as *Kunhi* to protect its wearers from the Sun and rain. In Meghalaya, *Garos* use bark cloth, while *Khasis* use pineapple fibre to make bags (Chatterjee 1991: 68). Like natural fibres, colours and dyes are also prepared from natural sources. Yellow is procured from pounding the flowers and roots of a local tree known as *athuo*. Sometimes raw yarns are soaked in this pounded solution to colour them yellow (Mohanty et al. 1987: 162). Pigmentation used in clothes

Image 1.4: Lashing phee from Manipur. Quilt made by weaving cotton in bright coloured threads. Can be worn from both obverse and reverse sides. Image Courtesy: Author (personal collection).

is also remarkably significant. *Ao Nagas* procures their textile pigment from an indigenous tree (*tangko*), and then mix it with rice beer and ash from the leaves of the same tree which is then applied by *Naga* men to the woven cloth using a pointed bamboo stick (Mohanty et al.1987: 162). The basic colours used in fabric weaves include blue, black and red. While blue is derived from indigo (*Strobilanthes cusia*), red is procured traditionally from the roots of *Rubia Sikkimensis* plant (Mohanty et. al.1987:158-62). Goat hair is tied together to form a plume, which is then utilized to decorate accessories, mainly in headgear and in ritual clothing.

There are a varieties of cultural taboos associated with the dyeing of cloth in blue, red, yellow, etc. and the tribes of Northeast are no exception. *Naga* women during their reproductive years are refrained from dyeing their clothes in blue (Tandon 2006: 86-92), they are additionally forbidden to manufacture red-dyed clothes during their youthful years. Thus, both

blue and red are only prepared by elderly women. Yellow is also used, but again, there are certain taboos associated with the colour yellow. Although, biases against the use of certain colours cannot be directly connected transculturally, but nevertheless it is interesting to note that there are similar injunctions regarding the use of colours like blue in early India. Colour and its symbolic attributes have evolved over time and by the 19th century, blue is further associated with the forced cultivation of indigo and became symbolic of the British colonial oppression.

Weaving Techniques, Looms and Costumes

Image 1.5 (right): Simple Naga back strap Loom (Displayed in the Textiles Gallery of the National Crafts Museum and Hastkala   Academy, New Delhi. Image Courtesy: Author.

Image1.6 (left): Rhikho, a white shawl-like garment worn by Naga Men. It is embellished with four black-coloured bands. Only those men who have not yet been able to offer a great feast or have not been able to kill or defeat any big enemy will wear this costume (Displayed in the Textiles Gallery of the National Crafts Museum and Hastkala Academy, New Delhi. Image Courtesy: Author.

Weaving is an integral part of tribal people of Northeast. In almost all the houses there are looms. Weaving is carried out by both men and women in which women are traditionally associated with ancillary activities involving the preparation of cotton, preparing the thread ready for weaving, etc. Women separate the seed by rolling the cotton on a stone base with a stick. Simple tools are used with great care to manipulate the threads to create the most intricate designs. Although some new techniques and mechanisms are increasingly prevalent nowadays, it only goes into making the process of weaving more user-friendly. *Nakrong*, an indigenous ginning machine (the mechanism of separating the cotton fibres from seeds) adopted from the plains of Manipur has become increasingly popular. Carding (the process involves separating individual cotton fibres, disentanglement, removal of impurities and to make fibres fit for weaving) is carried out next. It is mainly done by *aiya*, which is a kind of bow shaped instrument. It is interesting to note here that the carding of cotton has been traditionally done by bow-string instruments across many ancient civilizations including India

and China (Needham 1965: 127). After the fibre is ready, spinning is done. It is mainly carried out with the use of spindle whorls (Mohanty et. al. 1987: 266). Manipuri tribes like *Hmars, Kukis, Paities, Kabuis,* and *Tangkhuls* almost follow a similar process of ginning and carding for cotton preparation (Roy 1979: 15-18). *Nagas* mainly uses back-strap loom which are more or less traditional. The weavers sit facing the loom on a stool with the feet braced against a wooden board. A strap is attached with the loom, and it embraces the weaver from the back. This strap can be stretched, loosened, and controlled by the backward and forward motion of the weaver, it helps to create the balance and tension of the warp and weft threads. The *lobo* or bamboo beam is placed at the opposite end of the loom, serving to maintain the counterbalancing tension with the terminal section of the warp. The warp and weft threads are continuously moved and manipulated until the weaving is completed. The loincloth is usually woven narrow, when two such loin cloth are woven, they are sewn together to form a finished product of the required size.

In the *Naga* traditional attire, the *Ao Naga* men wears a shawl and kilt (Alemchiba 1968, 28-57) and the women wear loincloth resembling a petticoat known as *neikhro* which are usually decorated with narrow red bands along both sides of the margins. Their upper body is covered with *vatchi* and the hip is covered with *pfemhou*. The basic clothing remains the same, but the patterns differ according to the occasions. Some *Naga* man also wear a white dress known as *rhikho* which is embellished with four black colour bands. Interestingly, only those men who have not yet been able to offer a great feast or have not been able to kill/defeat any big enemy will wear this costume. Textiles in such communities have symbolic value thus patterns and ornamentations are different according to the occasions on which they are worn (Ghosh G. K. and Ghosh S. 2000: 40).

In earlier times the costume of the *Khasi* tribe of Meghalaya was entirely unstitched. Their garments were mainly comprised of inner garments, namely *kajympien* and *ka kryshah,* and outer garments namely *jainsem, tapmoh and jainkop* (Bareh 1967: 346-350). *Khasis* in present times use frame loom along with a traditional loin loom to weave their clothes (IGNCA 1999: 89). The *Garos* of Meghalaya also weave on a frame loom nowadays. *Garos* and *Rabhas* tribes moreover use complex weaves to create ornamental figured fabrics. Many changes have also been ushered in the nature of *Mizo* garments presently, but the traditional dresses of the *Mizo* particularly for women have remained more or less the same. The traditional attire of *Mizo* men known as *hnawkhal* is woven by using natural fibres, particularly *Hibiscus macrophyllus*. Earlier *Mizo* garments were white in colour. With dyeing becoming popular by 18th century resulted in the creation of a rich repertoire of weaves. Use of dyed goat hair on clothes indicates to the status of the wearer as a head hunter (Lianhmingthanga 1998: 96-98). Both Mizoram and Nagaland have the shared ritual heritage of head hunting and throwing of the feasts of merit (Danda et. al. 1997: 129-36).

Naga textiles are often decorated with beautiful and bright, hand-painted panels and embroidery (Jacobs 1990: 77-80). Head hunting is reflected in the panel of stitches of the *Naga* shawls. Even spear handle is also depicted in the *Naga* men shawls. *Tankhul Nagas* is a prominent tribe of Manipur. They weave various kinds of shawls among which *raivat kachon* shawls are mention-worthy (refer to figure 1). There are at least two kinds of *raivat* shawls. One is exclusive men's wear to be worn by the heads or men of prominence, known as *raivat kachon. Raivat kachon* are designed with zoomorphic, faunal, geometric designs. The other one is commonly worn by all, it is embellished with elephant motifs, embroidered patterns

(exclusively associated with the tribe). Interestingly, among *Tanghul Nagas* it is even worn by women mainly warrior's wives and daughters. There is also another coveted shawl *chonkhom*, mainly worn by bachelors of *Tankhul Nagas*. Along the horizontal centre of the shawl runs a bulky satin stitch depicting *seikhum* (buffalo spine), *seikuirar* (buffaloes head) and *raisam* (hair of the slayed victim) are seen (Sinalei Khayi, email conversation: October 8, 2022).

Textile Designing

Textiles is an identity for the people of Northeast in general (Chattopadhyaya 1978: 45). It is an identity of a tribe, it is an emblem of the wearer's social status, it marks the season of the year, identify the occasions on which they are worn, rites and rituals, social status and so on and so forth. In short textiles are unwritten constitution of tribal community according to Dr. Sinalei Khayi who teaches History at Pettigrew College, *Ukhrul*, Manipur. *Mizo* textiles too are known for their delicate designs. While the traditional *Mizo* loom is known as *them-bu*, *Mizo* weavers have gradually shifted towards frame loom to create intricate designs. *Mizo* textile patterning with extra weft (the technique which involves placing extra yarn into the regular weave to create a design/motif) is classified as *jamdani* according to the nomenclature of design. It seems innovations are on the increasing trend among tribal textiles of Northeast. In *Mizo* weaving, we can see widescale use of the Burmese fly-shuttle frame loom known as *Zo.* The *Zo* is better suited to the local conditions of the weaver, and is useful to carve out intricate designs and patterns like *jamdani*.

Weavers of Manipur are considered the best among the weavers of the Northeast. They have a fine sensitivity towards colour and their expertise produces magic on clothes. Embellishment of woven clothes with colourful embroidery is also common among them. Some of the intricate designs produced by them can be best described as loom-embroidery (Roy 1979: 35). The textile designs of Manipur with distinctive motifs and varieties of colours are extremely significant in terms of their religious beliefs and cultural memory. Besides the themes that hark on the local environment, their motifs include themes which are linked with the patronage of kings, legends, and religious heritage, which constitute a great source of inspiration for them. The choice of colours is not whimsical either, but deeply symbolic and rooted in their conscious approach towards nature. Designs and patterns are similarly age-old and penetrate the customs, beliefs, and rituals in contemporary times. Beautifully conceived distinctive motif with bright natural colours provides a distinctiveness to the Manipuri textiles, and recreates a style that helps them to identify as a community (Ibid, 52).

The art of the loom is an integral part of the life for Manipuri women. Almost every house is adorned with a small loom, thus enabling women of all ages to give full expression to their love for the weaving craft. Manipuri designs demonstrate an inclination towards prioritizing circular patterns. But the circular pattern is difficult to execute, and requires working with extra weft on the simple loom, and thus the circular design which we encounter on Manipuri clothes are often embroidered designs after the weaving process is over (Sanajaoba 2018: 205-15). The *akoybi mayek* design for example, was first developed in the embroidered form before it transitioned into the woven form. *Akoybi mayek* is a textile motif commonly used in Manipuri textiles. The motif is decorated with the use of red with little bit of black and white shade. Its overall pattern is circular, and one circle joins to the other, further broken up into patterns and thus creating a beautiful flow of design. This kind of design often points out to the conceptualization of the sacred geometry and attributes to the religious and cultural

values of the *Meiti* tribe of Manipur. This motif further delves deep into the scientific, philosophical, psychological, aesthetic and mystical laws of the universe (Nunglekpam 2014: 119). As far as the loom is concerned, Manipuri weavers use the same traditional throw-shuttle frame loom known as *pangiong* that they have used for many centuries, to execute this circular pattern. Some of the weavers also use the back-strap loom (similar to what has been discussed about *Naga* loom) to produce intricate patterns, executed either by the manipulation of warp or weft threads, or by adding extra threads to the designed part. *Meities* are known for the execution of delicate designs. Their choice of colour and designs are orderly and regulated. During the *Phanbankaba* or coronation ceremony, the *Meitei* chief is known to gift his warriors with richly embroidered shawls known as *shamilami*. The *Chakhesang Nagas* is also clientele of this *Meitei* embroidered *shamilami* shawl. Beauty of the *Shamilami* shawls is the use of *Akoybi mayek* motifs. Among the *Chakhesang Naga* tribe from Nagaland, wearing *shamilami* shawls is considered auspicious as it signifies ritual status of its owner. It is mainly worn by those *Chakhesang Nagas* who have the privilege of hosting the three Feasts of Merit ceremony.

Northeast textile heritage has strong, historic roots in Arunachal Pradesh's exceptional artistry. Arunachal Pradesh, which literally means 'land of dawn-lit mountains', is India's eastern most state of India and it shares borders with Assam and Nagaland. Arunachal Pradesh is vibrant and culturally diverse state of India and is the habitat of twenty-six major tribes and sub-tribes. The state is also known for its great diversity of woven products. Colours and patterns have profound importance among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Their craft exhibits a strong sense of colour and design (Bhavnani 1974: 19). A closer look into the textile designs of *Adi* and *Apatani*

Image 1.7: Shamilami shawl of the Chakhesang Nagas. Shamilami shawls are decorated with Akoybi mayek motifs. The motif is made with the use of red, black, and white shades. Its overall pattern in circular with one circle joining another, further broken up into patterns and thus creating a beautiful flow of design (Displayed in the Textiles Gallery of the National Crafts Museum and Hastkala Academy, New Delhi. Image Courtesy: Author.

of Arunachal Pradesh shows their inclination towards basic straight lines, stripes and bands. Contrasts and colour combinations are also quite interesting (Gadey 2021). *Mishmi* (Arunachal Pradesh) mostly celebrate pattern. Zig-zag lines and geometric patterns are the most common motifs. The floral motifs are geometric in nature. The woven products of the

Image 1.8: Textiles from Tripura (Displayed at the Textiles Gallery of the National Crafts Museum and Hastkala Academy, New Delhi. Image Courtesy: Author

Wanchu tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have an affinity with the designs of Mizoram. *Gale* (traditional wrap-around skirts worn by women) of the *Abor* tribe show great craftsmanship, wherein elements of asymmetry in terms of design provide an exclusive relief from the aesthetics of geometrical symmetry. The jackets of the *Mishmis* and *Apatanis* tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are the most interesting among all other woven products. Coming to Tripura, all tribal groups of Tripura wear breast bands known as *rishal rhea*, and the hip-cloth is known as *pachchral pinankapor*. There is great variety of *rishal rhea* or breast bands are woven, and these variations reflect regional and ethnic traditions. Among the Vaishnavite *Jomatias* tribes, the bride weaves her breast band in the red colour, while the *Reang* and *Naotia* hilly tribes weave simple geometrical designs into the breast band. Breastbands of the *Tripuri* and *Chakma* tribes are more elaborate. The *Chakma* bride makes her breast band by incorporating all the designs from her maternal side so that these designs could similarly be

transmitted to her daughters (Bhattacharya 1963: 14). The *Kuki* tribe of Tripura is also known for its exclusive weaves.

Lived Contexts of Tribal Textiles in Northeast India

Textiles of the Northeast are not just cloth, but they tell stories about their entire communities. Every cloth represents the crafted or written stories and aesthetic traditions of their weavers. Each motif and design have their own story of origin that reflects the community's culture, tales, and history. Textiles of the Northeast reflect the unique identity of the people. Among the other expression of cultures like wood carving, basketry, tattoos, cane craft etc., textiles have carved out a special niche, with each community becoming identifiable through its distinctive weaving techniques, unique shawls or *sarong*s (wraparound) decorated with different motifs, colours, or designed patterns. This distinctiveness plays a significant role in constructing identity and marking cultural variations within tribal communities. All motifs are more than just decorative items but have an independent cultural value, with each piece of cloth serving more functions than just to clothe persons or families. Traditional textiles also culturally express their community of wearers.

In the present scenario, textiles constitute second largest economic sector in Northeast India, that is second only to the agricultural sector. Thus, the handloom sector plays a pivotal role in the economic growth of the region. Sirawung Raiping, a teacher at the Modern College in Imphal (Manipur) shared his opinion in an interview, saying that tribal textiles in today's world were no longer confined to the domain of tribal utility, but rather, they upheld tribal cultural heritage, and represented this heritage to the rest of the world. Tribal textile has increasingly become the means for fostering financial independence for many tribals as well. Many weavers over time have come together to form societies, and self-help groups (SHG) to make a respectable earning through weaving. One such initiative is the Ukhrul District Handloom and Handicraft Co-operative Federation (UDHHCF). UDHHCF is formed by a consortium of handloom and handicraft societies that is located in different parts of Ukhrul district of Manipur. They aim to promote and uphold the rich traditions of handloom and the handicrafts of Manipur, and thereby generate income and employment, leading to the financial independence and social upliftment of many tribals. According to Sirawung Raiping, spokesperson of UDHHCF: India's Northeast is endowed with rich traditional textiles with unbeatable designs. From the perspective of commerce, many designs are quite unique and in demand and fashionable in the present market. The whole idea is to bring economic development of its people through traditional weaves.

Raiping's own family is also engaged in traditional tribal weaving for many generations, and his father, Shangmayang Raiping, a retired inspector at District Industry Centre, Ukhrul (Manipur) was also associated with various weavers' societies that founded the UDHHCF. Sirawung's mother is an accomplished weaver and designer of tribal textiles as well. Coming from such a background and heritage, he became the spokesperson for UDHHCF on behalf of his parents and shared insights about the noble work of tribal weaving from the Northeast with the rest of the world. There are around 195 sub-organizations of the federation that include many SHGs and societies that work under the Cooperative. They generate employment for local weavers and market their handicraft products, thus empowering the tribal population by enabling the expression of what is their traditional textile heritage. According to the Sirawung, traditional textiles of Northeast have come a long way. They no

longer cater to the needs of the tribal people alone, but nowadays, they have become an important means for the economic sustenance of people. It especially generates employment for tribal weavers in the non-agricultural seasons between late August and January, since the period between June and August constitutes the peak agricultural season, with weavers being too busy with agricultural activities.

The Northeast has witnessed great political disturbances that includes social displacement in the past. These upheavals have ravaged the socio-political fabric of the region. But it is the resilience of the tribal people and their deep-rooted traditions that have assisted them to sail through difficult times (Sirawung Raiping, email conversation: October 7, 2022). When asked about Covid 19 pandemic situation and its impact on weavers, he replied that tribal weavers are endowed with immense courage, grit, endurance powers, and flexibility, expressed in their simple lives and small needs. Since they do not aspire to earn to the extent of profit mongering, they can easily adapt themselves to any given situation and its inbuilt adversities. When the pandemic and lockdown hit the weavers, they easily adapted to a simpler lifestyle that required even smaller means. Many of them downsized their weaving production due to the lack of demand and a few even began making handloom masks, distributing them through NGOs. The weavers are thus, not only just imbued with resilience, but they are also authors of intelligent initiatives that answer to the needs of their time.

Textile designs and motifs constitute a conduit for the creative expression for weavers, especially as it mirrors the traumatic saga of long-standing socio-political disturbances spanning many decades in the Northeast. These struggles are also reflected in tribal textile arts, demonstrating how political upheavals have transformed the weavers' lived experiences into design schemes and motif formulation. Traditional textiles leave an echo of a peaceful past in the hearts of the Northeast people that helps them to cope with these changing times that are accompanied by rising trends of market globalization. According to Sirawung Raiping, the diverse ethnic culture and traditions of the Northeast are gradually responding to globalization in present times, with weavers and weaving societies customizing their products. Weavers are nowadays creating blended products that are a curious mix of modern and traditional designs. Weavers demonstrate great creativity and engage in experimentations that produce a more contemporary look to traditional tribal textiles. NGOs and weavers are increasingly convinced that they have to produce textiles that appeal equally to modern people and adhere to current-day ideas about aesthetics, in order to continue subsisting on weaving and retain their relevance in this global market. Of late, many of these experimentation projects have been spearheaded by national-level institutes of design such as the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) that work relentlessly to enhance and promote tribal designs, and work with weavers to produce textiles that have a blended look and contemporary appeal, and encompass new forms like a modern shirt adorned with traditional tribal motifs, or a scarf that has a tribal look. Traditional dresses are now given a modern look by new-age designers who tweak some of the design elements but adhere strictly to quality, the originality of the raw material, motifs, and pattern schemes. Probably this is the only way to familiarize and popularize traditional apparels and to make them relevant in the modern fashion world, that in the long run protects rich textile traditions from entirely fading away.

Under present circumstances, weaving has especially become an important means of economic empowerment for tribal women from the Northeast. Women increasingly sell

handloom products to provide economic support to their families. In this journey of economic independence and empowerment, SHGs play a significant role in mobilizing tribal women and helping them in financial matters that include making small scale deposits, opening bank accounts, and applying for loans as per their requirement (Gogoi 2010: 93). This assistance aims to provide women weavers with a stable and long-standing economic foundation that enhances their productivity skills, and makes their products marketable enough to compete within the global textile market. Several NGOs and SHGs, along with organized co-operatives have initiated a special Entrepreneurship Development Programme (EDP) for women. EDP organizes women weavers groups and helps them to acquire further skill-based training, along with entrepreneurship development, credit linkage and market support. This has reportedly improved life for tribal women weavers from the Northeast in terms of developing their skills, and reducing their financial dependence on men. The long-term objectives of such developmental programs are aimed at raising the economic and social status of tribal women in society, inculcating confidence among them, and bringing them into the mainstream of national development (Gogoi 2020: 143). They aim to enhance access, quality and relevance of their training programs to meet the needs of the growing labour market in a developing economy. With these programs, tribal weaving is emerging as a new sector of economic activity which is deeply rooted in traditions but are at the same time modern and relevant enough to compete with contemporary products that are produced under big global brands.

Conclusion

Simple tribal life, uncomplicated people, and their symbiotic relationship with nature are reflected in the weaves of Northeast India. Almost every woman barring a few are expert weavers. Caste, tribe, or gender barrier never comes in the way, and even a princess has to weave her own clothes. Textile technology in Northeast states thus upholds gender equality as central to this necessarily egalitarian tribal social system. Textile weaving thus plays a pivotal role in the traditional social and economic life of the people throughout the region's history. The design and motifs used in the hand-woven textiles are simple, unsophisticated, and naive, yet aesthetically beautiful. Patterns are mainly inspired by nature and raw materials are drawn from natural surroundings, that further promotes a mindful and conscious approach to consumption. At a time when the global market is reverting to tradition, this region has continued with its traditional techniques both with the manufacturing and dyeing of textiles. Study through new researches is showing how tribal weaving is constantly thriving towards toward a blended mode where experimentation with the designing and ornamentation is going on keeping the tribal essence intact. Even helping hands from NGOs and Self-Help Groups are playing important roles towards achieving economic empowerment of tribal women through weaving. Experimentation, blended clothing, new designs are helping this textile heritage to remain relevant and still much in fashion. Probably this is the only way to continue with this tribal craft, rejuvenate it and thereby to survive in the raging wave of globalization and brand culture. This beautiful interdependence creates an elementary connection with nature, yet much relevant to the modern world which finally culminates in sustainable existence.

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Generational Practices in Diaspora: Shared Memories in Morari Bapu's *Ramkatha*

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This paper explores the generational shifts in subjectivities, memories and community building among diasporic followers of the religious-cum-artistic practice of *Ramkatha*, staged narratives of the *Ramcharitmanas* by the popular *kathakar*, Morari Bapu. Since the 1980's, Morari Bapu's performances have been popular across the Indian diaspora and offer a rich illustration of how religious practices are reframed and renegotiated to meet the challenges of living 'here-and-there'. Drawing on participant-observation and in-depth interviews, among differently positioned first-generation adults, predominantly from a Gujarati background who migrated abroad from India, and second-generation adults who grew up outside India, this paper highlights how identities are performed, categorised and emplaced. While the first-generation grapples with migration, by trying to hold on to their culturally and historically specific Hindu practices that focuses on engaging with strategic home-making outside India and maintaining profound links with the homeland, the next generation sustains affinities with the diasporic Hindu youth, as well as identifies with the local community. How do the two diasporic generations draw on the *Ramkatha* and modify it in the course of coping with issues related to family structures, religious beliefs and practices, social customs, and attitudes? The result of a generational analysis confirms the multiplicity of diasporic experiences and the role of sharing and inheriting memory across time and place, that enables its circulation in oral modes as informal centres for meaning making. I bring into focus the agency of the *Ramkatha* to develop this connection through material and discursive practices that entails from living across transnational spaces and promoting enduring inter-generational links.

Migration, Generation, Memory, Performance, Diaspora

Introduction

In June 2014, Morari Bapu performed a nine-day *Ramkatha* at the Auditorium Conciliazione in Rome, Italy. As sponsors of the *Ramkatha*, the Lady Sandhya Popat Foundation of the UK (United Kingdom) had made adequate arrangements for the comfort of mostly Non-Resident Indians (NRI) audience that attended the function. The place was abuzz with people greeting one another, chatting, and laughing. The ambience in general, reflected a pleasant and festive mood. Audiences included men and women of varied ages and attending families mainly consisted of three generations: elderly persons, young parents and their children. Many of them had travelled from different parts of the UK, the USA, Africa, and India. Most of them spoke in Gujarati and English with British or American accents; a smattering of Hindi and Marathi was also audible. Their dressing styles and associated objects of conspicuous consumption appeared to be influenced by ethnic Indian fashions. Certain modes of action seemed marked and privileged, especially greeting each other with folded hands and saying, '*Jai Siya Ram*' (salutations to the deities, Sita and Ram), body tattoos of 'Ram', and conversations related to *sattvik* food. Freshly prepared vegetarian Indian food was being cooked and freely distributed to all those who attended Morari Bapu's *Ramkatha* on all the nine days. The *prasada* or food offered in the devotional ritual was a major attraction for all; the patrons and sponsors secured arrangements to share it during lunchtime in the form of a

buffet laid out in the lobby adjacent to the auditorium. Morari Bapu addressed his *shrota* or listeners through the medium of the *Ramkatha* and his diverse audiences included those who attended live, as well as those who attended in an online mode, mediated by technology. He recited the *Ramcharitmanas* quite effortlessly, and shared stories and anecdotes with his listeners, who in turn addressed their questions and doubts to him. A stark example of the cultural specificity of a staged performance amidst authentic and historical modes of presentation, the audience were awestruck and became subjected to experiencing altered emotional states. A prolific *kathakar* and storyteller, Morari Bapu framed his *Ramkatha* in conversational structures, mediated through specific stage practices that entailed enactments and embodied social interaction.

Travelling across pilgrim-centres, school grounds, exhibition halls, dams, ships, and airplanes, his discourses are fine-tuned to current events and happenings that take place across the world as well as locally within his own networks and relationships. These sacralised discourses about daily events are imbued with power, and both, performers and audiences strategically give meaning, embed and reproduce what they culturally consider as pragmatic. Reframed by these sacralised discursive powers, this form of devotional practice encompasses an active sacral space when engaging in collective and individual actions. Adapting to a variety of contexts ranging from traditional religious places to unconventional settings, the performances thus reveal, not only popularity of format but also the aspirations of its patrons. The charismatic competence of Morari Bapu to modify discourses in mobile settings and the overlapping of multiple frames and schema enables various forms of interaction among his followers ranging from different generations. The vast number of audiences do not belong to a single locality or the same generation, and yet they construct and maintain a cohesive and interactive religious and cultural memory and identity between them that is connected to the *Ramayana* narrative. Employing the story of Ram as a point of reference, Morari Bapu facilitates the juxtaposition of personal/ social/ religious/ spiritual/ moral frames and schema, and projects them into the interaction between the audiences and the *Ramkatha* performative narrative. Each generation's unique experiences, lifestyles, and values evoke connections that transcend spaces and recreate connections in new places.

The above description opens up a larger discussion about how a representational practice connects two or more generations among the Indians within an interconnected diaspora: those who migrated as adults from India, and those who were born and/or raised outside India. The overall cohesion between them rests with the continuous exchange within the *Ramkatha* performance itself where dynamic shifts in age, experience and memories contribute to an emergent web of representations that encompass shared values, belief and community behaviour. The first-generation migrants' experience of relocation, accompanied by their sense of self—mainly in relation to their roles and their status in the countries of their residence, along with their capabilities, are all directed towards adapting to new societal and cultural conditions across situations and places as speedily as possible. The second-generation responds differently, by reimagining and reframing their new attitudes towards relationships, career, family, and mobility through the *Ramkatha*. It is however difficult to examine the entire cultural context in all its totality, since both generations are impacted by migration on different levels that are defined by different experiences, both individually and collectively. But despite this, an analysis of generational experiences, intersected by age and life-course features (stage of life) enables an understanding of the responses and explanations provided by individuals situated in their specific historical times and spaces, as

they remain despite differences to be unified by the realities of migration. This paper reflects on the migration context, within which an artistic-religious practice performed in transnational spaces, becomes relevant to a multi-generation Hindu social, ethnic, cultural, and religious identity. This paper brings into focus how the *Ramkatha* develops and builds internal connections within the Hindu diaspora through material and discursive practices that entails the experiences of living across transnational spaces while promoting enduring inter-generational links based on shared religious beliefs and activities.

Ramkatha and Morari Bapu

The *Ramayana* of Valmiki, an ancient Sanskrit epic composed two millennia ago, and retold numerous times in several languages over the centuries has fascinated generations of scholars (Lutgendorf 1990: 127). Among several other vernacular renditions of the Ram story, the 16th century *Ramcharitmanas* by *Bhakti* poet Tulsidas in Awadhi (an important dialect of the Eastern Hindi branch of Indo-Aryan languages) has acquired preeminent status, especially for the religious performance of the text (van der Veer 2020). The text and its performance conveys several ideals about the social roles and relationships, regarding gender, caste, and family duties. More than any other object of popular Hindu devotion, Ram is revered as a moral model and a teacher of social and political values (Hess 1988: 238). Classic stories of Ram posit him as a symbol of *maryada purushottam*, an exemplary model of appropriate behaviour and of ideal kingship. *Ramrajya* or the rule of Ram epitomises the Hindu archetype of a socially and politically perfect state. Its contents centre around basic forms of interpersonal relationships that carry influence beyond religion, extending into secular physical spaces. Learnt by rote or read out, these stories are passed from one generation to the next through the *katha* tradition of religious oratory, a narrative telling meant for both ritual and entertainment. Beyond the reconstruction and representations of Hindu ideals, the cultural meanings derived from the text serve as model references for inferring and attributing meaning for the motivation of actions. They mark connections between religious practices and recreate generational consciousness that enable religious identification of individuals in unexpected ways. Taking a cross-cultural perspective, Lutgendorf situates the *Ramkatha* as beyond the categories of 'public oratory' or 'religious rhetoric' (Lutgendorf 1990: 231). Subsequent *Ramayana* story renditions have used the original plot to say entirely new things about the everyday context in variance of its many local versions (Kaushal, Bhalla, and Pant 2015).

As a popular and contemporary expounder of the *Ramcharitmanas*, Morari Bapu is best-known for his *Ramkatha* (Pande 2022). Born in Gujarat (India), he spent his initial years around the 1950's listening to his paternal grandparents recount several local stories. His grandfather in particular, shared the knowledge of the *Ramcharitmanas* with him on their way to school each day, thus, grounding him early in the tradition of reciting the *Ramcharitmanas*. As years passed, Morari Bapu commenced his career as a primary school teacher. His proficiency over the *Ramcharitmanas* obtained through the inter-generational transfer of skills, and ability as a *kathakar* to perform the *katha* proliferated alongside, and brought large audiences to his performances. After the 1980s, his performances began receiving an overwhelming response from local as well as international audiences. With a steady rise in popularity, his live performances were recorded on cassettes and circulated among closed groups. Later, his *Ramkatha* was mediated by satellite television, across India and in certain parts of the UK and USA. Gradually, the venue of his *Ramkatha* extended across many Indian cities as well as

those abroad to include Africa, Australia, Canada, China, the Middle East, the US, and other cities in South Asia. Till October 2022, he was known to have performed 904 *Ramkatha* across the world (Shree Chitrakutdham Trust 2021). Through his metier of performing the *Ramkatha*, Morari Bapu helped raised money for schools, temples, multi-specialty hospitals, old-age homes, toilets for the poor in certain villages in Gujarat, and for several other environment and literary causes. The *kathakar* has been involved in a series of high-profile socio-political interventions besides the settling of local or family disputes. In 2009, he hosted a conference *Dharma-samwad* or 'Harmony through Dialogue' at his *ashram* to provide a common platform for dialogue between all faiths (Shree Chitrakutdham Trust 2021). I was told by my interlocutors that Morari Bapu coordinated a series of performances on Gandhi called *Manas Mahatma*. He additionally spearheaded a successful local campaign against female-foeticide, and has also been involved in the 'Save Whale Shark' campaign (Times of India 2004).

Often referring to his *Ramkatha* as *prem-yagna* or an offering of love, where people gather in the name of love, Morari Bapu's followers are encouraged to live by the three foundational premises of *satya* or truth, *prem* or love, and *karuna* or compassion. Spending most of his life reciting and interpreting religious texts, Morari Bapu's nine-day *Ramkatha* is attended by tens of thousands in India and the rest of the world. Coordinated like a celebratory event, these performances elicit responses across social contexts and are repeatedly revisited, incurring a huge amount of material resource expenditure. Morari Bapu's *Ramkatha* is also unique, because they involve a large number of people that travel individually or in groups across transnational places for performances, while also involving the large-scale management of media, and catering. Though the format of his performances have undergone changes since the 1980's, it still remains popular among his followers. With the aid of technology and a sense of connection that is constructed between various sacred places and their stories, deities and worship traditions in India, the mobile *Ramkatha* underlines movement as an important experience, and imbues places integral to performances with new meanings, important for migrant groups. The relationship of trust and understanding between the narrator and his audiences aids in establishing authority to interpret discourses and provides legitimacy to interpretations related to contemporary Hindu identity, and practices that engage a transnational and intergenerational audience.

Mobility of Diaspora

There is much literature exploring the experience of diasporic people and communities that has deepened our discernment of dispersion, transnationalism, globalization and migrant subjectivities (Brah 1996, Clifford 1994, Cohen 2008). Material and discursive changes in the past three decades have increased both: the number of global diaspora, and the range and diversity of the new semantic domain that the term inhabits (Tölölyan 1996: 3). Constantly evolving through transformation and difference, changing diaspora identities represent distinct versions of modern, transnational, and intercultural experience. Diasporic life organized around cultural and religious discourse and practices is not just restricted to a simplistically imagined collective of individuals, or their scattered communities, but emerges as a movement that is in relation to power—turning to an intensification of those markers that indicates to itself and its own past; markers such as homeland, memory, and loss (Cho 2007: 11). As one of the most significant impacts of globalization, the intensification of worldwide social relations has linked distant localities in ways that shape local happenings through events that occur miles away and vice versa (Giddens 1990: 64). This idea implies that cultural

experiences are 'lifted out' in various ways from its traditional anchoring in particular localities, and serve to transform routine patterns of cultural existence elsewhere (Tomlinson 2003: 273). Fluid social spaces thus created, entail new forms of power and flows that exceed prevalent technologies of social control. Marked by spatial rupture, upheaval and displacement, religious narratives and practices of diasporic lives often shift as they move into new settings (Hausner and Garnett 2010: 2).

According to Steven Vertovec (2004: 281): "no matter where in the world they live, most Hindus tend to sacralise India and therefore have a special kind of relationship to a spiritual homeland". The flow of ideas and practices originating in India and their subsequent reproduction and adaptation in new locations includes movement of persons and sometimes these include charismatic religious leaders and their followers. Sociologist Chetan Bhatt includes Morari Bapu in the list of those few Hindu religious leaders who have acquired stature in India due to their popularity in the diaspora (Bhatt 2000: 567). For the transnational Indian diaspora, local and global references blend with discourses of belonging and identity that affect every day religious practices and social relations. Micro-level family connections and subsequent generations inherit and/or construct the past through narratives and artefacts that aid in imagining the future. Moreover, researchers have documented an increased number of 'circulating' children and elderly people who move constantly between places of origin and settlement, in order to reduce the costs entailed in the social reproduction of the home identity abroad, promote cultural learning, and to rule out negative influences and undisciplined social environment (Levitt 2009: 6). Such kin or network connections and practices together affect broader social processes. An awareness of, 'living here and relating there' has drawn the diaspora in evolving mediated subjectivities. While the media has enabled the development of new religious-spatial possibilities, such as the hitherto unforeseen connection between individuals or groups, it has come to include an adherence to older traditions among these new audiences that leads to the social reproduction of old religious practices accompanied by new ideas, images, or events (Knott 2015: 113).

Forms of cultural adaptation and navigation in diverse social arenas manifest in responses that include increased religious fervour, practicing native customs and allegiances, and other processes of community building. An uncertain sense of belonging becomes structured into an array of identities that are expressed without contradiction for instance, in multi-ethnic allegiances, attachments to the nation, and an adoption of cosmopolitan sensibilities. Tracing the traditions of the *Ramkatha*, my research gives me an insight into the general patterns of religious transformation within transnational diasporic community practices, especially about how one can interpret the behavioural and affective conformity between different diasporic generations. On account of the appeal of the *Ramayana* epic that continues to cut across the divisions of caste, region, sect, gender and age, the political theorist, Bhikhu Parekh asserts that the *Ramayana* comes closest to becoming the central empathic text of overseas Hinduism (Parekh 1994: 613). The ethics of the *Ramayana* with its centrality of family as the dominant institution, has been of continuous relevance and interest to overseas Hindus. The theme of exile, suffering and eventual return to homeland were popular among the indentured labourers, and this inclination continues among more recent Hindu settlers in the UK and the US for whom the *Ramayana* story and its moral message continues to offer a simplified view of a traditional life of values. Its recital provide occasions for people to meet and affirm cultural cohesion. They draw moral and emotional strength from one another, and reinforce their collective ethos. Parekh adds here that the skilfully embroidered narration of the epic's more

crucial episodes provides migrants with conceptual tools to make sense of their predicament, especially in relation to personal memories and experiences of alienation from their home country to which they remained deeply attached.

Generation in *Ramkatha*

Several anthropologists have claimed that the study of generations is a key site for interpreting the various social processes associated with modernity and globalization. With many theoretical, definitional and empirical challenges, the study of generations offers "a device by which people conceptualize society and seek to transform it" (Wohl 1979: 5). Anthropologists have used the concept of generation to explain social change over time, examine the different ways people organize and envision ties within the family, explore principles of social organization beyond the family, and identify differences among members of a society (Levitt and Waters 2002, Portes and Rumbaut 2005, Somerville 2008). Connected to the problem of social and cultural reproduction, the study of generations has been investigated to make sense between age groupings and continuity in society, their re-enactment of values and norms, and to trace social reproduction, patterns of adaptation, coexistence, and intergenerational social mobility. Karl Mannheim in his classic essay, *The Problem of Generations*, describes generation as an actuality where a concrete bond is created between its members by their being exposed to characteristic social currents in society (Mannheim 1952: 303). He posits that different generations live at the same time, but since experienced time is the only real time, they must all in fact be living in qualitatively different subjective eras. Accordingly, each generation comes into 'fresh contact' with its social and cultural heritage handed down by the older generations, thereby altering or transforming that heritage by remodelling what is encountered (Ibid.: 293). Sarah Lamb (2015: 853) working on widowhood, has used the category of generation to explain social change over time, especially to identify differences among members of a society, and to examine the ways in which people across culture organize and envision relationships. She explores ideals of family life and the intricate interrelationships between and within generations, their beliefs and practices that determine their life course, and reframe their religious identities according to the prevalent social-moral orders of their time. Essentially, the use of generation as a unit can be appraised by two separate sets of meaning: one refers to a group of people who are living through a period of time together and collaboratively participating in and simultaneously recreating a shared identity, demonstrated through practices and a code of beliefs. The other is structurally akin to kinship, and draws its identity and cohesion through family relationships, such as the parent-child relationship. Using one or both of these meanings, the anthropological scholarly interest in generation has focused on four primary topics that mostly pertain to: understanding social change, discerning family moral systems towards the care of the elderly, social organization that is extended beyond the family, and demonstrable forms and actions of identity, hierarchy, and inequality.

In case of the *Ramkatha*, shared religious stories situated in a distant but shared land with common history and heritage, accomplishes a deep sense of belonging and brings about solidarity, even if the displaced individuals concerned appear to think polyphonically, and are not strictly-speaking spatially bound with each other. Belonging in this sense, emerges with shared and relatable recollections of the past, through the sharing of moral values, networks and resources besides the negotiation and contestation of what is shared and celebrated. Interestingly, there is a complex relational and symbolic dimension that emerges out of the

intersectional social life of the *Ramkatha* performances. While the empirical backdrop of my inquiry recognizes that identity and belonging evolve on the basis of shifting combinations pertaining to location and positionality within the *Ramkatha* frameworks, the first generation incorporate these changes by negotiating new relationships. Their participative behaviour oscillates between a strategic and selective remembering and forgetting across domains of homes, heritage and history. The second generation adaptively responds to a shared language of cultural references that secures a sense of continuity between their parents' country of origin, and the country of their settlement. In doing so, they not only cultivate a distinct form of social memory through the recounted memories, identities, beliefs and practices of their previous generations practices, but they also try to redefine these older identities to fit their own modern times. Although older ties may continue, the extent of assimilation varies; sometimes increasing in frequency, while performing life cycle rituals such as in marriage, birth and death rituals, or at times, it decreases when taking everyday routine life into consideration. As both generations come into renewed contact with their accumulated socio-cultural heritage in the transnational context of the *Ramkatha*, with all its implicit references and cultural translation, there is a chemistry between the two that takes place that makes Mannheim's framework of 'fresh contact' useful as an analytical framework for understanding a migrant's social bearing, after leaving his or her home country.

Charting the course of transmissions and transformations through generations, therefore, provides a productive lens to understand facets of the social-cultural life of my interlocutors— this *Ramkatha* community. Open to creative revision and change, *Ramkatha* cultural practices are transgenerational and transmitted from one generation to the next. While transnational practices amongst the second generation is erratic or could be selective, they are just as significant for research on what exact facets of tradition binds them together if at all, and despite their transformed meanings, and loosening ties. I have extended the generational approach to go beyond an analysis of age and experience, and focussed on how each generation makes fresh contact with its social and cultural heritage, exemplified in this case by their engagement with Morari Bapu's *Ramkatha*. I have attempted to explore how two diasporic generations individually draw on the *Ramkatha* tradition, and modify it in the course of their own lives and their own coping strategies with cultural and social issues pertaining to family structures and bonds, religious beliefs and practices, and social customs and attitudes as Hindus abroad.

Methodology

This multi-sited ethnographic project was carried out between 2012 and 2015, among followers of the *Ramkatha* whom I met, observed and interviewed at Morari Bapu's *ashram* or hermitage in Mahuva, Gujarat (India), and later at different sites in Ahmedabad & Mumbai (India), California (USA) and Rome (Italy). The empirical data of this study was obtained from in-depth interviews with individuals between the ages of thirty and eighty years. My interlocutors lived in different countries like the UK, the US, Canada, Kenya, Uganda, Nairobi, and Singapore. The interlocutors of the first generation were generally above the ages of sixty, and the second generation was aged between their thirties and mid-fifties. While the first generation included those who had migrated from India between the 1960's and1980's as young children, most of them were in touch with their extended families in India, engaging with them on a regular basis. All my interlocutors identified themselves as Hindus and were

not related to one another. To preserve anonymity and confidentiality of my research interlocutors, I have used pseudonyms throughout this paper.

Ethnography is predicated on an attention paid to the everyday that produces an intimate knowledge of face-to-face communities and groups (Marcus 1998: 99). To carry out ethnographic research on social grounds that has already produced a particular cultural and religious discourse, requires using qualitative research techniques to explore the various engagement of research subjects—individuals in their daily lives over an extended period of time. I have employed classical methods such as participant-observation, field notes, carrying out informal and semi-structured interviews, accessing network ties, and using photography and audio/visual methods at different sites. My primary data includes fieldwork reports made in three countries, and the secondary data comprises mostly of a review of existing literature. It is necessary to distinguish between the historically-specific experiences of the old diaspora and the new diaspora, and I would like to state here that there are no parallels in the new generation, with the losses suffered by the old diaspora or those who travelled as indentured labour. In this research I have focussed exclusively on the new diaspora that has migrated from India since the 1960's. Since most of my interlocutors annually visited the *ashram* of Morari Bapu in Mahuva (Gujarat, India), I decided to begin my fieldwork from India. Starting with a preliminary study carried out in the early stages of research through a questionnaire, personal interactions or via telephone or email, I conducted over fifty interviews among those who attended the *Ramkatha* in different settings and later focussed on twenty in-depth interviews. The participants spoke in English, Hindi, or Gujarati, and all of them had high school certificates or higher degrees, and there was relatively equitable gender representation among them for my study, with about eight males and twelve females.

To bring these multi-local sites into the same frame of study and to posit their internally contiguous relationships with Morari Bapu's tradition was particularly challenging. For a transgenerational study of social interactions, behaviours, and perceptions among followers of the *Ramkatha*, I observed and participated in their everyday community activities. To obtain a clear idea of the basic structure of the phenomenon of generational differences, I have resorted to clarifying the specific inter-relations between the individuals comprising a single generation unit. Generation is not a concrete group of age-cohorts that automatically forms a community; rather, generation is a concept that operationalizes social relations amidst transnational processes of migration and change. Although members of a generation are undoubtedly bound together in certain ways, the ties between them do not automatically result in the formation of a concrete group. When faced with a specific phenomenon, individuals can 'work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways', which will result in separate 'generation units' (Mannheim 1952: 304). These generation units can be seen as ways in which individuals relate to the same cultural phenomena historically prevalent in their own times, and as such loosely construct an identity, grouping responses geared towards similar moral meaning-making in reference to the problems or exact questions that are at hand. Taking participant observation as the starting point of my ethnographic research, a lot of field research entailed following the *Ramkatha*, or 'following its people', and 'being here and there' along with them, and 'moving from single, local situations to multiple sites' (DeWalt and DeWalt 2010, Hannerz 2003, Marcus 1995). Thus, my methodology helped me examine the role of the *Ramkatha* in mediating nostalgia and how its followers from the diaspora made sense of their world differently, while creating trajectories of generational experience that preserved memories and marked identity.

Snapshots from the Field

Scene 1: In Bakersfield, Los Angeles, USA (2013)

(SZ, 50 yrs. Female) A housewife living in Los Angeles recounted that since her arrival in the United States more than twenty years ago, she regularly reads the *Ramcharitmanas*. During her pregnancy, she heard Morari Bapu's audio cassettes for the first time and subsequently read stories that were exclusively from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. After the birth of their two children, she and her family performed all the s*anskar* or rites of passage that were suitable for their age. From writing the name 'Ram' with honey on their baby's tongue, their children grew up listening to tales of Ram and Krishna. She proudly told me: "We are good Hindus, who know much more of our traditions than those living in India. Until a few years ago, there weren't many temples where we could go, so we decided to build our own temple or *mandir* in this house here." Her family regularly sings *bhajans* or devotional songs and performs *puja* or worships in this temple. While on annual trips to India, they regularly visit Morari Bapu's *ashram* in Mahuva and are especially fond of the village life in Talgajarda. As part of an organized visit for Indian-American children to familiarize them with their Hindu-Indian traditions, she recounted how her children had visited most of the holy places in India such as Varanasi, Haridwar, and Ayodhya.

Scene 2: In Rome, Italy (2014)

(LP, 70 yrs. Female): "This is the most interesting part of every *katha*. I can never miss this day when Ram is born. It is so marked in my memory. Morari Bapu *etlu sarkhu ritey prastut karye che...em laage ki aapda badha logo Ayodhya maa joiee rehache Rama lalo no janam*. (Morari Bapu presents/ performs the event of the birth of the infant Ram so vividly that it feels like as if we were witnessing the real event in Ayodhya). I always experience the same good feeling. All *ananda* (only happiness). You know, I had fallen ill in India during the *Manasarovar Ramkatha* held in August 2011. Since then I have not visited my home in India, nor the temple my family built in Kanav, near Surat in Gujarat. But coming to the *Ramkatha* every year, while living in the United States, I have not missed anything. All my family attends the *Ramkatha* in whichever place it is held outside India. You see, my children are raised in Zambia and have lived in the US. They refuse to go to India. They say: *India bau gandu che.... pan Bapuni katha bau saras hoye, baddhi chinta mati jaaye, uungh aavi jaye.... ane paisa vasool thayi jaye* (smiling sheepishly). *Ramcharitmanas ehi naama, sunat shrawan paayee vishrama"* (India is very dirty, but Bapu's *Ramkatha* is very beautiful. Listening to it, all our worries melt away and we go to sleep peacefully. It's a good bargain for all the money spent. That's the name *Ramcharitmanas*, and one derives solace by listening to it).

Scene 3: In Rome, Italy (2014)

(HG, 31 yrs. Male): "The main reason for my being a *katha* follower was that there are no rituals, no fasts, only easy to follow messages of *satya* (truth), *prem* (love), and *karuna* (compassion). I was raised within the influence of the Swaminarayan cult. *Khota* influence *bau che* UK *maa* (there are too many false/ negative influences in the UK). All that separation of male and female members and lots of rules. I am not into all that. My parents were born into the Swaminarayan community, but now we are followers of Morari Bapu. Listening to the *Ramkatha* has brought peace to all of us. Life in London is different. So *Ramkatha* is most appealing to my mind, since it is straightforward and not complicated. I just do my *diya-baati*,

and *gaadi maa Hanuman chalisa*, and *Kaag bhusundi Ramayana sambhlu choo* (I worship by lighting the traditional lamp, and by listening to the *Hanuman chalisa* chant and the *Kaag bhusundi Ramayana* while driving the car). I get answers to all my queries through that. It's not just how I keep the faith; it is also how the faith keeps me. I am confident that Bapu protects me even when I don't pray. My wife prays, and I basically like to help people whenever and wherever I can. It all makes sense, and that's incredible."

Scene 4: In Los Angeles, USA (2013)

(JD, 30 yrs. Female): "I was born in the United States, but I realize that to be Indian is not ever to be fully American. But I ask: how does one be an American, or, for that matter, even Indian? I choose to be a Hindu-American because that is how I live every day. My *dincharya* (daily routine) includes listening to Morari Bapu's *Ramkatha* for at least twenty minutes each day. I just can't do without it. My ears listen to his voice, and my soul lives his words. I perform *havan* (offerings to a fire) on weekends, because that is when one has the time for these elaborate rituals. Every Sunday we meet formally and conduct a *satsang* to discuss our notes from Morari Bapu's *Ramkatha*. At home, we all have the *katha sanskar* (values learnt from religious stories). My parents and younger sister perform Hanuman *aarti* daily before leaving home. Before going to bed, we recite the *Hanuman chalisa*. I have seen my parents keep the *maunvrat* (vow of silence), and would like to do it someday, may be when I visit Bapu's *ashram* next time. I have visited Varanasi, Haridwar and Ayodhya and experience a sense a connection with those places. I would love to go there again."

Observations

I link the above engaging vignettes of *Ramkatha* followers with their experiences and understanding how performances provide complex spaces for the construction of memory, connections, and continuity in a community's social life. These pieces provide us a scope to explore the process in which a generation perceives notions of identity and difference, partly building on specific kinds of longing, collective memory and cultural identity mediated via the narration of a religious text. Another first-generation interlocutor shared her experiences of Morari Bapu, his *Ramkatha* and *ashram* in ways wherein her memories served as a nostalgic point of departure. A citizen of the US and in her late seventies, she decided to relocate to Mahuva (Gujarat) to live in the vicinity of Morari Bapu. She told me that for every overseas *Ramkatha*, they normally reserve more than ten hotel rooms together so that their entire family and relatives can attend. As the matriarch of the family, she said, "this way we get our regular dose of *Ram naam* and also some family time." Her granddaughter, a doctor who lives in the US, chose to marry in Morari Bapu's *ashram* in Mahuva itself. Although born and raised in the Americas, she had spent most of her annual holidays in Mahuva. In the grandmother's words, "Her decision to marry in the *ashram* was influenced by two factors: her love for Morari Bapu and the place, Mahuva." Furthermore, she recalled that once the marriage arrangements were finalized, the prospective bride, groom, and his family flew from New York to Mahuva for the wedding. When the parents-in-law of the new bride saw young women of the village, with no access to toilets in rural Talgajarda near Mahuva, they expressed their desire to help. With no prior connection to Morari Bapu or the *Ramkatha*, the groom's family donated ₹ 50,00,000 (€70,400) to build public toilets in the village. When the groom's family communicated their wish to Morari Bapu, the latter explained that public toilets were not a lasting solution in the given situation, since these would neither be cleaned nor maintained as

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public property in the long run. On Morari Bapu's recommendation, toilets were thus only built, within individual, low-income houses that were chosen irrespective of caste or religious differences. This act of charity addressed the problem of public defecation and several individual household toilets were constructed under their sponsorship. She added that since marital ties serve as an extension of networks, many family members from the groom's side have started to attend the *Ramkatha*. The grandmother went on to demonstrate her granddaughter's creativity—a huge picture frame of Morari Bapu's image that was made of several thousands of his tiny photos, cut and pasted into a collage. Such examples demonstrate how the *Ramkatha* transnational network centres upon enduring social units of household, family, village and community. Many individuals belonging to the first generation of new diaspora are professionals and have access to media and digital technologies. These technologies further enable the sharing of language, memories and other cultural specificities of everyday life from India. Technology facilitates material and emotional connection across boundaries and an ability to negotiate interpersonal relations, domestic hierarchies and moral values. For the second generation, the connections to home are more complex, fluid and relational as they navigate multiple worlds simultaneously. Besides their experience of exclusion, resulting from racism, transnationalism, and radicalization, exerts a constant pressure on them to assimilate with their homeland and parental practices. Due to multiple expectations and prohibitions, the second generation selectively responds and adapts to the diaspora, effectively carving out their own hybrid belonging to the homeland while simultaneously aligning themselves to a cosmopolitan and positive Hindu identity.

While in the *ashram* at Mahuva, I met many women who had lived and raised their families in the UK but had "come home" to rest. Many had purchased homes closer to the *ashram*, so that they could live near Morari Bapu and take his *darshan* every day. They told me with a hint of pride that they had given up their pensions in favour of spirituality, and even framed their actions in terms of *tyaaga* or sacrifice that saw them breaking away from emotional ties, while living away from their families settled abroad. Now they received a paltry pension from the British government that would have been higher, had they chosen to continue living in London. In the process of doing fieldwork in Rome, I noted many conversations related to old-age homes for Asian/ Indian/ Gujarati senior citizens from England. Earlier, many seniors preferred returning to India in their old age. However, this trend has also changed over a period of time. Many elderly women of first-generation migrants described their life stage of retirement as akin to the *vanprastha* (forest dweller), which follows the stage of *grihastha* (householder), and is a prelude to becoming a *sannyasi* (renouncer). The centrality of the *ashrama dharma* often comes up within the *katha* discourses and in classical texts and modern studies of Hinduism alike, the four *ashrama* are presented as specific modes that a person is expected to assume during successive periods of his life (Olivelle 1993: 4). They represent the four stages of life, exemplified by the *brahmacharya* or celibate student, the *grihastha* or married householder, the *vanprastha* or forest hermit, and the *sannyasi* or mendicant who renounces. For senior citizens, listening to Morari Bapu's *Ramkatha* enabled a gradual transition from being actively engaged in family pursuits to renouncing it all and adopting spirituality instead, and from being at the centre of action to a more peripheral role. My interlocutors said that they felt confident about moving into old-age homes in England now, rather than continue to live within extended families where they would be considered a burden. The provision for culturally specific care available in certain old-age homes where language, food and daily practices would be carried out according to regional and religious requirements was a matter of relief and encouragement.

Many of the senior members of the diasporic first generation who attended the *Ramkatha* have made plans to go to these care homes together to keep company with their contemporaries and continue watching *Ramkatha* on television, sing *bhajan* (devotional songs) and share anecdotes therein. In this case, not only does the *Ramkatha* provide a symbolic landscape for the collective dimension of memory where individual recollections are associated and narrated in a social environment, but it also empowers its diasporic followers with cultural resources for social survival in foreign lands. The younger generation that inculcates *katha sanskar*, are motivated to take up the responsibility of providing their elders with compassion, support and security and make an effort towards making these actions tangible in daily life. For many in the diaspora, *Ramkatha* serves as a nostalgic contact point for homeland practices that intensify culture and identity, with first-generation migrants sharing their personal memories and nostalgia from earlier *Ramkatha* performances. Reminiscing about the original performance format, they told me that Morari Bapu sang the *Manas chaupai* or quatrain, in its entirety for nine days in two sessions of mornings and afternoons. The stage would be decorated with flowers, fruits, coins, and traditional lamps. Many young children and parents would dress in silks and jewellery, enacting a tableau that mimicked the story of Ram and other characters of the *Ramcharitmanas*. Those who appeared on stage as gods such as Ram, Sita, and Hanuman, were worshipped and showered with gifts; in return they blessed the audiences. The current format of the *Ramkatha* that I observed that is more prevalent for second-generation migrants, is different from the one described by an earlier generation. Currently, the *Ramkatha* is performed in one session, typically in the mornings, and lasts for four to six hours. Morari Bapu recites a particular *chaupai* from the *Ramcharitmanas* and elaborates on the same for nine days. Sometimes the topics that are discussed focus on a particular theme or a character from the *Manas*. A few followers from the diasporic first generation however expressed displeasure with this new format. They told me that the "*katha* has disappeared" and that increasingly, "Bapu is only interested in the philosophical implications of the *Ramkatha* without telling the story." The second-generation that comprises younger audiences are expected to know the story of Ram in advance to understand the canonical exegesis. The first generation was also resentful that Bapu performed in Hindi unlike the previous *Ramkatha* performances which were in Gujarati. Incidentally, none of the younger generation ever reported any problem with language and it was Morari Bapu's openness towards new interpretations and mediations of the *Ramkatha* that had been seen as responsible for bringing the performance to wider, transnational audiences.

Conclusion

This exploration of the inter-generational Hindu diasporic identity and community building practices among the *Ramkatha* followers highlights the spatialization of memory through a transnational cultural performance. The case studies effectively show the agency of *Ramkatha* in constructing belongingness across generations and paving for a unique pattern of transnational adaptation. The popularity of Morari Bapu's *Ramkatha* establishes participation in ethnic, linguistic, and religious practices, which are important markers of identity within the diaspora. Through narration and imagination, the *Ramkatha* encourages formal participation in fluid performances of constructed relatedness and togetherness. As cultural texts, these performances provide engaging experiences that include a representational intensity based on simplified and repeated moral frames. At the core of its popularity lies the efficacy of the *Ramkatha*; the capacity to carry something into effect, such

as altered cognitive states across varied audiences. In symbolizing the audience's worlds, these context-driven narratives are simultaneously condensed or elaborated and employed to configure or decode motives and morals facilitating wider cultural flows. Since the bulk of his audiences comprise people of Indian origin, irrespective of age, caste, class, nationality or gender, the authenticity of symbolic communication and cultural interactions generate a spontaneous and unreflective trust whereby integrative processes create a sense of shared identity at an inter-group level.

Mapping the boundaries, conflicts, and compromises of the first- and second-generation Indian diaspora this work unravels the experiential worlds through the landscape of the *Ramkatha*. Rather than severing ties with the country of origin, an increased exchange is sustained by the diaspora through economic, political, and religious ties. Morari Bapu's mobile *Ramkatha* transforms and transfers religious beliefs, and helps to create communities besides promoting culturally adoptive strategies. For the first generation, there is a long-standing need to create a feeling of home in the host country. They are constantly engaged in an effort to preserve their cultural and traditional identities while living in foreign lands. For the second generation, the *katha* stories offer value of an action-centred approach that focuses on lived practices and the building of a strong diaspora community with dense transnational connections. The *Ramkatha* performances establish 'renewed contact' with the younger generation, legitimizing their accumulated cultural knowledge through the effective transmission of a *habitus* that becomes a conduit for new generational experiences to manifest. The younger generation makes good use of their assimilated selves and asserts their agency in defining their cosmopolitan identities, such as claimed by an interlocutor when affirming "being British-Hindu of Indian origin". As a space where ethnic experiences are shared, local acts of religious identification contribute to performing and creating 'Hinduness' for most audiences. Since adhering to their adopted country's mainstream living produces their value sets as unfixed, complex, and fluid, engaging with *Ramkatha* performances makes the younger generation feel familiar with community language, food, clothing, and acquire the ability to express themselves in Hindi, Gujarati, or Marathi, wear ethnic Indian apparel, and eat *sattvik* food.

Transnational social spaces emphasize that mobile persons are intensively involved in building social relations during the process of engaging in celebrations and commemorations. The challenge of nurturing the needs of the Hindu migrants of successive generations provides a foreground for innovation and creativity in performances. A multi-generational attendance of Morari Bapu's performances attests the performer's fine ability to navigate between the dialectics of self-definitions of his followers and positive assimilation during his *Ramkatha*. Sponsors and patrons of the *Ramkatha* mostly belong to the first generation and provide economic and cultural support for the overseas performance of *Ramkatha* for the subsequent generations. They provide the next generation of followers with an intermediate space among other resources, to connect to practices and peoples of their collective homeland. The *Ramkatha* that is an intergenerational and transnational collective of social and religious activities thus provides for active forms of engagement that overlap with family practices though which moral values are perpetuated, and cultural norms are transmitted and revealed.

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Reimaging Human-Nature Interactions and Reclaiming Marginal Identity through Folk Narratives of Sundarbans[1]

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The folklore of the Sundarbans, including religious epics, is primarily disseminated through oral history, embodying the lived experience of marginalized communities. Popular Sundarban narratives of folk deities such as Bonbibi have already been discussed in various international fora, highlighting the Sundarbans as a domain of tragic human-tiger conflicts. However, the Sundarbans folklore also contain stories of other human-nature interactions, like the response to cyclones, floods, epidemics outbreaks, and attacks by crocodiles, sharks and venomous snakes. These more localized relationships are confined to smaller narratives that outline the everyday nature of human-nature conflicts, marked by coexistence and symbiosis. This paper focuses on the diverse epistemologies that are contained within the folk narratives of the Sundarbans, presented in the form of customary rituals, *vrata-katha* propitiatory texts, and *thaan* or small-shrine worship. Beginning by examining the functions of various folk deities in the Sundarbans, this paper describes their worship by Dalit and Adivasi communities. The deities have their own mythologies that describe typical hierarchized struggles, wherein marginalized deities attempt to enter the Brahmanical pantheon. Their struggle is similar to the struggle for dignity among their Dalit-Adivasi worshippers (referred to pejoratively through abusive epithets like *chhotolok* in colloquial Bengali), and accused of aspiring to become a so-called *bhadralok*.[2] This paper highlights how marginalized populations structure the 'narratives of marginal identity' by commenting on mainstream Brahmanical religion. The argumentative thrust highlights how folk deity narrative traditions and practices are imbued with ecological knowledge that describe the community's relationship with the environment. Folk stories constitute an important method of talking about the environment, its changes, and how people adjust to these changes. The paper concludes by defining the confrontation between folk narratives that are specific to microregions and their Brahmanical *bhadralok* hegemonic counterpart to produce a collective cultural heritage that give more centre stage position to marginalized epistemologies, deities, communities, and persons.

Folklore, Deities, Sundarbans, Dalit, Adivasi

Introduction

Folk narratives in the Sundarbans constitute an arena of meaning-making where the local community uses socio-culturally and ecologically grounded mythology, folklore, songs, stories, and legends to make sense of their everyday lived experience. When orally or performatively disseminated in the community, the nomenclature used for such local epistemologies often defines them as 'folklore'—meaning traditional and collective. Elliott

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[1] Please note that the Sundarbans have several folk narratives and folk deities. This paper only deals with a selected few that emerged from discussions and observing the daily practices of interlocutors.

[2] *Bhadralok*, meaning 'gentleman', refers to the Brahmanical identity. It is a colonial concept that arose between 1757 and 1947 and was a term anyone with wealth and polish (usually English-like manners) could acquire. Being *bhadralok* within colonial culture consisted of an ardent display of 'respectable' religious activities that acquired social mobility in the public realm. In this paper, *bhadralok* is used synonymously with Brahmin and/ or Brahmanical. For more information cf. Bhadralok. (18.06.2021) *Banglapedia*, accessed 10.06.2022.

Oring (1986: 138-142) describes how folk or myth-based narratives have the ability to present the essence of our interest in ways that not only stimulate us, but also compels to anticipating the equivalent to what happens in our lives as in these stories or narratives. These narratives then, lend themselves to processes of teaching, learning, and growing a conscience with emotional values that allow the expression of morality—"vices and virtues; anger, fear, joy, grief, suspicion, hope, despair, and the complete gamut of emotions" (Ibid: 122). A large part of Indian folklore consists of stories and beliefs about deities that emerge from Dalit and the Adivasi communities and are based on local ethnic traditions combined with indigenous culture, that fall outside the Hindu Scriptures (McDaniel 2007: 276, Sharma 2021: 3). Such deities and their narratives are formulated by marginal communities, as a response to being disallowed from worshipping the Brahmanical pantheon. Some historians, using obsolete and racialized terminology (Bhattacharyya 1965: 155-156, Gaur 1968: 32-38) to describe India's non-Aryan characteristic, attribute its existence to the marginal identity fostered by the worship of marginal deities.

The Sundarbans have long encompassed a perilous landscape for disadvantaged communities, the majority of whom belong to the Scheduled Castes or Dalit communities, Scheduled Tribes known as Adivasis, and a few other backward caste communities and religious minorities. The Dalits in this case are primarily of East Bengali descent from the Poundras or Pod, and the Namashudra sub-castes. While the Adivasis mostly belong to the Chotanagpur's Oraon and Munda communities and the OBCs are from Midnapore in West Bengal (Jalais 2010: 26-27, Sarkar 2010: 74, Sen 2017). A continuous spate of cyclones, increasing flooding, erratic rainfall, shifting river courses, an increase in water levels, embankment breakage, land degradation, and soil salinity have negatively impacted agricultural yield in the Sundarbans, making it an unpredictable place for the seeking of a livelihood, especially for the poor. In such a situation, most people in the Sundarbans, particularly those who live on the fringes of forest areas, depend on forest produce like honey collection, fishing, and crab and prawn catching (Jalais 2010: 30-33, Uddin 2019: 292, Sen 2017, UNESCO World Heritage Centre 1992 - 2022). Due to the frequency of human-tiger conflict and conflict with snakes, crocodile and sharks while engaging in subsistence occupations have historically been associated with significant mortal peril (Jalais 2010: 44, Uddin 2019: 304-306, DasGupta 2020: 171, UNESCO World Heritage Centre 1992 - 2022). Frustrated with an increase resource crunch and growing ecological disasters, locals make meaning out of their perilous life conditions through customary rituals and beliefs, and celebrating the narratives of folk deities. According to Mukul Sharma, in his recent exploration of Dalit folktales contextualized within the environmental movement: "Local marginalized communities have found ways to connect with their 'untouchable' pasts and reaffirm their cultural memories through folklore, rituals, festivals, and celebrations, reconstructing their socio-cultural and environmental connections and laying claims over political-public spaces, rejecting the Brahmin-dominated cultural universe" (2021: 2). In recent times, the development of tourism that showcases the cultural, economic, political, and public sphere of the Sundarbans has intensified (Jalais 2007: 340), resulting in the organizing of folklore performances, festivals, and the public worship of folk deities that has resulted in the diffusion of their content and form, bringing visitors in closer connection to the 'marginalized communities' of the Sundarbans (Jalais 2010: 207-208, Sharma 2021: 13-14, Mukhopadhyay

2021: 4).[3] Their folk narratives have also become more visible, manifesting their environmental concerns, struggles, right to subsistence, and synchronicity with nature. The supernatural character of folk deities has been reimagined as "ecological guardians with vast physical, natural, and spiritual abilities who have the courage to emancipate society from repressive environmental and social institutions and bring in a peace accord between human-nature" (Sen and Mukherjee 2020: 3-4, Uddin 2019: 17, Sharma 2021: 10). Folk narratives are thought to circulate, primarily through oral tradition. Since they communicate in a face-to-face manner, and prefers orality over the written form, such narratives tend to exhibit specific characteristics—especially their multiplicity—their existence in multiple versions (Oring 1986: 122-123). In contemporary times, these myths, tales, and stories have been written down to preserve and acknowledge their cultural identity (Oring 1986: 123, Harvilahti 2003: 200-201). However, no single version can be claimed as the 'authentic' or 'correct', as each narrator promotes a different version and appropriates the story with alterations in the plot that incorporate present-day scenarios (Pender-Cudlip 1972: 11, Oring 1986: 123).

This paper includes an autobiographical account[4] combined with extensive field investigations and interviews,[5] carried out in different areas and communities of the Sundarbans, to get a more comprehensive and precise understanding of some select folk narratives and their associated practices. 'Folk narratives' as a term is thus, also used here as an umbrella category to encompass myths, legends, fairy tales, and fables. Despite knowing that these are distinct narrative types with their own distinct characteristics, these terms are often merged in term of their usage (MacCath-Morgan 2021). In the context of the Sundarbans, most folk narratives correlate with the genre of *katha* or Puranic mythology. Though mythology tends to reconstitute core narratives within larger ideological systems (Oring 1986: 124, Arnold 2018: 1-56), especially when they cater to local and indigenous communities at the margins of society struggling with their lives, each of these myths deal with some or the other variety of folk deities. "Myths have an element of a story that is frequently performed in a ritual or a ceremonial context that showcases conflicts between humans and nature, humans and their society, and humans and the gods of lower class and caste" (Oring 1986: 124-126, Biobaku 2017: 199-204, Sur 2006: 169-174). In the case of the Sundarbans and several other rural areas of Bengal, folk theatre or *jatra* also constitutes an important facet of preserving folk narratives.

The Emergence of Folk Deities in Sundarbans

This section discusses why there is an abundance of folk narratives in the Sundarbans and how folk deities through their different ritualistic and ceremonial contexts, embody the lived experiences of the locals. Here, both devotee and deity are considered inferior and struggling for upward mobility while keeping in accord with the larger social and physical environment.

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[3] 'Marginalized communities' is an umbrella term here, that accommodates heterogeneous communities consisting of Adivasis, Dalits and other Backward castes. Here, 'marginal', 'indigenous', 'local' and 'folk' are synonymous under the larger umbrella of meaning, though these terms do not obviously mean the same thing. The logic here is to indicate to communities that are excluded from the Brahmanical social, economic, educational, and/or cultural mainstream. This exclusion results in marginalization due to the unequal power relationships between social groups. (Cf. Hasnain 2021).

[4] The author is herself a native of the Sundarbans and her family follows such folk deities and rituals.

[5] As a part of the author's ongoing PhD dissertation, the names of respondents have been changed to maintain continuity and anonymity.

The Sundarbans is an archipelago with the world's largest mangrove forests located in the deltaic regions at the confluence of various rivers and the Bay of Bengal. The region stretches between West Bengal to the Haringhata River in Bangladesh, covering an area of about 40,000 square kilometres. The internal geography of the Sundarbans in particular, often alters drastically due to the effects of ocean tides and the movement of river courses. If in one place islands vanish altogether, at another, they form and thrive. The Sundarbans of West Bengal are home to about 4.5 million people (with another 7.5 million in Bangladesh), and most of its deltaic islands are forested, abounding with tigers, snakes, deer, crocodiles, and other fauna. The fisherfolk of the Sundarbans rely on the abundance of its waterways for their livelihood (fishing, catching crabs and prawn seeds), while other communities depend on the mangroves for various forest-products such as timber, fuelwood honey, and wax. However, Sundarbans locals risk their lives while eking out their livelihoods, being often attacked by wild animals—tigers, and some extremely venomous snakes like the king cobra, the Bengali krait (*Kalash*), crocodiles, sharks, and other predators (Uddin 2016: 291-293, Sen & Ghorai 2019: 6-7). The region also constitutes a threshold that is most vulnerable to climate change and impending natural disasters. The monsoon here consists of a close succession of severe cyclonic storms and low-pressure depressions forming in the Bay of Bengal (Biswas 2020). O' Malley, in his compiled 'Gazetteer of the 24 Parganas' even noted that there was "no safeguarding against the sudden fury of a cyclone and its record show that though they occur at irregular intervals, these violent storms are far more destructive to life property than either droughts or floods" (1914: 130). The destruction caused by these cyclones is mostly beyond comprehension, as people's livelihoods get destroyed, their houses get torn down, power systems and mobile networks become dislocated (Daniyal 2020. The intensity of storms leads to the intrusion of sea saltwater into farmlands within the delta, rendering them infertile for the next few years and resulting in famines (Biswas 2022). Sundarbans locals typically

Image 3.1: A typical arrangement for Itu Puja. The vessel with plants symbolises the deity Itu. Image Courtesy: Author.

respond to such calamities that expresses their desire to revitalize soil fertility and retrieve harvests despite adversity, through the worship of harvest-related deities.

Itu-*puja* (worship) is an example of this—a ritual that offers devotional homage and prayers to deities. It is a prominent folk festival among Bengali Dalits, celebrated in the month of *agrahayan* (harvest season). The idea underlying the worship of Itu or Inyati, who is also considered the goddess of grain, is to preserve the seeds of the winter crops like rice and mustard and increase their yield that in the hereafter would result in the salvation of the population (Sen 1995: 81-93, Bhattacharya 2018, Bengali Pujo Path 2019). Both married and unmarried women perform Itu-*puja* and once undertaken, a woman must continue with the ceremony till she can pass it on as an inheritance to a daughter or daughter-in-law. One of the most critical tasks of performing this ritual, is to read or recite the goddess Itu's *vrata-katha* or narrative. Often these oral recitations are carried out by elder women, who teach it to the younger generation. The narrative itself does not have a fixed structure, like many folk deities. The goddess is worshipped in a bowl full of earth, where the different seed grains of rice, gram, pea, mung, mustard, sesame, and barley are already yielding sprouted plants. As part of my own autoethnographic observations and reflections, I have often noted that the bowl is watered every Sunday as a part of the ceremonial practice (cf. Bengali Pujo Path 2019). The watering of the pot has to be balanced and carefully calculated; if too much or too less of water, then the seeds do not sprout, and die due to excessive waterlogging. The pot here signifies the deity herself, and is kept at the family altar along with other household deities. Several local women interlocutors from Sundarbans describe the significance of the pot as symbolic of women's lives—their sufferings from the time they are born into a family from a marginalized community located additionally in the ecological precarity of the Sundarbans. The pot of goddess Itu also signifies the unstable agrarian landscape and the urgent need for the proper rearing of plants necessary for a good harvest. The mythology of the goddess revolves around the vernacular concept of *obhab* or poverty, which augments women's suffering in every household of the Sundarbans. As the *katha* recounts it, parents mitigate this precarity by sacrificing their girl children—marrying them off too early in order to escape poverty. Itu, the folk deity is hence worshipped by women with a wish to lift their families out of deprivation and with a wish to bring peace and harmony to their own feminine impoverished lives.[6] While *vrata*s or undertaking ritual fasts was originally considered conventional among non-Brahmanical practitioners of folk religion that was moreover practised exclusively by women, this was later adopted into Puranic Hinduism. Kunal Chakrabarti in fact discusses how Nihar Ranjan Ray describes the indigenous communities of the eastern regions of India, who performed *vrata*s, as originating outside the so-called Aryan pale (1994: 220-221). To return to the several basic processes encompassed in the ritual, the *alpana* or floor decorations sporting creative designs in the white colour is an important part of worship. The gruel paste or the basic art material comprises a mixture of *kharimati* (rice) and *chalerguro* (rice flour) and making designs is considered a feminine domain of creativity (Ghatak 2013: 128, Chatterjee 2014: 133-134). This is followed by the memorialized recitation of the deity's narrative or *katha* in doggerel verses,[7] that describes

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[6] The detailed knowledge of Itu-*puja* reflects the author's own participation and detailed interview of her grandmother and aunts regarding the rituals and related folk narratives.

[7] A form of verse that is loosely constructed and often irregular, but very effective because of its simple mnemonic rhyme and loping metre. This form of verse is common in most folk literatures that have a strong oral and performative component. For more information on doggerel verse, cf. 'Doggerel', *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1998), accessed 30.09.2022.

the aim of the *vrata* performance. *Katha* here also constitutes the act of listening to the goddess's mythology that establishes a series of justifications for undertaking a *vrata* (Wadley 1983: 148-150). The worship of certain folk deities and the domestic practices of *vrata-katha*s do not involve priests, and are carried out by lower-caste men and women in their own homes (Basu 1966, Sen 1995: 71-72, Bangladesh Information Desk 2016). This aspect, I argue, constitutes a subversive act that deconstructs Brahmanical ritual and caste hegemony over the worship of Hindu deities. This subversion has led upper-castes and mainstream groups to include many of these folk deities within the larger Hindu pantheon, and the Brahmanical rituals used to worship folk deities has begun to infringe on the original *vrata* rites that were carried out by indigenous communities (Xavier 2009-10: 623-632, Ghatak 2013: 125-126). Most folk deities have traditional manuals that are cheaply printed, that document the worship rituals, rules and *katha* associated with the deity, locally referred to as *panchali* (Ghatak 2013:126). These booklets are found within marketplaces, and even at local grocery shops. These do not include the entire and detailed mythology of the deity, but consist of a summarised version of the tale and prayers (*mantra*) composed in doggerel verse to be recited and imbibed during worship. The ritual process of offering specific food items and flowers includes fasting and the reading of these *mantra*s and the *katha* (Anonymous 2019). Most interviewees endorse a good grasp over the different recited *vrata-kathas* of folk deities and confirm that they adhere to rituals and pass these oral narratives down over generations despite available booklets. Many locals know these oral narratives by heart, making the folklore an integral part of their regional and ecological identity. Subhadra Mondal, aged 52, an ardent worshipper of the goddess Itu says (interviewed 02.11.2021):

> I do not need a *pachali* alongside for reference anymore. I had memorized the Itu *vrata-katha* when I was ten. I learned it from my mother, and now I have passed it on to my two daughters, and daughter-in-law.

The goddess Tusu is another harvest-related folk deity, whose worship is quite widespread among the Adivasis of Sundarbans. Rafiqul Islam Khokan (2015: 11), in his exploratory study of the folk deities of Sundarbans, reveals that the goddess Tusu reached her present worshipped form in the Sundarbans through the many centuries of evolution before and during the colonial period. Worshipped mainly among the ethnic tribes of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Orissa, Tusu is conceived of as the farmer's wealth, including her worship into the category of fertility cults (Mukhopadhyay 2021:17). From the accounts of Sundarban locals, she is mainly worshipped as a harvest goddess, with the word *tusu* being identified here as the chaff of corn that is worshipped in the *poush* or nineth month of the Bengali calendar when harvests yield income and food (mid-December to mid-January). The ceremonies and ritual practices of Tusu are similar to Itu worship. A pot or a *ghot* also called a *lota*, or a *shora* is used for the ritual. Whereas the *ghot* is a globular spouted, middle-sized vessel made up of brass, copper, plastic or earth, the *shora* is a wider vessel. This pot is filled with earth, and only rice grain is planted within it, denoting the care that is required for harvesting this specific staple, symbolically expressing the experience of this harvest on a small-scale (Bengali Pujo Path 2019: November 13). In earlier times, the goddess Tusu was aniconic. However, in recent times, non-Adivasi, lower-caste households have also started worshipping her, and making idols of her that resemble Goddess Laxmi. They believe Tusu to be like Laxmi, who will similarly fulfil their wishes of an abundant harvest.
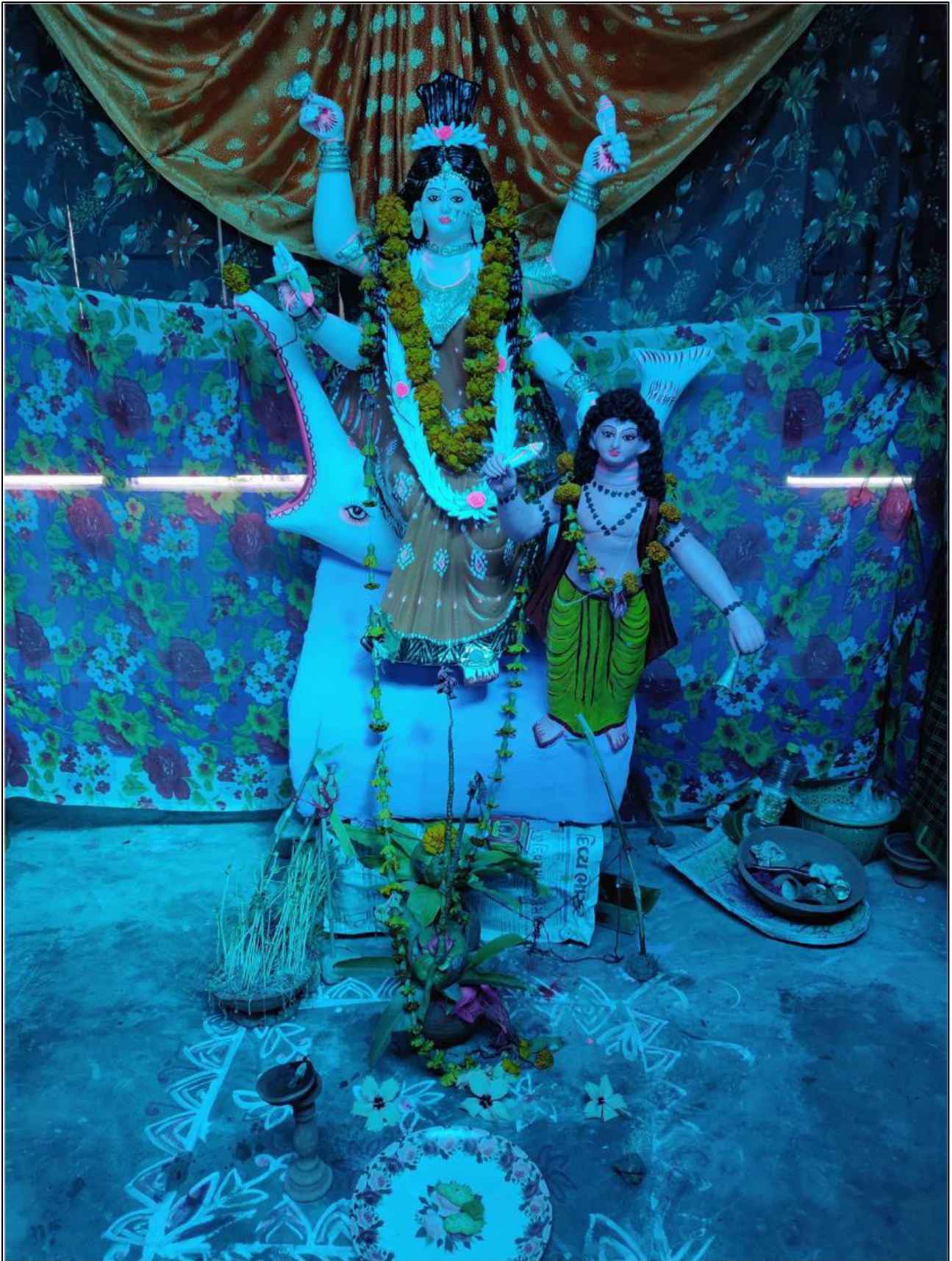
Image 3.2: Goddess Tusu. The sculpture is akin to goddess Laxmi, and earthen bowl of plants is placed next to the idol, similar to Itu Puja. Image Courtesy: Author.

The last five days of the *poush* month are set aside by Sundarban locals for the Tusu celebration that includes the traditional Tusu dance, set to verses composed in a song, based on the goddess's *vrata-katha*. When asked what Tusu means to them, one Adivasi interviewee said that Tusu was not just a goddess; she was another household woman as Ankita Dutta mentions in her blog, "close kin" of theirs (2021: January 22). One notable observation made during fieldwork by the author was that many folk deities like Itu did not have a physical form; they were aniconic. Basu (1966: 1-3) in his Bengali book on folk deities has identified the prevalence of the aniconic form among folk deities as a sign of them being primitive, and of a primitive religious stage, when people conceived of gods as supernatural forces. They took a lump of clay, a stone, or a clay bowl, filled it with soil to form a deity that represented life and fertility, and placed it on a *thaan* and worshipped it. *Thaan* here means the 'holy seat' of a deity in Bengali and is considered to be a deconstructed version of a temple (Sur 2006: 173-175). *Thaan*s are somewhat like altars and consist of smooth stone slabs or clay mounds with painted facial features and decorative adornments. Devotees make offerings to these *thaan*s considering it to be their deity's represented form (Sharma 2021: 9).

Image 3.3: Temporary thaan of Makaal, with the three mounds of clay denoting the deity. An offering of batasa (sugar biscuits) is made to the deity. Image Courtesy: Author

Makaal or Machaal Thakur is another example of an aniconic deity, formed from simple clay. He is considered the god of fish and is very commonly encountered among the fishermen community of the Sundarbans. There is no specific place of worship for Makaal and hence, people make a *thaan* for the deity on riverbanks or canals and worship him there before going fishing. No one really knows Makaal's physical attributes since no folk narrative has ever mentioned his shape and form. People offer him worship, and in doing so consider his

thaan itself as Makaal Thakur (Basu 1966: 1-6, Bangladesh Information Desk 2016). Most families cannot afford to buy an idol of a deity and hence, it is common for them to offer their prayers to the deity in the form of the *thaan* itself. Often miracles concerning a folk deity become associated with the *thaan* of her worship, and that particular area henceforth becomes auspicious and is often declared the permanent *thaan* of the deity. Author while attending on of the Puja of Makaal Thakur, finds-there is no specific *vrata-katha* associated with Makaal Thakur. However, he commonly occurs in folk songs and local poems, and most *katha* verses claim his equality to other famous folk deities like Bonbibi. Makaal Thakur is said to be satisfied, with just the faith of his devotees and if he is pleased, his devotees receive the blessings of catching a lot of fish.[8]

As a response to the ongoing spate of cataclysmic tragedies, people worship various folk deities that are part of their desire and need for protection from ecological disaster. The harsh environment of the Sundarbans leaves its inhabitants vulnerably to many diseases and epidemics such as cholera, skin diseases, food poisoning, endemic gastrointestinal disorders, and lung infections. The inaccessibility of the Sundarbans interiors moreover makes it impossible for agencies to construct proper medical facilities there. The vulnerable existential nature of life has led to the formation of several folk deities and their worship rituals and narratives, that are considered to be imbued with immense healing and life-saving powers, when practiced and performed by devotees. One such goddesses is Shitala and her *thaan*s abound across the Sundarbans, and in other parts of rural Bengal. In their study of the goddess Shitala among the Savara community, Ghatak (2013) claims that the worship of the goddess is not associated with either gratitude or spiritual attainment but with fear, with the only desire behind the worship being propitiatory—to ask the deity to cure ailments and ensure the well-being of the children.

Same as other folk deities, Shitala's ceremonial practices do not always necessitate the need for a priest; the rituals can be performed by women and non-Brahmin priests hailing from Adivasi or lower-caste backgrounds. Just like other *vrata-kathas*, Shitala has her own *Shitala Mangal*, a minor poem of the *Mangalkavya* texts discussed in the next section. Ayurvedic medical texts have references to Shitala's *kavya* or poem and usage of Neem (*Azadirachta indica*) in treating smallpox and thus sometimes associated to Goddess Shitala, which is therapeutic and medicinal (Wadley 1980: 57, Nicholas 1981: 39-40). This medicinal component produces Shitala as an ambivalent goddess of both health and ill-heath, both medicine and the absence thereof, for many rural areas across India. Her worship is no longer limited to the Sundarbans or to Bengal. Though smallpox is eradicated, Shitala's worship persists, and she presides over other childhood illnesses, that according to folk theology produces her as a guardian of children (Ghatak 2013: 124-125).

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[8] For more information on Maakal Thakur and its origin, please cf. Goswami's *Martye krisikajera suru siber hate, machacasera age puja pan makala thakura* (translation: Maakal Thakur was worshiped before the 'start' of fish farming at the hands of Shiva). *Prohor* (01.03.2022), accessed on 7.10.2022.

Image 3.4: Shitala thaan in the middle of an agricultural field. Image Courtesy: Author

Understanding Human-Nature Discourses through Folk Narratives

This section discusses the prevalence of *Mangalkavya* and other folk narratives like *punthi*. I argue that the folk narratives contained within the genres of *punthi, kavya* and *katha*, serve to amalgamate a comprehensive understanding of what the religiosity of the Sundarbans encompasses, in terms of their relationship with society, history, culture and ecology. These narratives present their audiences with the ecological knowledge of the region and its significance that are coded within mythology and tradition. This is helpful in reconstructing how locals came to be identified as marginal in the first place and helps them to further reconnect to their landscapes in an agential and empowered manner.

The *Mangalkavya* constitute a documented collection of popular Bengali folk literature, consisting of a comprehensive compendium of *vrata-katha*s associated with folk deities. Asit Bandopadhyay (1997: 39-41) defines the *Mangalkavya* or "poems of benediction as a collection of local epics and legendary narrative poems that are performed and theatrically represented in the public domain at fairs and marketplaces". Folk goddesses like Manasa, Shitala, and many others, such as Chandi, Shashti, and Bashuli, are worshipped mostly by rural women using simple non-Vedic domestic rites (Dimock 1962: 311, Bandyopadhyay 1997: 40, Chakravarty 2012). Bandopadhyay further claims that "this style of worship can be traced back to the "pre-'Aryan' history of proto-Australoid tribes in eastern India" (1997: 39). Folk deities are commemorated through the singing and chanting of rhythmic narratives, and longer stories called *panchali* that describes the deity's splendour. The deity's *vrata-katha* include verses that are chanted on the occasion of making a vow. From the perspective of my interviewees, the *Mangalkavya* are folk narratives that enumerate the greatness of

particular folk deities. However, Ghatak mentions that several historian scholars have also described these folk deities as *nimnokoti* (lower deities) due to their absence from classical Sanskrit literature (2013: 124).[9] Manasa is said to be indigenous to Bengal and play a significant role in assimilating folk religion into a unified ethos of regional Hinduism (Bhattacharjee 2021).

To summarise Manasa's *Mangalkavya as* told by interlocutors and further corroborated with existing literatures (Chakravarty 2012) and *Paanchali* in Bangla by D.D. Sastri (2016: 1-50), is as follows: the story revolves around her conflict with the merchant Chand Saudagar, an ardent worshipper of Shiva (a Brahmin god), who refuses to worship her, condemning her as a serpent deity of the lower-castes. Due to the story's topographical similarities with the Sundarbans and its marginalized groups (her devotees), Manasa represents the struggle of folk deities and their devotees when she challenges Chand Saudagar's Shaivism. She uses every weapon in her arsenal to turn him into her worshipper: she kills his seven sons, wrecks his fourteen merchant ships, and abandons him in the middle of the river, flailing and spluttering for live, just to demonstrate to him her wrath and power (Ibid). Her wrath symbolizes the resentment of female and subaltern deities and devotees, marginalized by society and mainstream religion, as she-they seek to establish her-their rightful place and self-worth within the pantheon of patriarchal and Brahmanical gods, priests and upper-caste *bhadralok* devotees. After the return of his sons and after he recovers his lost ships and commodities, Chand accepts to worshipping Manasa even if just with his left hand (wherein his right hand is dedicated to worshipping Shiva). At the end of the Manasa *mangal*, "Manasa merges into the larger Hindu pantheon as a deity" (Chakravarty 2012).

It can be argued that the story of Manasa challenges the three pillars of marginality: casteism and class discrimination; the supremacy of Sanskritic gods; and Brahmanical priestly supremacy. The affluent merchant class is also shown as being powerful in the Sundarbans (Roy 2020:150). The story further demonstrates how Manasa struggles to achieve social mobility and acceptance among Hindu devotees by entering the Hindu pantheon. Yet, because Chand worships her with his left hand, his acceptance simultaneously reveals and underlines her marginality. For inhabitants of the Sundarbans, folk deities such as Manasa are often depicted with strong human qualities, and engage directly with humans. Their stories deal with several nuanced problems that Sundarban islanders face, and the narratives of these deities demonstrate how devotees overcome these difficulties. Locals believe that most folk deities and their narratives showcase the conflict between humans and nature in society, especially as the stories of Manasa and Shitala are strongly imbued by an omnipotent threat of conflict. This conflict is the most important characteristic of the *Mangalkavya*s and even *punthi* literature is full of conflict-ridden stories.

Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar has given an extensive explanation to Punthi literature in her book, 'The Sundarbans: folk deities, monsters and mortals' (2010). It talks about how *punthi* "has flourished in the deltaic river plains of Bengal between the 17th and 19th centuries and was

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[9] Ghatak (2013) in her paper have cited several historians, who in their work have mentioned about lower caste deities. For more information, cf. Wadley (1980), Puranas (1908), Risley (1991), Tarakaratna (1947), Williams (1879).

Image 3.5: Jatra or folk theatre performace of goddess Manasa's story from the Mangalkavyas at Samsernagar village, Sundarbans.

devoted to documenting the struggle between humans and the natural environment of the Sundarbans especially wild animals" (Ibid: 180). One such narrative is that of the goddess Bonbibi called the *bonbibir johurnama* that describes how she as the forest's protector, protects locals from the wrath of Dakkhin Rai (The Tiger God).[10] She distributes the forest and its resources equally between them, presenting readers for the first time with the discursive idea of shared spaces between humans and animals in the Sundarbans (Sen and Mukherjee 2020: 02, Uddin 2019: 300, Sarkar 2010: 180-183). While the *punthi* was written by Banayuddin in 1877, there were many later versions of it, with all the texts written in ever simpler verses to help people easily understand, learn, and chant them for safety before going inside the forest (Sarkar 2010: 32-33; Jalais 2010: 71-75, Sen and Mukherjee 2020: 01, DasGupta 2020: 176). Bonbibi and Dokkhin Rai's folk narratives have come to culturally symbolize the Sundarbans and scholars worldwide, working on the Sundarbans have analysed this myth (Sarkar 2010, Jalais 2010, Uddin 2019, Sen & Mukherjee 2020, DasGupta 2020, Mukhopadhyay 2021). The popularity of Bonbibi has also somehow served to eclipse

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[10] For more detailed information, read: "It tells the tale of the birth of Bonbibi and her brother Shah Jongoli and their winning over of the Sundarbans. They were sent to the Sundarbans by Allah to save its people from the villainous tiger, Dokkhin Rai, who could take human form. He would take the lives of the people who came searching for wood, food, wax, or honey in the Sundarbans. Dukhey was given as sacrifice to Dokkhin Rai in lieu of the resources garnered by his uncle from Rai's forests. Dukhey, scared by his fate, sought the security of the forest goddess. Bonbibi waged a war against Rai and ultimately won. Barkhan Gazi, a resident of the forest (now remembered as a pious saint), requested Bonbibi to spare Rai's life and establish order in the forest. She did as she was requested by equally dividing the forest resources among the animals and forest dwellers" cf. (Uddin 2019: 298, DasGupta 2020: 175, Sarkar 2010: 30-52, Mandal 2018: 446- 448).

the importance of other folk narratives and folk deities in the Sundarbans, and as one of my respondents Subhash Biswas said (interviewed 10.02.2021):

> We believe in Bonbibi, but we don't organize annual festivals for Bonbibi, as we are not dependent on the forest. Four years ago, my son was on his deathbed due to a snakebite by a *Kalash* (Common Krait). I vowed to *maa* Manasa that if she saved him, I would worship her devotedly and make a permanent *thaan* for her in my home. Since then, every rainy season, I organize a *puja* ceremony of *maa* Manasa, and invite a local *jatra* company to perform the Manasa *mangal*.

Similar to the Sundarbans flagship species of the royal Bengal tiger, several other species like snakes also play an important role in demonstrating human-animal interaction and its dynamics through folk deities, mythology, and customary rituals. Manasa worship represents the snake and through folklore communicates an ethos of snake conservation. Snakes in the Sundarbans are known to be highly venomous and are found in abundance with almost thirty-seven species. More than the human-tiger conflict, Sundarban is known for its human-snake conflict, where the number of human deaths by snakebite according to my interlocuters, is triple that of a tiger attack. Often, tiger conflicts result in retaliation from humans, by means of illegal poisoning or shooting. A legal way of tackling tiger attacks is by electrifying fences, or creating a double nylon net boundary around the forest, or wearing masks to confuse the attacking tiger. However, in case of snakes, there have not been any preventive measures taken to reduce or prevent the conflict. Locals believe that the "one who worships Manasa cannot ever kill a snake", and if they do, they have to face the wrath of the goddess that entail snakebites and infertility. In the form of her divine figure, Manasa is seen sitting on a lotus, and it is customary to also offer her with lotus flowers as part of her worship. The lotus is quite central to the ecology of the Sundarbans and is considered to contain self-purifying properties, especially from their continuous inundation by saline water in local ponds. In the Manasa *mangal*, the lotus symbolizes regeneration and rebirth and hence, many devotees worship Manasa for her "fertility giving powers" (Dimock 1962: 320, Jash 1986: 170).

Snakes are easily the most feared reptiles and have been portrayed negatively, and discriminated against. They have not been enough recognized as a vibrant part of the Sundarbans wildlife that closely interacts with the human world. The terror of snakes highlights their marginality, as well as the marginality of the Sundarban locals who coexist with snakes through the worship of Manasa, and respectfully ally themselves to the snake's conservation. Along with customary rituals, the Sundarban people have accepted snakes as part of their daily lives, and are well aware of how snakes constitute an essential part of their ecosystem. Locals confirmed-this has led to the decline in snake catchers and snake charmers in Sundarbans and moreover, there are increasing awareness campaigns combined with snake-handling training sessions organized by local bodies and NGOs such as 'Nature Mates organisation' and 'nature wildlife organisation' that are keen to conserve the ecological balance and flora and fauna of the region (Das 2022).

Simply put, folk narrative is a complex cultural phenomenon that affect the lives, relationships, cultures, and natures of people, helping them in turn to build their own relationships with nature. Many authors agree on the necessity of conserving folklore (Ceriaco et al. 2011: 1-2, Dubi 2017: 57-58, Das et al. 2021: 3) as an important document of biodiversity threat and the human response to it. In fact, sociologists and anthropologists have emphasized that the

traditional ecological knowledge of a community is conserved and represented within their folklore that morally outlines and enables appropriate rules, and appropriate human response to environmental threat through the coding of emotions: fear, reverence, etc (Ceriaco et al. 2011: 3-5). Berkes (2008: 1-2) uses the revolutionary term "sacred ecology" to stretch the boundaries of this argument that holds ecology as central to religious practice, in a context of the devotee depending entirely on his environment and ecology for his subsistence. However, several folk deities and their *katha*s that advocate human-nature coexistence are viewed with a certain scepticism as depictions of danger and conflict, that view devotee communities as fear-ridden and precarious. Their worship of folk deities and their 'fear' of ecological catastrophes here, serve as a warning for megacities like Kolkata, who are highly susceptible to cyclones-like the recent calamity of Amphan in May 2020 (Biswas 2020).

"About 80% of the world's population relies on indigenous or traditional knowledge that is deeply established and embedded within their oral traditions about human-nature relations" (Nemogá et al. 2022: 3). The Convention on Biological Diversity of the United Nations acknowledges the significance of traditional and "indigenous knowledge to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity" as asserted thoroughly in Dubi's (2017) and Nakata's (2002) research and this knowledge is said to be an integral part of the social capital of the locals, helping them to take control over their lives and maintain an equilibrium with nature (Klubnikin et al. 2009: 1302, Jalais 2010: 76-78, Das et al. 2021: 5-6, Nemogá et al. 2022: 11). People in the Sundarbans have amalgamated their traditional ecological knowledge through folk narratives, and the customary practises of folk deities. Hence, it can be said that folk narratives mirror the socio-cultural and environmental practises of the Sundarbans, wherein the story is both created and told. The everyday life experience of the Sundarban islander is filled with stories of conflict with nature that actually traces the history of their coexistence with the natural environment.

Conclusion

While Sundarban residents constantly struggle with natural calamities, the *bhadralok* urban elites view the Sundarbans as an exotic, beautiful and untamed locale, that is simultaneously marginal. They would not come here to live permanently, but will only visit for touristy purposes (Jalais 2007: 27-38). Often their view of the Sundarban inhabitants construct the latter as helpless and tragic. For Sundarbans residents, their own landscape, however difficult in contemporary times due to climate change, is never a marginal terrain. What is marginal for the *bhadralok* is in fact at the very centre of life for Sundarban inhabitants, rendering the *bhadralok* perspective about them as a process of marginalization itself. The lives of the same Sundarban marginalized communities have, gradually over time, found expression within literature, metamorphosing their articulation into what can be considered a movement towards finding a regional and vernacular voice that counters their systemic silencing. Authors and researchers from Sundarban marginalized backgrounds have found their voices in exploring, powerfully describing and analysing their own oral traditions and folklore in what are agential and empowering ways. Those denied a voice, have protested their stand and recounted their marginalization, through their ability to bargain for power within the globalized marketplace. They have found visibility as writers, poets, academics, and as social activists litigating their own causes. When marginalized and socially disadvantaged communities raise their voices in protest and asserting their rights, their voices give powerful expression to their

own folklore, mythology and oral narratives—an acknowledgement that folklore is indeed mainstream literature—a means to reclaim identity. Even though the Sundarbans are full of danger, its inhabitants are emotionally resilient due to their folk deities and folk practices that are imbricated within the region's eco-human symbiotic relationship for decades. As a result, folk narratives are significant not just in terms of their cultural identities but also in terms of their "geographic and communal identities" (DasGupta 2020: 177), which are both marginalized. However, it is not simply a "fear-based relationship" (Ibid: 177) with the environment; Sundarban inhabitants also have a convivial attitude towards it. Their respect for nature and compassion for it is existential, producing danger and death as a common motif in religious texts and daily customs.

Classical and *bhadralok* historians and thinkers have often tried to make sense of the subaltern by writing their history in hegemonic ways that reduces it to a simple narrative about marginality. By depicting the subaltern thus, Brahmanical historians thus secretly nurture a saviour complex that is colonial in nature. Sundarban folklore and folk deities are instead a vibrant source of resilience and resistance to their reduction, within the production of social relations made by the *bhadralok*. Sundarban folklore deconstructs preconceived hegemonic notions, by reconstructing and reimaging an indigenous identity that transcends the *bhadralok-chhotolok* binary, or marginal-mainstream, and rural-urban binaries, and instead emphasizes the multicultural and trans-local identity of the Sundarbans. As Deepali Debi (aged 62), who is leaving Kumirmari (in the Sundarbans) after losing her husband and shifting in with her sons in Kolkata, says (interviewed 23.12.2021):

> We will not stay in this land forever; we will have to leave this homeland one day or the other; but the stories of our miraculous gods and goddesses will remain with us for generation after generation.

It can be inferred that even if the landscape transforms, as happening in many parts of the world due to climate change, the identity of the Sundarbans will continue to endure, making Sundarbans more than just a physical place. The Sundarbans in this context becomes a mind-body-emotions-ecological-folk theological identity that is larger than Bengali or even Indian—since Bangladesh too shares the cultural-ecological zone. While it must be said that many erstwhile inhabitants of the Sundarbans have gradually migrated away due to the climate crisis, and those who dwell outside often seek to blend with *bhadralok* society as part of their social mobility that comes with affluence, urbanism and globalization, there is a local adage that describes their identity better. The adage says, when a person is repatriated to his homeland, folk narratives from there transform that person and take them back to being an islander of the Sundarban, helping him to reclaim his own marginalized identity that becomes an emblem of dignity and honour. It is exactly the same relationship that reclaiming the marginalized deity and his or her marginalized devotee underlines—owning their marginalized identity with pride.

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Of Hunting and the Hunted: Vayanattukulavan *Theyyam* and the Enunciation of Being 'Backward.'

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The Thiyyas are a prominent backward caste community in Kerala. The contributions of the heterogeneously constituted Thiyya community towards the modernization of the north Malabar region are noteworthy. However, the assertion of modern forms of visibility on the part of the community has prompted modes of reprisal from the dominant caste in disparate forms. This paper focuses on the discourse over the ban on the ritual of hunting in the worship of Vayanattukulavan Theyyam, believed to be the tutelary deity of the Thiyya community. The hunting ritual is often associated with offering meat to the Kulavan Theyyam as a gesture of respect and gratitude for the protection that the deity is believed to bestow on the devotees and people in general. The paper analyses how the demand for a ban centres on an association drawn between the primitive nature of the ritual and the backward status of the Thiyya community. The backward caste status of the community is identified as inherent to the community than as an infirmity effected by an unequal, savarna social order. The tools of environmentalism and animal protection are mobilized to supplant modern, politicised forms of mobility aspired and achieved by the Thiyya backward caste community .

Thiyya, Caste, Modernity, Ritual, Environmentalism

Introduction

Vayanattukulavan *Theyyam* is revered as the *kuladeivam* (or tutelary deity) of the Thiyya[1] backward caste community[2] in the north Malabar region.[3] The deity is worshipped in disparate forms across the region extending from *Kodagu* district in Karnataka to *Kasaragod* district in Kerala. The Kulavan deity also called *Thondachan* (or the eldest one) is invoked and then performed by men from the Vannan[4] community, in *Theyyattam* festivals, mostly, but not exclusively, in Thiyya tharavadus.[5] The oral liturgy and the staging of the Vayanattukulavan

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[1] Thiyyas are a backward caste community located in the northernmost region of Kerala, which extends northwards from Korapuzha, or the Elathur River that flows through Calicut district. Though their numerical supremacy has given them an edge over cultural visibility in the region, this hasn't translated into political representation in the state. Their presence in the various domains of the public sector remains minimal despite an abundance of political leaders from the community.

[2] OBC or the Other Backward Class is used to classify socially and educationally backward caste and religious communities.

[3] North Malabar, along with south Malabar was an administrative unit of British India under Madras Presidency till 1947 and later a part of Madras State till 1956. On 1st November 1956, following the States Re-organization Act, the region, along with the Kasaragod taluk of south Kanara district was merged with the erstwhile princely states of Cochin and Travancore to form the modern state of Kerala. Today, North Malabar refers to that region of Kerala that covers the districts of Kasaragod, Kannur, Mananthavady taluk of Wayanad district, Koyilandy, Vatakara taluks of Kozhikode district and Mahe.

[4] Vannan refers to the person traditionally associated with the caste occupation of washing. They are enlisted as a Scheduled Caste community in Kerala.

[5] Thiyya families invoke the deity as acknowledgement of vows taken, or gratitude for prosperities showered on the family members. It pre-supposes cooperation from the whole village in collecting and offering services from

consist of multiple pointers that allude to the specificity of the *Thiyya* community. The transition and upward mobility of the *Thiyya* backward-caste community into an organized, agriculture-based collective are hinted at on various occasions of the *Theyyattam*. It is also a manifestation of the social visibility of a (backward caste) community   that draws on the possibility of coexistence and cooperation with other caste, and religious communities for its realisation. The disparately constituted emergent community of the devout, encompassing the embodied deity during performance, devotees, and the organizers is united in their belief in *Theyyam* in general, and in the tutelary deity of the Thiyya community in particular. The ritual of hunting associated with the Vayanattukulavan *Theyyattam* has recently come under scrutiny for posing a threat to animal life in the region. This paper analyses the discourse over the ban on the ritual of hunting in conjunction with the modern forms of visibility aspired by the Thiyya backward caste community. The paper explores how the assertion of modern, politicised caste identity is supplanted by *savarna* assertions of backwardness, as an inherent attribute of the community.

Theyyam is a ritualistic practice of worship based in north Malabar where persons from certain lower caste and tribal communities,[6] are temporarily transformed into oracles. Elements of art and performance impart the trans-real ambiance of devotion with dramatic impact that becomes pivotal to the *Theyyam*'s actualisation. In these moments of being god, the performer turned deity is venerated and worshipped by devotees irrespective of their caste, gender, and religion. *Theyyam* however, does not free the *kolakaran* (or the one who transforms into the oracle) from caste discrimination once s/he is out of her *kolam* (the transformed body). The resonances of *Theyyam* exceed narratives that pin them on resistance and subversion or else, their improbability.[7] As a contemporary ritual practice that preconditions the participation and contribution of disparate communities *Theyyam* qualifies as a micro-historical chronicle of the public/s it creates. The ritual of hunting in Vayanattukulavan *Theyyam* assumes significance for its allusions to the prehistory of the Thiyyas and the transition of the community from a hunting-based society into an agricultural society that demonstrates allegiance with an extended *avarna* (non-Brahmanical) collective. The condemnation of the ritual however is based on accusations of savagery and reflections on the unrefined disposition of the worshipping community. The paper analyses the discourse on the ban to elaborate on how aspirational attempts for mobility in a backward caste community are supplanted by the dominant caste system. The first part of the paper elaborates on the ritual of hunting in the Vayanattukulavan *Theyyam* and on the Thiyya community of devouts constituted around the *Theyyam*. The second section examines how the narratives of environmental conservation raised against the ritual of hunting directly reinforce 'backwardness' as an inherent attribute of the Thiyya community.

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food grains to the successful culmination of the program. Other caste communities like Nairs and Maniyanis also occasionally host the festival. Most Vayanattukulavan *tharavadus* (ancestral homes) (more than 134 in number) are located in the region of Palakunnu *Kazhakam* (the region that falls under the ritualistic practices and customs of a specific temple) which includes Kottappara *tharavadu* where the *Theyyam* was first invoked and performed.
[6] Men belonging to lower-caste and tribal communities like Vannan, Malaya, Velan, Mavila and Pulaya transform into and perform the kolam (the body in trance that is mediumistic) during the *Theyyam*.
[7] Mohan (2021) in "How Caste Still rules the Social Lives of Theyyam Practitioners in Kerala," explains instances of caste discrimination faced by the Theyyam performing community on a daily basis in *The Caravan*, accessed 12.01.2022.

Vayanattukulavan *Theyyattam* and the Ritual of Hunting

References to hunting, archery, and warfare are predominant in the liturgy and performances of *Theyyam*s, especially those worshipped by the Thiyya community.[8] The bow and arrow are important accessories of *Theyyam*s like *Muthappan* and Vayanattukulavan. While the myth of *Muthappan* refers to the camaraderie between tribes and their practice of hunting for food, its liturgy describes hunting and the graded distribution of meat in significant detail. The liturgy of another *Theyyam* called Kathivannur Veeran narrates the story of a Thiyya man who loses his life in warfare. Vayanattukulavan is described as the commander-in-chief of a fort in the town of Valapattanam in Kannur district of north Malabar. He is the teacher of a martial art form called *Kalari* who teaches in Vazhoor Perumkalari as referenced in another myth. The *thottam* or oral liturgy of Vayanattukulavan also cites the practice of hunting in multiple instances.

The liturgy describes hunting as leading to non-compliant foraging in the forest. According to the liturgy, the deity Shiva, disguised as a hunter during one of his strolls in the forest, comes across a tree that is oozing toddy. Shiva ingests the toddy secreted at the foot of the tree and this leaves him inebriated. His mighty steps of elation terrify his wife Parvathy who then goes to the forest to reroute the flow of toddy to ooze at the top of the tree. Furious at being manipulated, Shiva thumps his thigh. A boy is born whom Shiva calls Divyan (the divine). Divyan is entrusted with the task of extracting toddy from the tops of coconut trees. He is also given the right to hunt and forage anywhere in the forest, except in the *Kadalivanam* (an area in the forest dense with resources). However, Divyan defies this injunction and drinks from the forbidden tree. Shiva, enraged at this, curses Divyan with blindness, though he is also eventually appeased, blessing Divyan with a pair of false eyes and a torch made from a lighted bundle of dry coconut fronds that would aid his vision. However, Divyan's normal vision could not be restored and in desperation, Divyan throws his false eyes and torch away. These fall in the courtyard of a Thiyya man called Adiparamban Kannan and Divyan appears to Kannan, and ensures him protection in return for sanctuary (Kalanad 2016: 53-55).[9] The Divyan who appeared to Kannan is believed and worshipped as Vayanattukulavan. There is another liturgical reference to hunting that occurs in connection with Vayanattukulavan's display of expertise as a hunter, following his humiliating reception by the *Kolathiri*, the reigning king of *Valapattanam* fort. The Kulavan, it was said, travelled from Wayanadu to Malanadu accompanied by Nariyankora Panikker, Kottavathukkal Thandan, Mottamballi Mappila, Kadakambally Moosari, Cheeyamcheri Akambadi, and Kollachamkudi (Rahman 2016: 89),[10] and finally reached *Valapattanam* fort. The *Kolathiri* received him and served him rice gruel with *kulichithala* (a preparation of pony fish) in a bid to demean and disrespect Kulavan. Sensing the rage of the Kulavan, the *Kolathiri* challenged him then, to prove his skill in hunting. Thoroughly triggered by this, Kulavan summoned animals to Chalad beach from the mountains Udayamana and Asthamana and asked Nariyankora Panicker to kill them. The *Kolathiri* realised his mistake and honoured the Kulavan by conferring him with a position as the head of the military gymnasium of his kingdom.[11] The Kulavan henceforth protected the

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[8] This includes the prevalence of animal-shaped adjuncts like *maanthala* (deer head) and *maankaal* (deer limb) in *Theyyam*s like the Padakathi Bhagavathy. Likewise, the liturgies of *Theyyam*s like the Vishnumurthy and the Malappilavan contain multiple references to hunting.

[9] See Raghuraman's (2021) *Vayanattukulavan: The God With Silver Sight*, accessed 05.05.2022.

[10] The men who accompany *Kulavan* to *Malanadu* belong to different castes and religious communities.

[11] Interview with Sujith Udayamangalam, 05.05.2022.

people of the region from attacks of wild animals and subsequently became their deity. This event is commemorated in the ritual called *theyyathin kanjhi kodukkal*' or 'serve gruel to the *Theyyam*', in Vayanattukulavan *Theyyattam*. The ritual of hunting in Vayanattukulavan *Theyyattam* also alludes to serving meat to the Kulavan as a gesture of honour and respect. This ritual of serving precedes the *Vellattam* (the *Theyya kolam* that precedes the main deity) of Kandanarkelan *Theyyam*, a *Theyyam* that is performed before the invocation of Vayanattukulavan *Theyyam*.

The narrative story of the performance surrounds a Thiyya man called Kelan and alludes to the consequences of his reckless destruction of forestland for the sake of swidden cultivation. As the story goes, the Thiyya Kelan, was sent by his mother to Wayanad to prepare the farmland for swidden cultivation. Kelan set about burning the land in a bid to clear it. Soon the fire went out of control and the drunk Kelan was trapped in its midst. As a last resort to escape, he climbed up a gooseberry tree. Now, two snakes lived on that tree. Kelan and the snakes fell into the fire and were burnt to death. Vayanattukulavan on his way to hunt found Kelan's body and brought him back to life with a touch of his bow. The camaraderie between the two is the central feature of the mythology encompassed through the ritual of hunting that is part of Vayanattukulavan *Theyyam*. The Vayanattukulavan *Theyyattam* lasts four days. On the second night, a group of men bearing firearms leave for the forest in groups for hunting. They are expected to return before the *Vellattom* of Kandanar Kelan with the game meat tied onto poles.[12] The hunted animals are then laid on coconut fonds. Kandanar Kelan cuts the meat and divides it into three portions using a small knife. This meat is later distributed to the deities and the devotees.

There are regional disparities in the practice of the ritual of hunting. While the hunting is symbolically performed in most places in Kannur district, *Theyyattams* held in certain places in Kasaragod district choose to perform the actual practice of hunting. The reasons for this disparity are variegated, ranging from the backwardness of the region owing to its relative exclusion from the development policies of the state to the existing forest cover of the region. The discourse of the ban on hunting however focuses solely on the backwardness of the Thiyyas who are held responsible for the dwindling animal resources of the region. The paper argues that the demand for the ban is founded on a *savarna* perception of environmental conservation that disavows the caste-induced cause of structural inequality and frames the problem as a consequence of the inherent backwardness of the Thiyya community.

The 'Nature' of Caste and the Caste of Hunting

The recent rise in the number of Vayanattukulavan performances every year is cited as the prime reason for the sudden concern about animal life. Takemura (2018: 40) describes how police officers, following widespread protest, intercepted many rituals held in the period between 2005-06, to catch hunters and stop the practice of hunting wild animals. It was noted that the number of endangered wild animals meant to be protected, was dwindling due to the ritualistic hunting organized during every *Theyyattam*. District-wide campaigns were held, workshops were organized by forest and wildlife departments, and literatures were produced to sensitize the public regarding the dangers posed by ritual hunting to the animal life of the region. Following a PIL (Public Interest Litigation) filed by Neythal (an environmental-based organization based in Kasaragod district), an interim High Court order demanded immediate

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[12] See, "Kandanar Kelan Theyyam," *Travelkannur.com: Promoting Cultural Tourism*, accessed 12.02.2022.

and effective action to stop illegal ritual hunting in the guise of the Vayanattukulavan *Theyyamkettu*.[13] However, this sudden concern for dwindling wildlife did not translate into any substantial-action plan that would stop the practice (Takemura 2018: 40). On the contrary, a new body of literature was produced that foregrounded the backwardness of the Thiyya community, the key patrons of the *Kulavan Theyyattam*.

The discourses that were produced in favour of the ban centred mostly on two aspects of the Theyyattam. The first was an implicit suggestion about the backwardness of the community in the region which was said to be resistant to change. They were compared with the Thiyyas from Kannur district who practiced symbolic sacrifice. The inability of the community to modify its rituals, by replacing animal sacrifice with symbolic sacrifice, was identified as the trait of a regressive community that refused to progress. While describing the need for modifications in rituals in keeping with modern social and environmental concerns, A.K. Nambiar cites instances of two ancestral communities that performed the same *Theyyam* but with alterations made in their mode of executing rituals. While the Veeranjhira Bhagavathy *Theyyam* performed in a Nambiar ancestral village called Manjheri *Tharavadu* in Cheruthazham, in Kannur Taluk was accompanied by the ritualistic slaughter of animals, a Brahmin ancestral house called Maathapalli resorted to symbolic sacrifice during the *Theyyattam* (Nambiar 2010: 53). A.K. Nambiar explains that "the reason for the change in the ritualistic practice is the change that has happened in the society's value system and perception of life" (Ibid. 2010: 52) and that "a modern society which is the continuation of an ancient society that had honoured nature as mother-source of life, should return from 'the role of the hunter' to that of the protector" (Ibid. 2010: 54).

The mode of symbolic sacrifice adopted by the Brahmin community is conjectured as progressive without further historicization of caste-based apprehensions about meat eating. The hesitancy to engage with the language of caste, eliminates the Brahmin community's advocacy of symbolic sacrifice (in place of animal slaughter), as a manifestation of *savarna* behaviour. On the contrary, their advocacy transforms into a demonstration of their modern sensibilities, that is keen on environmental conservation. Being highest in caste here translates into an assurance of progress based on an association presumed between caste identity and the modifications effected to an erstwhile ritual, identified as savage. By implication, the Thiyyas who refuse to refashion their ritual, thus becomes read as a community expressing their inherent backwardness in identifying the 'evil' of engaging in animal sacrifice. The allusion to inherent backwardness recurs in the writings of others supporting the ban. For example, E. Unnikrishnan, whose paper on hunting in the context of the Vayanattukulavan ritual, which was instrumental in boosting the controversy surrounding animal sacrifice, describes the similarity of the origin myth of the Thiyyas with other *avarna* communities and their 'primitive' identity that persuades them to associate with the Shaiva tradition. He writes (Unnikrishnan 2010: 77):

> The Adivasi community Bheel in Central Asia has a myth similar to Vayanattukulavan. The dark-skinned son born to Shivan from a beautiful creeper is excommunicated for disobedience. The Bheels believe that they are the successors of the forest trodder. The Malayar and Pulluvar of North Kerala also have such origin myths related to Shiva and Narada. All these communities idolize

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[13] See Petition Report "Naythal (Coastal Information vs State Of Kerala) Represented By The on [sic] 10 June 2009," *Kerala High Court*, accessed 09.04.2022.

their origin by attributing divinity to it. Also by conferring the paternity of their clan to the primitively dressed and short-tempered Shiva, these communities, with experiences of caste atrocity, vindicate their uncivilized nature.

The projection of primitivity onto an *avarna* community underlies the discourse supporting the ban. While discussing how backwardness of OBC communities ought to be understood as a result of the "colonially valorised exploitative social relations," rather than something that was naturally evolved, G. Aloysius (2022: 412) describes how it is indispensable to understand the relevance of casteism in abetting backwardness.

> The systemic and ideological nature of the retrieved caste does not figure here. Their lack of modern education, non-participation in the services, and need for representation are all the *consequence* of their backwardness and not their *cause*. With the collusively and, therefore, ideologically laid out parameters of eligibility, merit, and qualifications, all very much along the traditional skills of the Brahmanical, they, indeed, require concessions, privileges, exemptions and other forms of condescension. The terms of the discourse as well as the standard for the new public-political life have been set by the colonially valorised Brahmanical.

The second reason cited by the supporters of the ban is the exponential increase in *Theyyattams* held in a year due to the rise in financial influx from the Gulf. Kulavan *Theyyattams* which used to be held once every 15 or 20 years were now being organized many times a year owing to the improvement in the economic status of Thiyyas because of gulf money (Kunjhikrishnan 2010: 95):

> One would have thought that it would be one-time defiance of the law of a grand collective held once in a while. But I was wrong. In the wake of gulf money and the new financial invoked awakening, this has become a permanent spectacle in various parts of Kasaragod district in the months of *meenam-medam* (the months of March-April and April-May respectively).

The reference to the nouveau riche among the community as a reason for concern, recurs in many papers supporting the ban. A story by Ambikasuthan Mangad, celebrated as a manifesto of the pro-ban movement, i.e., is expressive of how the Thiyya community is solely responsible for the savage ritual and how the *Dubaikkaran* Thiyya (the Thiyya from Dubai) accentuates the malady. The story titled 'Thokku' ('Gun') enumerates the predicament of a Thiyya man called Chindanambadi, who goes hunting and is unable to sight a single animal for his deity, *Thondachan*. Eventually, the deity Vayanattukulavan himself appears in front of him in the form of a rabbit, demanding him to transform the ritual into a symbolic sacrifice (Mangad 2010: 128-133).

The emphasis on the backwardness of the Thiyya community as the sole reason for the killing of animals exemplifies the disavowal of *savarna* culpability in the unequal distribution of resources as the potential cause of the backwardness. While the 'unrefined' constituents of the Thiyya community of devouts were a matter of deliberation for elite Thiyyas in the early phase of communitarian assertion in the early 20th century, their emphasis was on the modernization of their collective. However, the *savarna* discourse on the ban draws on the 'disgraceful' conduct of the community as irreversible and innate in total obliteration of the modes of visibility and social mobility aspired to and achieved by the Thiyyas. The next section

would explore two modes of modernization in the Thiyya community—one that was founded on the Ezhava social reformer, Narayana Guru's philosophy of reform, and the second mode, marked by the politicised articulation of Thiyya (by certain segments of the Thiyya community) as a separate backward caste identity.

The *Thiyya* Community of Devouts and the Class Drive for Modernization

The elite, land-owning Thiyyas of the Kannur-Thalassery regions of north Malabar have drawn attention from anti-caste researchers and reformers. The privileged social positioning of the Thiyyas in Malabar under the British encouraged C. Kesavan, a social reformer from the Ezhava community and chief minister of Thiru-Kochi (1950-1952), to believe that "any community had only as much weakness as could be eradicated with the support of the ruling class" (Kesavan 2010: 171-173). The elite sections of the Thiyya community were drawn to the Ezhava social reformer Narayana guru's philosophy of modernity. It guided them to distance themselves from traditional rituals and ways of life that could be quoted as being primitive. One significant outcome of this correspondence was the adoption of certain reformist measures that were centred on practices of worship. Dilip Menon has described how Narayana Guru's teachings encouraged Thiyyas to construct Thiyya temples, discard rituals considered primitive and regressive, abstain from caste-based services that caused several intra-community conflicts. A society called Sri Gnanodaya Yogam was founded to this effect in 1906 that mainly comprised "the Tiyya professional classes and lesser civil servants" and which stressed the need to "organise alongside the SNDP under the themes of religion, business, education, and social reform" (Menon 1994: 67). Narayana Guru perceived temples as locations for the holistic development and progress of people, who were otherwise denied entrance on account of their *avarna* lineage. Religiosity was adopted as leverage to nurture a moral code of conduct that would help reinstate the *avarna* community's vandalized sense of self-respect. In the words of the Ezhava social reformer Dr. Palpu, "These self-owned institutions facilitate the means to assert the self-respect of this community, which has been thoroughly ruined by years of social persecution. These temples shall permit people of all castes, lower and upper" (Qtd in Sreenivasan 1989: 65-66). Elite Thiyyas subscribed to this model of reformation that was thus administered through a modernised concept of piety.

However, this choice was not unanimous among the heterogeneous Thiyya community. A considerable segment of the community were ardent devotees of *Theyyam*. The practice of *Theyyam* itself, followed a different order of piety that was primarily dependent on resources and relationships available to the non-elite, *avarna* communities on the one hand, and sharing of resources based on customary rights of communities, including upper and lower caste communities as well as the Muslim community, on the other. Y.V. Kannan, a *Theyyam* practitioner and scholar, identifies *Theyyam* worship as "central to the differential constitution of the backward caste community in north Malabar" (Kannan 2007: 82). The rituals of many *Theyyam*s, particularly those worshipped by backward caste communities include offerings of toddy and meat. The meat is served as *prasadam* (benedictory food) to devotees in many *kavus* (Kaavu is an avarna site of worship). Guru's perception of progress was founded on the rejection of any such ritual that posed the possibility of being branded as primitive. "Guru identified toddy, opium, marijuana, tobacco, etc. with alcohol because of their intoxicating effect" (*Smaranika* 2016: 208). Y.V. Kannan describes the conflicts that Narayana Guru's philosophy of reformation through the building of temples posed to a social order where the

avarna communities had structured their lives based on a differential order of religiosity and reform determined by the practice of *Theyyam* worship. Kannan writes (Kannan 2007: 82):

> The decision to build temples for the *avarnas* and recruit *avarna* pujaris to officiate the pujas and the insistence on maintaining personal hygiene overlooked the *avarna thanams*, *palliyaras* and *kazhakams* [non-Brahmanical spaces of worship] where the pujas were officiated by the *avarnas* themselves. The fact that the *kolakkaran*, *anthithiriyan*, *velichappadan* and the *koottayikaran* [officiating *avarna* priests who perform specific rituals] maintain personal hygiene not only in palliyaras but also in homes and other public spaces went unnoticed.

The Ezhavas and elite Thiyyas who adopted Guru's perception of reform constituted themselves as worshippers of the objects deified and desacralized from Brahmanical association by Guru in their temples. They saw shrines as 'sites of blood sacrifices and rituals involving the use of alcohol, as distinct from the 'higher' religious practices of the new 'Tiyya' temples' (Menon 1994: 62). The socio-religious publics like *Kavu*, *Ara*, *Mundya*, *Thanam*, and *Kazhakam* however were places around which non-elite, plebeian segments of the Thiyya caste community were organized. They worshipped deities like Muthappan, Gulikan, Kuttichathan, mother goddesses, and deities included in ancestor worship. These publics determined their communitarian lives unlike the Ezhavas or the elite Thiyyas who were driven by Guru's philosophy of modernization. Thiyya devotees of *Theyyam* followed a different model of religiosity and reform. M.K. Sasindran (2016: 105) recounts Narayana guru's visit to Kasaragod and his opinion about the ritualistic practices prevalent there:

> Guru recommended that we stop the practice of worshipping primitive gods. When he suggested uprooting the *thenghakallu* [an aniconic idol] installed to worship Ali Theyyam, the Thiyyas of Kasaragod refused to do so. The *jadgakaar* [the drivers of a horse cart] from Kannur pulled it out eventually.

The disparate conception of ritual held by the Thiyyas worshipping the deity *Theyyam* and the community of Ezhavas worshipping Narayana Guru's sacralised idols of veneration exemplifies the alternate trajectories of modernity pursued by two backward caste communities differentiated on various grounds. The community of devotees (of Thiyyas, other castes and communities) constituted around the worship of the *Theyyam* was organized on the basis of customary rituals that each community was entitled to in a society determined by caste. However, Guru's model of reform could not sufficiently address the problems of the Thiyya community centred around the *Theyyam* ritual, which came to be identified as unrefined.

The community of *Theyyam* devotees was cited as one reason that prompted elite Thiyyas to summon Guru to construct temples in the Malabar region. The decision to construct a temple in Palikunnu, in Kannur, was followed by a series of deliberations between Guru and the community members willing to donate land for the construction. Guru was initially reluctant to concede to the demands of the elite Thiyya families in Kannur for a community temple. "'They are English educated well versed in Sanskrit, many being Vedantis and Brahmasamajis … Wouldn't they ridicule me telling that someone came from somewhere and installed a stone there?" (*Smaranika* 2016: 32). Varathoor Kaniyil Kunjikannan, who was instrumental in bringing Guru to Kannur had to convince him that the community as a whole was not as

modern as Guru thought them to be. Describing the not-yet civilized Thiyyas in the community, he remarks: "Swami! Despite Vedanta and Brahmasamajam no one has been able to save or stop those believers who still follow devilish and detestable worship rites. The community is still driven by drinking, animal sacrifice, and primitive idol worship … the presence of at least one temple with the *satvika* form of worship[14] would encourage people to go there without restriction, bathe, enter the temple and pray" (Smaranika, 2016: 33). When Guru expressed his surprise at the presence of such primitive worship patterns in such a "civilized *rajyam* [province] ruled by the British" Kunjikannan continues (Smaranika: 33):

> Yes Swami…the queen has declared that they would not interfere in religious matters. Since the *savarna*s expect to see the others continue to degrade themselves through such forms of worship, they encourage such rituals practiced by *avarna*s.

The assurance of the prevalence of regressive traits within the community persuaded Guru to go ahead with temple construction in Kannur.

The adoption of Guru's model of reform centred on socio-religious progress was revolutionary for the vision of equality it embodied. However, his philosophy was appropriated by the class discourse of communism in Kerala which prompted a dissociation of caste concerns from the Ezhava reform movement. The community envisaged by Guru was taken over by the communist ideology that led to a reconstitution of the Ezhava community along class lines. This prevented them from organizing themselves as a political category. K.V. Cybil describes how the Ezhava community could not organize itself as a political category like backward castes elsewhere in India, especially in places like Maharashtra. "'The predominant communist discourse sought to transform the question of structural inequality posed by caste identity of the Ezhavas as a class concern. The communist inability to assess the case of Narayana Guru as an Ezhava thinker, mixed his thoughts with the question of making a class out of the Ezhava, the bourgeoisie" (Cybil 2022: 103). The communist secularization of the Ezhava as a class category undermined its capacities as a politicized caste community. "Although pioneering in terms of having started a community-based organization, the Ezhava were left behind in terms of representation in the governing bodies of the state" (Ibid. 2022: 103).[15]

The secularization of the Ezhava allows for disengagement with the problem of caste identity. The adoption of the Ezhava model of reform by one section of the Thiyyas was a convenient mode of modernization for dominant groups to subdue the issue of caste identity. However, for the community itself, the association with the Ezhava movement had negative repercussions that amounted to the eradication of particular caste identity. This concern regarding the subsumption of the Thiyya caste by the Ezhava community may be seen as the alternative model of reform by certain sections within the Thiyya community in the years leading to 2010. The controversies surrounding the ritualistic practices of hunting associated with Vayanattukulavan *Theyyatam* co-occurring during the same period assume significance in such a context. The *savarna* projection of backwardness as irreversible and primitive in the

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[14] Satvika is associated with a state of mind that is free of fear, violence, wrath and malice. For further details, see Jain (2019) *The Three Gunas: Sattva, Rajas and Tamas*, accessed 20.10.2022.
[15] Cybil (2022: 103) describes how SNDP could never raise itself to the level or platform of non-Brahminism by which it could enter the state legislature despite triggering the formation of community-oriented organizations.

Thiyya backward caste community comes at a time when the backward community chose to project its politicised, particular caste identity.

Ezhava Subsumption and the Assertion of Thiyya Particularity

The *savarna* mediation in abetting backwardness is overlooked in the discourse of the ban raised by environmentalists, predominantly from the Nair caste. Of interest here is the movement initiated by Thiyya caste organizations for proportionate reservation in the government sector roughly around the time. The insistence on identifying Thiyya community as separate from the Ezhava community dates back to the early 20th century. However, the demands for proportionate reservation in the government sector in consonance with the population of a separately enlisted Thiyya community received an impetus in 2010 with related movements on the part of organizations like Thiyya Mahasabha and Thiyya Kshema Sabha. These community-based collectives have vociferously expressed their resentment against Ezhava subsumption of Thiyya identity,[16] which according to them prevents the latter from accessing reservation rights to which they are entitled by the Indian constitution.[17]

They alleged forceful caste conversion through upper-caste bureaucratic means that resulted in lessening or rendering absent, the Thiyya community's representation in the government sector. Ezhava subsumption is believed to have driven them into a state of social backwardness and a state of eventual obliteration as a caste community. This is in contradiction to the mode of reform that entailed an association or imbibing of Narayana Guru's teaching among elite Thiyyas. The movement demanding a distinctive backward caste identity for Thiyyas and proportionate reservation in the government sector coincides with pleas seeking the ban on animal sacrifice that depicted the community as innately backward. In an attempt suggestive of reprisal, there is a (*savarna*) projection of backwardness as primitive in the face of backwardness choosing to project its politicized, modern self. The dissociation of the Thiyya identity from the secular framework of classification leaves them off the grid of casteist patronage. Their economic and social visibility mobilized through the manifestation of their caste-based identity poses a challenge to the secular/*savarna* social order.

The demand for banning the ritual of hunting concurs with the assertion of a backward caste collective as a politicized caste community in no uncertain terms. The Thiyya refusal to concede to concessions dictated by the dominant and their demand for constitutional rights is confronted by narratives that establish their inherent backwardness and a denial of their increasing visibility and social mobility at various levels in the social life of north Malabar. The associations drawn between environmental conservation and Hinduism cannot be inadvertent. While exhibiting anguish at seeing the hunted squirrels, Mangad says (Mangad 2010: 11):

> The *shlokam* [verse] Ramayana, … was written in response to the grief after
> witnessing the death of one of the bird couple. Which God would rejoice when

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[16] See "Thiyyas Up in Arms Against Forcible 'Ezhavanisation" (23.01.2010) *The New Indian Express* (Kerala), accessed 12.01.2022.

[17] Since Ezhavas, Thiyyas and Billavas are treated as a single unit (ETB), more than 12% out of the 14% reservation for the group is drawn by the Ezhava community. Thiyyas are categorised as a sub- caste or synonym of the Ezhava backward caste community in government records because of which, there is a near total absence of Thiyya representation in the government sector.

> small squirrels that scramble around with three lines blessed on them by Sri Rama
> are cruelly hunted down?

The reference to squirrels as creatures blessed by Sri Rama, confers a truth value to both the mythical narrative of Rama, while serving to establish the uncouth and primitive demeanour of the community that is unable to protect an animal blessed by Rama.

Freeman critiques the problems of ecological idealism in Kerala by discussing how the ecological often finds articulation in the language of Hinduism. Writing about the romantic assumptions behind such environmental claims, he writes (Freeman 1999: 295):

> The projection of an environmentalist ethos onto the Hindu past underscores a cultural concern less with the forest and its resources per se, than with the often-conflicting social interests that converged on those resources.

The failure to historicize hunting on the one hand and to look beyond the backward caste community to explain the prevalence of the ritual on the other, arises from the *savarna* environmentalist's disavowal to acknowledge the role of caste in perpetuating unequal distribution of resources. Freeman (1999: 266) comments on how access to resources and control of labour is determined by the place that each community has in a *savarna* society:

> While it is true that resources in forests and wastes in this region were utilized by local labour, in some sense, collectively, this says nothing of the actual proprietary rights of control in these resources, which were in fact privately vested. The majority of forests in this region were attached to the estates of the small body of landlords and chiefs, the janmis, who claimed all the lands of Malabar and Kasaragod their hereditary family property.

A ritual incorporating the act of hunting (symbolic or otherwise) in a backward caste community's deity of worship and one that additionally presupposes the participation of a heterogenous collective, mandates a historicization not constricted by bigoted perceptions that presumes hunting as a practice that can be engaged by all irrespective of caste and religious affiliations. According to the folklorist Raghavan Payyanad (quoted in Zahira 2014: 160):

> such enactments help to establish the identity of a community as a group in a social space that is often hostile and oppressive….The rituals signify the changing histories of these communities: the representation of hunting in parts of the ritual, for example, enacts a remembrance of earlier times, and other parts signal the shift to an agricultural society or themes related to assimilation into modern cultures.

Even though animal sacrifice is condemnable, the discourse of the ban on hunting underscores not the desire for any environmental preservation, but that of restoring an *avarna* community to its 'rightful' backward place in the Brahmanical social order. This may be seen in the way a particular community is made responsible for a practice that can happen only if there is government sanction for it at various levels. Even as the prohibition of hunting and the murder of animals within the forest would put an end to the ritual of animal sacrifice, the responsibility of hunting is imposed on the organizers of the ritual, than on forest departments

and the many associated departments that are in charge of forest and wildlife protection (Rahman 2010: 49). The ritual referred to as *Bonam Kodukal* in the *Kulavan Theyattam*, performed in memory of the camaraderie between Kulavan and Alimapla,[18] dissidents of feudal authority and defenders of Adivasis exploited by feudal lords in the region, alludes to an emergent heterogenous community united by resistance rather than conformity. However, the modernity inherent in these narratives is bypassed to emphasise the ritual of hunting, and through it the violent nature of the community.

The empowering modern concept of an *avarna* community of equals underlying the myth, performance, and organization of the *Kulavan Theyyattam* is hijacked by a discourse of environmentalism concerned with establishing backwardness as the inherent trait of the Thiyya community. The discourse on banning the ritual of hunting draws more on a concern of restoring an *avarna* community to its 'rightful' backward position in the Brahmanical social order than on the protection of animal rights. The demand for ban reroutes the focus from the Thiyya backward caste community's demand for proportionate reservation in the government sector to its inherent, irreversible backwardness. Backwardness is established as primitive at a time the backward caste community chose to project its politicized, modern self. Casteism couched in the rhetoric of environmentalism manoeuvres the containment of possible threat following the articulation of reservation rights by a section of the Thiyya backward caste community.

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[18] The Kulavan organized the Adivasis, who were coerced into selling forest produce to the feudal lord free of cost. Alimapla, likewise, was the merchant who bought the produce from Adivasis for a reasonable amount. They were united in their concern for the Adivasis and for each other in times of despair (Rahman 2010: 89).

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Translating the Religiosity and Gender Politics of Manasa Myth in Contemporary Bengali Theatrical Narrative

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Until recently, folklore, like all other genres and disciplines, had a male-bias. A tendency to see the folkloric world in male terms as well as the sexist preconception about prevailing gender roles restricted the line of inquiry in case of folkloric fieldworks. Initially, the lack of feminist approach to the folklore and the folkloric representation of women characters, could be said to pervade the discipline with a conscious or unconscious gender bias. But the introduction of feminist theory into the study of folklore has opened new possibility for folkloric feminist scholarship to demonstrate how the analysis of women's lore transformed folklore studies and why the feminist lens provided a different meaning to folklore that had the potential to disrupt patriarchal culture. The objective of the folkloric-feminist method offers a model for understanding social relations as gendered relationships of power. Though feminism has a political agenda and desire to change women's position in society, this agenda expressed within mainstream folklore studies rarely connotes political action, but instead a methodological and theoretical intervention that in a compatible manner, yokes folklore studies and feminism together to reconstitute a new foundational base. Their conjoined efforts (i) validate and regenerate the socio-cultural life of women and to (ii) trace and highlight the forms of women's symbolic expression that are concealed from or considered unimportant to mainstream culture. In this regard, Margaret Mill's advocacy (1999) for the requisition of a performance-oriented, folkloric feminist women's genre and its application, has been appreciated as it deconstructs previously unquestioned assumptions about authority, agency and power hierarchy. Contextualizing the above discussion, the present paper will show how the select Bengali play decodes the Manasa myth to create a new lore in the light of gender discourse and religiosity.

Ritual theatre, Folklore, Manasamangal, Divine possession, Alternative sexuality

Introduction

In the Indian context, folkloric content is often morally charged with religiosity and an ethic that subtly confines women within the domestic fold, and subjugates them by framing them as either bodily impure or then shackling them within patriarchal morality and dictums of feminine chastity. Feminist intervention in folklore narratives helps to redefine and subvert the reality of a socially structured gender hierarchy from the very grassroots. Alongside *puranic* goddess, this paper seeks to highlight the many regional female deities that were initially ignored both within the pantheon and in literature. Goddess Manasa from Bengal exemplifies one such liturgical and feminist position that is emblematic of the ambivalent, playing an important role as a field for feminist retrieval, her divinity both ostracized and simultaneously eulogized in the medieval Bengali folk narratives of *Manasamangal* that combine seemingly contrasting images of her divinity and benignity mixed with her malignity. Neither does a feminist reading of Manasa's story depict her as a victim or as failure in the masculine constructed world. Rather the story charts her real power, that is a force communicated through folklore. Manasa's folkloric image points to a popular trope about women who appear in the public arena as strategists with a manipulative identity, who offer themselves to the performative domain as a female villain-cum-heroine. However, with time,

narratives of Manasa have become Sanskritized and morphed to contextualize the contemporary discourse about body politics, that has alternative sexuality mixed with religiosity, embedded within its ethos. The feminist intervention transforming the folk narratives of Manasa thus studies the importance of sex-role reversals, in producing a new lore surrounding the goddess and her worship. This paper hence highlights the performative version of ambivalent and lesser-considered goddesses within Bengali Hindu folklore and in Puranic sources like Manasa, in producing a narrative terrain that expresses the axioms of postcolonial feminist activism.

A quick glance into existing scholarship will help us to reflect on how the story of Manasa story is still considered fascinating, affording itself to cultural and historical renditions that encompass myriad perspectives. Gleaning the traces of Manasa from miscellaneous sources, this paper is divided into different sections. While the introduction briefly discusses the interconnection between folklore and feminists, it also explores how this combination as a lens tries to dismantle the subtler range of gender politics through it. Views from a wide range of erudite scholars (Farrer 1975, Jordan and Kalcik 1985, Kousaleos 1999, Mills 1999, Garlough 2008, and Goldstein 2015) have helped us to shape the theoretical framework of this study from both a religion as well as a gender perspective. Also, a further review of literature about the role of women within the development and refashioning of Hindu religiosity is provided to us by Young (2002) and Pintchman (2007), who extend the scope of this study. This present paper delves into the folk narrative of Goddess Manasa, which, though originated from ancient religious texts, has nevertheless evolved many times, making its way towards public culture through diverse creative domains that represent Manasa, and that also represents themselves through Manasa's story. The Puranic story of Manasa from this perspective, gains momentum right with the introduction of the *Manasamangal* narrative itself, in which Manasa's folkloric image as that of a venomous serpent goddess epitomizes the image of the contemporary feminist rebel that is nevertheless tinged with empathy and the softer emotions of maternal care. Scholarship surrounding this ambiguity is an ongoing process, carried out by many scholars (Bhattacharya 1947, Maity 1966, Dimock 1962, Curley 2008, Jash 1986, Haq 2015, Sarbadhikary 2019) who have meticulously examined the theological and sociological matrix of Manasa's story. There is a group of young scholars (Sahaji, 2019; Chakraborty, 2021; and Chakravarty, 2023) that has renewed attempts to study the Manasa narrative from a feminist perspective, and predictably, it is her constant battle with social and the pantheon of Puranic hierarchy that generates a dramatic effect to the nature of this conflict—something that automatically attracts the theatre, and has encouraged many to compose what has been many successful stage compositions and productions based on Manasa's story. Enriched by the narrative's religious, folkloric, ritualistic elements, in addition to creative theatrical representative versions of Manasa's story and its cultural impact, many academicians have extensively explored Manasa's tremendous cultural influence over society (Turner 1982, David 2005, Chatterji 2007 & 2014, Lidova 2017, Prakash 2019, Preston, 2013). Aspects that specially dwell on cultural representations of her spiritual possession cults and its gendered perspectives have been offered by Burley (2019), Dure (2019), Murphree (2009), Urban (2018), and Ryzhakov (2020) et al.

Goddess Manasa in the *Manasamangal*

Written usually in the form of long narrative poem, the *Mangalkavya* epitomizes the malignity of divine characters. To pacify the malignance of such deities that serves to elude their

menace; it is a common practice to eulogise their deeds in musical forms that is often popularized as *mangal-gan*. Holding a unique position within the Bengali *kavya* literature, the emergence of *Mangalkavya* has been embedded within medieval Bengali religio-political milieu that became disrupted with the gradual decline of Buddhism and the corollary increase in religious malpractices that surrounded everyday Brahmanical observances. The Turkic invasion of Bengal not only served to control this political anarchy but also re-engendered a feeling of enthusiasm that reinvigorated regional identity and consciousness. This new-born cognizance of region and identity assisted in building regularity and calm in everyday lives that in turn, resulted in the immediate religious resurgence of ambivalent local deities. These strong and ambivalent deities evoked awe, and this awe promoted their recognition and inclusion into the regional pantheon of deities. Zealous and collective efforts made by erudite Bengali composers, resulted in the completion of previously unfinished manuscripts of the many *panchali* (saga) that told the stories of ambivalent deities, gradually leading to their transformation into entire *kavya*s that provided a panegyric account of *loukik* (local/ regional) deities. These panegyric accounts in time, developed into a new genre of religious literature, namely the *Mangalkavya*s in Bengali culture. While the sudden attack of Turkic polity diminished the dominance of Brahmanism, it played an important role in temporarily obliterating class and caste divisions. This situational crisis, it can be said, directed Brahmanical ideas to gradually relocate attention from the royal echelons of society to the everyday lives of ordinary people that still laid great emphasis on questions of religious patronage. The period of this relocation therefore witnessed a relaxation of caste strictures in the religious domain and the adoption and inclusion of *loukik* deities, culture, and religious belief from among low-caste, indigenous groups within Brahmanical society. This coalition wielded internal linkages between the Brahmanical pantheon and indigenous cultural influences as a socio-religious safeguard against Turkic invasion. In this process of Brahmanization, local deities like Manasa, Chandi and Dharma were promoted to *Puranic* status as part of their active public and welfare role.

The serpent goddess Manasa said to be the illegitimate daughter of Lord Shiva, gained enormous influence over Gangetic Bengal where people used to reside in regions shared with an infestation of aquatic animals and reptiles that included venomous snakes. She, being the snake deity was thus worshiped widely in Bengal and its neighbouring regions to protect worshippers from snakebites especially during the rainy season: "The worship of Manasa is prevalent all over Bengal especially the people of the lower stratum of the society … mostly Hinduised aboriginals" (Jash 1986: 169-177). Though the ancient sacred text *Padma Purana* has traced the name of Manasa to a serpent mother, no reference of her have been found in Vedic or Brahmanical literature. However, the *Mahabharata* epic contains a detailed account of Manasa along with her husband Jaratkaru and son Astika, along with other divine snakes like Vasuki. All these ancient sources confirm that though Manasa was conceived out of Lord Shiva's passion, Shiva was absent during her birth, and even forgotten that the falling of his seed on a lotus leaf had resulted in her birth. While her fatherly inheritance gave her the name *Vishahari* for carrying poison in her one eye, her birth on the lap of a lotus leaf denotes her motherly epithet as *Padma*. However, since her foster mother was Kadru, she stayed in *patal-lok*. Abandoned at birth, Manasa thus suffered celestial marginalization. The influence of Shiva among both Brahmanical and ordinary non-Brahmin society helped to establish her divinity within the orthodox Hindu pantheon of specific regions where snake infestations were high. She is credited with occasionally expressed violent anger that is manifested in snake-bite, but her benevolence as also considered life-giving as the goddess is known to confer the nectar

Image 5.1: Manasa-ghat (the earthen pitcher of goddess Manasa). Potter: Ms. Meera Paul from Krishna Nagar, West Bengal (India). Image Courtesy: the collections of Mr. Soumen Nath, Kolkata (WB).

of immortality through her one eye. The rites and rituals related to Manasa worship diverge in the different districts of Bengal, but certain basic and elemental practices also unify the religiosity surrounding her cult, like *arandhana* or abstinence from cooked food on the day of *Naga-panchami* and the celebration of *Dasahara,*[1] conducted by placing a few leaves of milky hedge plants inside an earthen oven; offering milk and banana in a flat earthen pot at any *Manasa-badi*[2] or *Manasa-tala*[3] or *Manasa-sthana*; hanging the paper-made decorations called Chand-mala from the *Phoni Manasa* tree (a local cactus plant), which is considered to be the personification of the deity; or then by spreading a canopy of printed or inscribed moon symbols upon the head of idols. Usually, the image of Manasa is painted on earthen pitchers depicted with a combination of hooded snakes. The common idol of Manasa who is shown as "seated on a lotus in *lolitasana* pose with the hoods of snakes spread over her head, her left hand holding the eighth one" (Jash 1986: 169-177) conceptualizes the amalgamation of the Brahmanical deity culture in post-Turkish incursion period.

However, despite the ambiguous deific status of Manasa, whether considered indigenous or Brahmanical, or *Puranic*, her reception among the Bengalis became popularised through the *Mangalkavya*s that can be historically located to a period of politico-religious turmoil in

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[1] On the tenth day of second month of *Jaistho* in the Bengali Calendar, the Goddess Manasa is worshipped at some places in West Bengal.

[2] Usually, the mud house of a locality where Goddess Manasa has been established for the purpose of worship by her devotees.

[3] The cemented alters allocated to Goddess Manasa in rural West Bengal.

Bengal. Among the other *Mangalkavya*s, the *Manasamangal* eulogises the hardship, as well as the magnanimity of this serpent deity. Though there are several version of the *Manasamangal*, marking its popularity, Ketkadas Khemananda's descriptive poem of the goddess has received maximum admiration from literary scholars. Enriched with socio-religious descriptions of the transition and infusion between orality and the production of folk narrations, Khemananda's text contextualizes the re-discovery of Manasa and her subsequent incorporation within mainstream Brahminism. In this long narrative poem, the story of Manasa illustrates how her adversaries attained divinity and earthly popularity, and how Manasa faced a lot of difficulty due to her marginalized status, resolved conditionally by the merchant Chand, in case he offers her worship.

Being a devout *Shaiva*, however, he not only refuses her claim but using his clout, also instigates others to not worship her. Infuriated by his power politics, Manasa intimidates Chand by killing all his six children by poisoning them, and by making his trading ships capsize in the sea. Despite being reduced to destitution, he refuses his wife Sanaka's request to worship Manasa, openly demonstrating his patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes. Finally Lakhindar, Chand's only son who was as yet alive, fatefully loses his life in his nuptial chambers to Manasa despite top security, and Chand fails to save his son from Manasa's cunningness and vengeance. Lakhindar's newly wedded but widow wife Behula however decides to bring back him back to life and sets out for a journey towards the heavenly courts where she performs a dance to please the gods, save her husband's life along with that of his six brothers, and retrieve the treasures submerged in the sea on the condition that Chand will worship Manasa to legitimise her divinity on earth. A closer scrutiny of Manasa-related texts that demonstrates her villainous existence and activities, also gives her a subaltern image – she is marginalized as well as ambiguous. Her identity of being abandoned at birth, accompanied by her scheming, overlaps and confronts Chand's masculinity, while her benign self usually overlooked by readers emerges in the context of Behula's struggle.

Bridging the *Manasamangal* and Bengali Theatre

Pregnant with elements of folklore, religiosity, and theatricality, the conflict between Manasa and Chand represents the dramatic narrative quality and contours of the *Manasamangal.* Additionally, the tragic journey of Behula full of the *karuna rasa* serves to underline the dramatic elements of the text. The character of Behula has been depicted as a skilful dancer who entertains the heavenly court with her expertise only to fulfil her promise. Again the folkloric aspect of *Manasamangal* hints at a culture that considers singing and dancing as elemental to Manasa rituals, still dominant in some parts of Assam. It is said that the celebration and performance of the *devi-mahatyma* myth, applauds the Goddess Manasa who personally crafts the *ojha-nritya* dance performance as a three to seven days extended event during the annual goddess worship. Naturally enriched with the features of poetic drama, the narratives of *Manasamangal* have been adapted several times to stage performances in Bengali theatre.

Commenting on the predominant dramatic elements and theatricality of the *Manasamangal*, renowned historian Prof. Ashutosh Bhattacharya (1947) in fact observes that the skirmish between two opposing forces is much more successfully depicted in drama than in novels. The conflict between two opposing forces is more than clear in the story of the

Manasamangal, and becoming attracted by the magnificent profusion of its dramatic elements over the years, theatre practitioners have produced numerous Manasa plays in Bengali.

A brief chronological survey of Bengali theatre traces the dramatization of *Manasamangal* during colonial period in the two years of 1926 and 1927 when Basantbihari Mitra and Manmotho Ray adopted the Manasa story for their respective plays that had the same name of *Chand Saudagar*. Another playwright Haranath Basu composed the play *Behula* in 1910 for 'Star Theatre' following the same storyline. However, renowned Bengali dramatist Shambhu Mitra's *Chand Baniker Pala* has been considered the most notable of all these theatre productions, performed in postcolonial Calcutta between 1965 and 1974, and subsequently printed in 1978. Highlighting the struggles of Chand, Mitra's play metaphorically critiques the contemporary socio-political anarchy of Bengal 1970's by theatrically representing it as the *Champaknagari* of *Manasamangal* that symbolized the dark phase of Manasa's excesses in the story where she punishes and threatens potential devotees into worshipping her. Subhasis Gangopadhayay reconstructed the Manasa story in his play *Chand Manasar Quissa* in 2000, staged and produced by a Kolkata-based theatre group called 'Sansriti', to reflect on Behula's perspective of the narrative. Gangopadhayay's emphasis on the feminine struggle of a lonesome Behula thus encompassed a paradigmatic shift, as the focus of the story shifted away from Chand's chauvinism to now represent Behula's humanitarian journey, framed through contemporary gender politics. Following this trend, Charbak's production of *Kande keno Behula Sundari* that was composed, directed and performed by Kheyali Dastidar in 2003, dramatized the story of a destitute Behula and her psychic violations. In this version, Lakhinder is doubtful about Behula's chastity after he is revived, this doubt overshadowing her love, care, and sacrifices made for him, because of the many immodest proposals Behula receives during her voyage with Lakhindar's corpse. This version demonstrates how the questions of women's chastity remains an eternal struggle within patriarchy. Dastidar's theatrical translation of Manasa's story provides a fresh perspective about gender subversion in contemporary modern society, with Behula's journey exemplifying this protest and resistance against injustice. While theatrical productions made by Gangopadhayay and Dastidar underline the gender discourse in theatre scholarship, they also create a new lore by re-contextualizing indigenous folk culture from a different perspective, in which issues of capitalism, secularism and the female impersonation of the divine through possession snowballs into recreating popular Manasa stories as possible contributions to contemporaneous sociology.

This paper analyses the Bengali play *Shuno Manasa Katha* (Listen to the story of Manasa!) by 'Jadavpur Manthan' (2015), derived from the *Manasamangal* from the perspective of 'narrative turn' – a term coined by Martin Kreiswirth (2005), to chart and disseminate what in the folklore context is "the voice and knowledge of vernacular culture" (Goldstein 2015: 125-145). Combining the composite nature of both folk religion and Brahmanical Hinduism, the Manasa's stories in theatre suggests the presence of a palimpsest, composed of, of multiple historical layers. The feminine figures that Manasa represents are transgressive and rupture social order by threatening conventional idea of *dharma* and devotion. Unlike other ritual narratives, the Manasa dramas focus on the character of her adversaries rather than the goddess herself, thereby producing Manasa as a subaltern entity. Again, in ritual theatre, the divine possession of Manasa is usually performed by a female impersonation that translates the feminine rage visible in the physical strength of the performer. Understanding the choice of protagonists for the goddess through the fact that their bodies represent the goddess's

masculine power, requires further exploring in terms of the historical relationship between Hinduism and women. The play *Shuno Manasa Katha* (henceforth *SMK*) elaborates on this argument.

Textual Analysis of *Shuno Manasa Katha*

Reconceptualized from the popular folk narrative of *Manasamangal,* the play *SMK* was first staged on 26th November 2013 by a Kolkata-based theatre group called 'Jadavpur Manthan'. Divided into twelve different scenes, the play *SMK* was written by Rakesh Ghosh and directed by Rajib Bardhan. Deconstructing the Manasa myth in the light of gender fluidity, *SMK* reintroduced the legacy of gender politics and trans-debate within the performative space of the script. As expected, the play-text narrated the grim reality of how a person of *hijra* orientation, Tarak, lived a dual life of an incarnation of goddess Manasa in his village where he enacted the body possessed by the goddess, and on the other hand, of a fake transgender person professionally named Madhuri in Kolkata city. Cheated by his boyfriend Chandan, Tarak left his village and joined a ghetto of other transgenders of *hijra* orientation lead by Shyamali. While his father Jibon makes good money out of Tarak's deity possession enactments of goddess Manasa, Tarak never discloses the actual nature of his profession to his father or wife Radha. Instead, he pretends to have been a singer of *Manasa palagaan*. On the other hand, he is franker with his other trans-mates Katkati, Bipasa and Karina about his struggle surrounding familial life, his affair with Chandan, and the question of his gender fluidity. However, during the dancing slot he is accorded at a client's home that coincidentally belongs to Chandan's in-laws, Tarak is caught red-handed by Chandan and his wife Saswati, who nevertheless don't disclose this fact to villagers. Later, he is trapped and made vulnerable in a conspiracy headed by Chandan's father Ananta and Shyamali to traffic Radha and force Tarak to perform a *launda* dance for them (a dance with feudal and exploitative origins in North India where young boys are made to dress up and dance as women). But Chandan and Saswati's joint efforts rescue Tarak and Radha from this conspiracy. Tarak's dual life interlinks with Manasa's story in a two-fold manner – his deity possessions translate the religiosity and ritualism of Manasa worship into present folklore and the role played by subaltern gendered and sexual minorities in such performances; and his professional cross-dressing traces connections between trans-sexualism and folkloric *Manasa palagaan* singers and performers who are usually men but dressed like women to gain and disseminate the goddess's blessings: fecundity and protection from snakebites. Finally Tarak's non-normative sexual orientation and its acceptance or rejection within family and society can be compared with the goddess Manasa's own struggle for recognition into the mainstream Brahmanical pantheon. As for religion and performance, Tarak's deity possession and drag dancing denotes the contested and performative space of alternative sexuality within normative cultural milieu. Sangeeta Datta (2016: 14) accordingly observes that the concept of *Naribhav* (or the feminine form) has a long legacy within Indian culture, both in its ideological and performative domains. The presence of androgyny is a common factor for folkloric artistic endeavours, and in the present context of a renewed academic thrust on trans-studies, these narratives like that of goddess Manasa are being revived for a newer audience and a newer interpretation. Positing a protagonist like Tarak at the centre of a vortex consisting of folklore, religiosity, and homosexuality, the play *SMK* explores fluid and artistic identity on the one hand, and its socio-cultural context on the other, while strongly focusing on the present-day politics of alterative sexuality and its dangers for vulnerable humans in the merchandise-oriented body-politic-identity faced by Tarak.

Performing Religiosity, Divine Possession and Decoding of Gender Politics in *SMK*

The play opens with the nocturnal yard of Tarak's house where he usually appears in the form of goddess Manasa, and as the scene opens he is shown to have possessed with divine trance. Right from the beginning, his sartorial red *saree*, his forehead smeared with vermilion, hands with bangles made of conch and coral, long hair, and lac-dyed feet already creates an uncanny resemblance with goddess Manasa's ritual practices. This is accompanied by the way his eyes are always red, his shrugs, body language, and the hissing sound he makes that match with the ambience of a typical Manasa *puja*. Behind him, the snake that slowly takes the shape in the form of a huge milk hedge as part of the scene's backdrop in accompaniment with the playing of musical instruments fixes the mood of the scene to communicate Tarak's demonic prowess caused by divine possession.

Image 5.2: Tarak's Divine Possession in SMK, Scene 1. Image Courtsey: Jadavpur Manthan, Kolkata (WB)

The semiotic encryption of the scene unfolds with these three-tiered implications: ritualism linked with the religious and devotional purpose, the question of gender within the performative space, and the countering of violence with the signs of community-inflicted trauma legible on the body as a canvas. Divine possession involves humans calling forth deities to enter into their bodies, and the body itself thereafter becomes a vessel for divine power that transmits truth through oral and oracular revelations. Embodying the divine, Tarak typically engages with structured ritual practices encountered within religious space. The purpose of his divine possession is to communicate with other community members, answering their questions about personal fates and the fates of family members besieged with earthly difficulties. Because of his status as an oracle, the male-goddess Tarak embodies power, provides protection amidst distress, and increases the mobility of those he protects. This association with the power in divine possession disrupts prevalent hierarchies within which demons and women are bracketed together due to their impurity. Through this ritual practice, Tarak's drag female body becomes the scroll upon which both truth and dissent are simultaneously written in the religious context. The reality of such a body is encapsulated

within the systemic body of society that tries to control, consume, conceal and make ruptures invisible. Being a person of an alternative sexual orientation, Tarak is considered a sexual subaltern, just like his favourite deity Manasa who is also marginalized in divine space because of her parental abandonment, and because she is one-eyed. Tarak's break-up with Chandan due to the social taboo against their homoerotic relationship serves to decode this crisis in everyday terms. While the ritual possession of Manasa is considered part of conventional religiosity since pre-colonial times, this practice has been projected on traditions that lay in far-away sacred centres that were liminal as religious spaces, and controlled only ambiguously by fluctuating sources of social and religious control. Surprisingly, divine possession can only happen for lesser beings and lesser-known deities of the Hindu pantheons, finding popularity and circulation within rural communities. Their possession cults are said to help resolve allegations of infertility as even the couple Chandan and Saswati have

Image 5.3: Continuing with the moment of Tarak's divine possession in SMK, Scene I. Image Courtesy: Jadavpur Manthan, Kolkata (WB).

a baby – a son, whose birth attests to Tarak's foretelling of it during possession. Here Tarak acts like 'a goddess medium' (Dandekar 2017: 236) to convey her 'verdicts' about the possible solution to the crisis of childbirth.

Until recently, the practice of ritual theatrical performances was restricted to men, but the galvanization of folk theatre contextualized within burgeoning urbanism, places male performers within a maze of gender discourse on fluidity that comes to include the performative space afforded to androgynous protagonists. For women engaging with ritual space, the situation is fraught with regulations imposed onto their bodies. Spaces that are considered sullied by women's supposed impurity creates a barrier between them and their interaction with the divine. However, while the exercising of divine possession and oracular revelation through the bodies of the female drag has also been traced historically for

Indian traditional performances, men impersonating the female, or the female drag is the rule within ritual performances carried out for religious theatre. As Patrick D. Murphree says when commenting on the patriarchal oppression of Brahmanical traditions, "by divorcing the female body from the representation and incarnation of divine femininity, female impersonation reinforces the patriarchal structures of Hinduism…" (Murphree 2009: 41-54). Though the chief aim of both devotional and ritual theatre revolves around the enactment that also simultaneously translates religiosity through performance, there has been some ambivalence in the question of depicting the divine possession. Theatrical performance commonly includes the enactment of mythological plots that seek divine intervention, where the rituals and mimesis of female impersonation represent them as distinctive divine beings. The worship of the female deity, its enactment and the subsequent deployment of female impersonation within ritualistic performative space therefore indirectly follows prevalent Brahmanical and patriarchal customs that accepts a social hierarchy which outranks woman due to her menstrual pollution. Katherine Young (2002) for example, considers the presence of the female body as an extremely powerful and yet potentially dangerous entity within Hindu religious culture. For employing female impersonations, the predominant patriarchal structure in the cultural domain of traditional and folk performance demonstrates a variety of excuses like the (i) logistic difficulties of providing women's dressing-rooms (ii) women's biological incapacity, and the (iii) public-private dichotomy of women performing possessions in the public domain. But Murphree comments (2009: 41-54):

> the potency of the performance of deities in religious theatre suggests that an alliance between women's bodies and divine feminine energies could lead female performers to question their subjugated status and empower them to challenge the patriarchal structures of contemporary Hinduism'. Again, 'a receptacle of divine essence must be as pure as possible justifies denying women the opportunity to embody divinity and share it with a group of devotees in public theatrical performances.

Situated at the interface of devotional and ritual theatres, *SMK* presents audiences with a semiotic transformation of the protagonist Tarak into a *svarup* (form) of the deity Manasa through mimetic representation, while on the other, *SMK* sanctifies this performance itself by executing divine possession on stage to ultimately increase the drama's spectacular and theatrical appeal. While the particular beginning scene of the play indirectly validates Hindu folk practices of divine possession, Tarak's active participation in divine possession through the impersonation of a woman also justifies the social/cultural logic of safeguarding the female body from possible injury of that situation which may entail performer's self-regulatory physical mechanism for bearing the strength of that possession. Becoming goddess Manasa in a trance, Tarak encompasses an important agenda of ritual theatre that dignifies the feminine rage of rebel and marginalized deities, as well as fulfils the religious agenda of such goddesses that mollify the devotee community's existential problems. Demonstrating their *dharma* and loyalty to the goddess, in order to earn the goddess's blessings through Tarak; Tarak's women devotees like Saswati and Sarama are also rewarded for it by having their childbirth wishes fulfilled. Here, the displacement of Tarak's impersonated female body perpetuates oppressive gender hierarchies wherein the image of powerful woman ruptures and threatens society by inviting the goddess's destructive energy through their alleged menstrual impurity. The fear of unbridled femininity here, whether the women's or the goddess's, denotes the fear of violent feminine energies associated with the vengeful and

wrathful goddess. Adopting both the femininity and wrath of Manasa in his female impersonation, Tarak unsettles and dismantles gendered and heterosexual hierarchies, through a depiction of his own gendered fluidity and homoerotic associations with Chandan, to transform the depiction of gender, at least within the play's performative space.

Translating the Merchandised Body Politics in Female Drag/ Hijra in *SMK*

As said earlier that besides being a deity possession performer, Tarak also serves as a professional transgender (a profession that entails singing, clapping, performing) in Kolkata. Set in the ghetto of a transgender community, here specified as Shyamali *maa*'s *thek*, Scene VI of the play highlights how other transgenders, namely Katkati, Bipasha, Madhuri and Karina – none of them biological transgenders but only of transgender orientation, pretend to be biological transgenders by imitating their make-up, costume, voice modulations and physical comportment. Named after popular heroines, their discussions dismantle the grim reality of non-registered, transgender voices. All of them have their own responsibilities and also their own dreams – Karina has his family to feed; Bipasha who is emotionally dealing with a boyfriend who cheated him and escaped with his savings; Katkati who has a contagious disease; and Madhuri who is Tarak who is already badly violated after being let-down by Chandan. Tarak's entry into the professional hub of other transgender, familiarises him with the equally painful stories of others. His external feminine looks overlapping his male body like a palimpsest fails to hide his inner feminine nature from the experienced eyes of the transgender Katkati who brings him into the ghetto and trains him in specialized ways of clapping and beating *dhol* (drum) and extortion, that transgenders in Indian society are recognized by. In terms of his quotidian concerns, his concern about his wife, his worry about his own financial situations, and his distress about his father's greed demonstrates his humanitarian nature in the play, when he painfully confesses his wish to permanently live in the transgender ghetto, but also expresses his inability to do so, as: "*Radhatar jonnyo pari na. ... bado bhalo re meyeta. Swamir kono kartobyoi toh korte parlam na. biswas kor, sudhu or jonnyoi purush hote echche kore. Mone hoi bodle jak amar bhetorta*" (I cannot (go) because of Radha. She is a genuinely good girl. I am unable to do any husbandly duties for her. I feel like becoming a man only for her. I wish, I could change my inner me!) (Ghosh 2015: 124)

Tarak is manipulated by the notorious pimp Shaymali*maa* and his frustration at this, that makes his own trans-life feel like a charade, is expressed as: "*amra hijra na hoyeo asole toh hijrai … sudhu shymali maaer isharay nachte hoi amader*" (even though we are not biological *hijra*s, but we are like *hijra*s… we have to dance at the behest of Shyamali*maa*" (Ghosh 2015: 123). Shyamali*maa*'s strong but cumbersome networks that range from the local saloon to the police station helps her in conducting a thriving human-trafficking that organizes *hijra* and *launda* dance. Although she makes profit from her unconventional dance business, her business and avarice also makes Katkati and other transgenders vulnerable. Katkati for example, has been infected with an incurable, sexually transmitted disease (AIDS) in one such trip of *launda* dance in Bihar. Apart from physical and biographical instabilities, the *hijra*s in the group are marked by their isolation and marginalized social backgrounds -- their *prantik (subaltern)* identity that forces them into situations of compromise with Shyamali*maa*. Due to the discrepancies in the money they are able to collect, she insults Katkati by calling him a *gheo kutta* (a dog, his body full of sores). The disrespect Shyamali*maa* gives transgenders in her group, illustrates the destitution and poverty of the *hijra* community, who are marginalized,

humiliated, and impoverished due to their sexual orientation. Katkati's situation, as well as that of his colleagues is menacing and additionally perilous as their masculinity is undermined by their poverty – coercing them into professions that capitalize on the performance of alternative sexuality.

Image 5.4: The moments of negotiation, untouchability and conflict for Tarak and his colleagues. Image Courtesy: Jadavpur Manthan, Kolkata (WB).

Scene VII functions as eye opener for Chandan and Saswati who come to understand the duality between Tarak's personal and professional life. The scene opens at Saswati's natal home where she is spending her post-delivery period along with her new-born. Katkati along with Bipasha, Madhuri (Tarak) and Karina visit the house to perform the *hijra* dance there with the aim of blessing the child with a long life. While their initial negotiations for money and clothes with clients seems unethical, in reality, the extent of these negotiations cast more of a light on their wretched life struggle. Also, Saswati's mother expresses a fear about their filthy and impure touch, reminding viewers that society still considers *hijra*s untouchable. In the course of their bargain, Chandan and Saswati's entrance with the child and their sudden meeting with Tarak constitutes a new twist to the story. Their understanding of the truth underlying Tarak's story and occupation that has him work with a gang of transgenders baffles them. The moment they exchange looks creates a contradictory mirroring effect that reverses and complicates the normative gaze between genders in the drama. Tarak is a biological male but his professional entity as a female subject generates a new identity for him as a 'female drag' – an economy of the female gaze that produces him as a 'her' and thus as an object of male heterosexual consumption. Tarak thus becomes "an object of exchange in a heterosexual economy founded on bourgeois" (Aston 1995: 43) social relations. Situated in a world of heteronormative, gendered, and sexual-relations imbalance, Tarak's

unconventional exhibitionism connotes a strong visual and erotic message within the scope of the constructed gaze, that has him-her emplaced at the centre of both the masculine and feminine heteronormative gaze.

A partial repetition of the same reversal occurs when Shaymali*maa* 'shows' Tarak to Chanda Mian with an aim to 'sell' him as a dancer for the coming season of *launda* dances. Mian who has kept his eye on Tarak for a while, now selects and 'buys' him for this dance trip at the cost of fifty thousand rupees. Keeping Tarak's dance expertise, acting and singing skills combined with his good look and youthfulness in mind, Shaymali*maa* specially underlines Tarak's virginity that will make him additionally attractive as the object of Chand Mian's consumption. Scene VIII also highlights the personal journey of Katkati who experiences the savagery of *launda* dances and its aftermath. Upon hearing the discussions between Chanda Mian and Shaymali*maa* who are planning to send Tarak for the same dance function in Bihar, Katkati expresses concern for him and protests vehemently against the filthy and immoral nature of such practices and the unhygienic activities it entails. Having suffered it, Katkati recounts his terrible exploitation that ended with he becoming infected with a sexually transmitted disease. His detail descriptions of the vulnerability of men in *launda* dances exposes the otherwise repressed and concealed sexual perversion of patriarchal society. During such trips, the dancers are poorly accommodated and fed and men who usually taunt dancers with abusive epithets in the daytime, enjoy sexual relations with these same men at night. Though, Tarak's owner Shaymali*maa* and the pimp Chanda Mian will earn a handsome amount of money by supplying Tarak for the entertainment of others, he would live on very meagre supplies. He painfully describes the paradox of how the dancing transgender who is considered auspicious in a groom's wedding party is also considered an amusing spectacle, whose public presence and visibility in daylight is reviled. It is exactly like seeing a snake; in a dream, a serpent is considered a symbol of procreation, but in reality people are scared when they see a snake. His comparison of the *launda* dance with snake dream articulates the internalised fear surrounding fecundity that may be associated with not just transgenders but also the snake. While being forced into *launda* dance, his contact with contagious disease increases, as does his physical ability to live a healthy life; in return, he receives no financial support or medical help from his ghetto. In anguish, he cries out aloud: none is a biological *hijra* in the ghetto of transgenders; rather men are forced to become transgenders due to their poverty that is exploited for business by pimps.

Katkati and Tarak's homosexual journey provides a stark example of how queer persons are oppressed in patriarchal society, and how LGBTQ persons are sex-trafficked in a homophobic capitalist political economy (Gore 2022). LGBTQ sex-trafficking is a commonly overlooked concern due to its underreporting as well as the concealment of the criminality surrounding it, that is hidden in a restricted community. While the mainstream society blames the community and its members, traffickers and exploiters go scot-free. The invisible nature of same-sex prostitution and the stigma associated with homosexual prostitutes not only lessens the possibility of understanding more about their life marked with struggle and exploitation, but also keeps them away from accessing the required legal and health facilities they need. Their trafficking entails forced labour in the commercial sex-work industry, and also in the entertainment sector that sells exotic dances that are accompanied by sexual servitude. The acute trauma and anxiety generated from the everyday torture, social stigmatization, familial isolation, economical imbalance and mental health difficulties of a homoerotic individual extracts a heavy toll over them. And these problems are only increased by their traffic and

enforcement into unhygienic sexual practices that easily brings them into contact with communicable diseases.

Again queer sexuality occupies a marginal position in society and in the political economy of urban space because of its non-binary and non-reproductive orientation. Unlike women's sexual labour, and the way in which reproduction and corporeality is bound up within capitalist power relations, queer sexuality falls within the non-productive category of state-market relations. It is emplaced within the so-called private sphere or within restricted spheres of individualized sexual intimacy that falls outside the boundary of political economy. Though NGOs interlink state machinery with queer activists and practitioners with the aim of providing the community with economic stability, legal assistances and health facilities, the ungoverned or outside-society or reproductive nature of sexual relations between same-sex partners still convolutes the situation. Same-sex marriages serve to decriminalize homosexuality for elite members of the LGBTQ community, but for queer from economically weaker sections of society, difficulties continue. The double oppression of economic instability and a sexual minority status creates a trap and in *SMK*, Tarak and Katkati are in a similar web of familial responsibility, their experiences of rejection forcing them to yield to obnoxious traffickers like Shaymali*maa* and Chanda Mian who earn a profit by exploiting their marginalized sexual minority status combined with economic needs within a strictly conventional hetero-normative society and capitalist economy. Neither side morally sanctions the same-sex sexual orientation, and in their need to fend for themselves and their families, queer persons regularly lose their life to health and food, infected with contagious and fatal diseases.

Wrapping up: Using the Narrative Vernacular Turn to Make a New Manasa Lore

Summarizing the narratives of the goddess Manasa and linking it to the present play under discussion *SMK*, the analyses in this paper shows how the feminist approach within popular folklore transforms and recreates a new lore that bears special relevance to the contemporary discourse of transgender activism and social truth. The conversion of popular Manasa songs into dancing songs, or what is called *Manasa pala-gaan* presents a postmodern and postcolonial 'narrative turn' to the feminist exploration of folklore studies as domains of articulate representation. The adoption of the 'narrative turn' suggests significant changes in the practice of Manasa story. Bardhan's theatrical endeavour of transferring a popular Hindi song into a sacred *Manasa pala-gaan* in Scene VII postulates the 'total nonaddress of gender as a rather persistent and visible cultural resources in folk and popular models of difference in gender stereotyping' … 'Feminist models are equipped to look at the phenomenon of cross-cutting identifiers in such (social) groups' … 'which assumed alternative shared solidarities are played out'. (Mills 1993: 173-192). The song in the drama paraphrases the deconstruction of *Manasamangal*:

Du'noyone ghor chamak! Abiswasyo kata!	Surprised Enough! Goddess Manasa is manifested in Kolkata city!
Maa Manasar Abirbhav – sahor Kolkata!	Absolutely unbelievable!
O Chand Bene, ne mene ne, Maa Manasar leela!	Dear merchant Chand, please accept the divine play of Manasa!
Chandan Bene, ne mene ne, Maa Manasar leela!	Dear Chandan please accept her!

Pasne chamok, hosne abak, Maa ke hetay dekhe,	And do not be so awestruck by the goddess appearing here!
Ki rupe maa debe dekha, ke jane kotheke!	None can predict her incarnated appearance!
Natun sure shon ajike, Maa Manasar katha!	Please listen the new tune of Manasa stories!
Natun rupe dekho ebe, Maa Manasar katha!	Please watch the new version of Manasa story!
Natun bhabe bhabo ebe, Maa Manasar katha!	Also think of the Manasa story differently! (Ghosh 2015: 126).

In folk narratives, Goddess Manasa has been epitomized as a mother of fecundity but she herself was motherless. Ironically, in the play, Tarak like Manasa has lost his mother, but possesses Manasa into him for giving blessings of fertilization to Saswati. Even, the nomenclature of dramatic personas seems intriguing. The protagonist Tarak has been named after Lord Shiva who is mythical father of goddess Manasa. Tarak's spiritual connection with Manasa in advocating the praises of this serpent goddess actually reverses the mythical narratives of *Manasamangal*. While in the folk, Chand Saudagar, a staunch Shaivite, shows reluctance to perform Manasa puja, here in the play Tarak doing Manasa puja senses that Lord Shiva Himself performs the fatherly duty to exonerate the marginal status of Manasa. Tarak's platonic conjugality with Radha has been symbolized by the perpetual romantic image of Radha-Krishna, but in the play, her dramatic action matches with Behula. Radha's asexual conjugality with Tarak due to his god-like image and marginal status of alternative sexuality synonymize with the *Pouranic* story of Radha who was married to impotent Ayanghosh. Unlike Behula she accepts the indecent proposal of deflowering of Ananta to save her husband and family, but ultimately slays him for constant stringent criticism of Tarak's desexualisation. Again, designing the character of Chanda in the shadow of Chand Saudagar from *Manasamangal*, director Bardhan tries to chart the changing perspective of postmodernist narrative turn in folklore. While the mythical Chand was a sea merchant, the contemporary Chanda Mian is engaged in female trafficking by cajoling the local girls into wedlock. The religious identity of Chanda Mian reminds the Islamic influence upon the folk narration of *Manasamangal*. Here following the idea of bricolage, the play *SMK* produces a new way to think/talk about the socio-cultural marginalization of thirdgender and the legal loopholes in resisting the female trafficking. While the playwright Rakesh Ghosh experiments with existing popular text *Manasamangal* to form a new kind of trans-narration, the director Rajib Bardhan shows acumen and creativity in assembling the ritual and folk theatre together. The mythical story of Manasa itself was unnoticed but assembling with folk touch gives it a momentum. So, it proves that writings on women's lore yet to get due attention with an explicit structure in gendered division of cultural labour. A differential restudy possibly opens up multiple gender consciousness in particular cultural situations. In case of Manasa story, the inter-textuality of written text and its performance genres celebrate the goddess. *SMK* galvanizes the older religious text and modern political discourse to 'co-exist by incorporating the sacred symbols of the former' (Cowen 1981:18).

The folk world is a composite picture of human imagination, escapism and make-belief situations, where displaced persons seek solace through the activity of benign deities. The musical remarks about the moment of astonishment, the moment when Chandan and Saswati

confront Tarak's grim reality that is now an open secret, is also reflected in the moment when Tarak is incarnated as goddess Manasa, when he is also cross-dressed. This palimpsest creation of the divine and homosexual self in the cross-dressed body also encapsulates the zeitgeist of Manasa's mythical tour of Kolkata, where LGBTQ groups celebrate the month of Pride, participating in Pride Walks with rainbow flags. *SMK*, enriched by urbanized and folk theatrical elements, interlinks the popular medieval narratives of the goddess Manasa with local knowledge formation of the trans-ghetto, and its language that constitutes the vernacular turn of the play. The play's experiment with the community's language *Ulti* contains additional professional terminologies like *dhurani* (sexually marginalized communities of West Bengal)*, koti* (same as *dhurani*)*, parikh* (male partner)*, laharan* (female sex worker)*, launda* (male dancer in female garb)*, khiluya* (alcohol/ liquor)*, bila* (quarrel)*, jhalki* (money)*, dhumki* (smoking) and other terms that are used by trans-people, invested in embodying the voices of knowledge within vernacular culture.

Aniruddha Dutta (2022) explains how the term *dhurani* as associated with the sexually marginalized communities of West Bengal and comes to include queer persons, while in the *Ulti*, the spoken language of the LGBTQ community, the term comes to mean sex worker. The word also denotes a cooperative society of culturally self-identified, distinctive group of alternatively sexually oriented persons. In the end of the 1990s, the word *dhurani* was replaced by *koti* and became popular among a new generation trans-people, with *koti* being later used by NGOs to identify HIV infected transsexual communities. However, *dhurani or koti* and *parikh and giriya* were used interchangeably in Delhi within the community, this exchange of community language among sexual subalterns helping them to form an assemblage of communication that widens the scope of their activism throughout the country. The incorporation of local knowledge within folk taxonomy, and the increasing interest in the vernacular has been examined by Diane Goldstein "as a path to making public culture appear both aware and accountable" (Goldstein 2015: 125-145). The usage of the vernacular in *SMK* is deeply associated with the gender politics of an ostracized community that is used to demonstrate how normative people evaluate and disseminate knowledge about sexually downtrodden individuals. Also, by moving away from the dominant folk narratives of the goddess Manasa's story to the individual narratives of Tarak and his colleagues within theatrical performance, *SMK* elevated the role of personal experiences to social truth accepted within public culture.

There is the last aspect of the overlapping similarity between the cultic processes of marginalization itself – the marginalization of the goddess Manasa within popular, traditional narratives that also demonstrates the way in which she grows as a goddess, and the gendered marginalization of colonial and postcolonial Bengali and Eastern Indian society. While late colonial dramatic trends represented the oppression of women within patriarchal society through the narrative and dramatic metaphor of Lakhinder's wife Behula, demonstrating her story to be that of every woman's story, the postcolonial lens shifted to Manasa herself. Goddess Manasa's story of marginalization, transformed the traditional story of women's emancipation through Behula, and widened the arc to include a larger concern of sexual minorities, gendered subalterns and their emancipation that came to include the concerns of the entire LGBTQ community, and especially transgenders. Manasa's story became Tarak's story in *SMK*, in which his subalternity reflects the earlier subalternity of the Behula protagonist, and the goddess Manasa's own prehistory. Now, leaving Behula and women behind, the story of emancipation shifts to the ambivalent reflection of goddess Manasa

herself, reflected in the marginalization of Tarak, and the genesis of an articulate protest that gives him and other transgenders a powerful voice. This process of emancipation is exactly like goddess Manasa's cultic process of being finally accepted within the Hindu pantheon, contextualized within the loosening frame of Brahminism responding to the Turkic invasion of Bengal. While the Behula period may have reflected the various reform movements of the 19th century in India that highlighted the oppression of women within Hinduism, the Tarak phase represents the postcolonial period that sees the exploitation of all sexual and gendered subalterns and minorities within a capitalist market economy. The folklore of Manasa thus remains alive and relevant as a narrative that is fitted to every vernacular expression of gendered marginalization and exploitation through time.

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Kusumita P. Pedersen, *The Philosophy of Sri Chinmoy*: *Love and Transformation.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021. Pp. x+157. ISBN 978173618986 (Cloth). Price: Not Stated.

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Chinmoy Kumar Ghosh was born in 1931 in the village of Shakapura, in what was then East Bengal. He belonged to a prosperous Hindu family, benefitting from his father's profession as a successful Chittagong banker. It was a time of political ferment occasioned by the Indian independence struggle. Bengal was also the epicentre of religious stirrings with reform and conservative Hindu movements vying for influence. Prominent among these were the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission. Eminent teachers such as Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo had also left their marks. The latter would exert a significant influence on the life and thought of Sri Chinmoy. Hriday Rajan, Sri Chinmoy's elder brother, became a disciple of Sri Aurobindo and took up residence at the Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry. The family became regular visitors and, after the deaths of their parents, all the children, six brothers and sisters, moved to reside at the Ashram. Here they spent the rest of their lives as celibate spiritual seekers. Sri Aurobindo's teachings clearly exerted the most significant influence on Sri Chinmoy. He attended the Ashram school and engaged in religious practice. Here he began his career as a poet and athlete, interests that he sustained throughout his life. In 1962, at the age of 31, Sri Chinmoy moved to the United States. He found employment as a clerk in the Indian Consulate in New York, while delivering lectures and leading meditation sessions at the homes of interested seekers. As Sri Chinmoy became established as a teacher, centres were founded, and a monthly magazine, *Aum,* launched. New York became the centre from which his activities radiated around the world and his permanent home until he passed away in 2007 at the age of seventy-six. Sri Chinmoy's legacy is impressive and multidimensional. It includes over 100,000 poems, 200,000 paintings, and 23,000 song compositions in Bengali and English. In addition, he led over 750 musical peace concerts around the world and conducted twice-weekly meditation sessions at the United Nations headquarters in New York. He was a dedicated runner, completing twenty-two marathons, and weightlifter. His work expanded in the field of business to include restaurants, health food stores, flower shops, printing presses, yoga studios and professional consultancies.

Pedersen work, as far as I am aware, is the first attempt to offer readers a systematic introduction and exposition of the philosophy of Sri Chinmoy. This is no easy task. Poetry was Sri Chinmoy's preferred mode of expression and his poetic legacy, as noted above, is enormous. Even his prose writings have a pithy and poetic quality and Sri Chinmoy never offered any systematic exposition of this thought. The work of Pedersen, as Sri Chinmoy's interpreter, is undoubtedly challenging. Beginning with a brief biographical summary (Chapter 1), Pedersen organizes her presentation of Sri Chinmoy's philosophy under six headings: God, Creation and Evolution, The Soul's Journey, Knowledge and Realization, Love and Acceptance and Transformation. In her discussion of divine nature (Chapter 2), Pedersen emphasizes Sri Chinmoy's focus on the relational nature of the divine. There is much less concern with the divine as it is in and of itself and much more on God in relation to humanity. It does not surprise, therefore, that while the divine has infinite attributes, love is described as

being the very nature of God. "Love or *Prema* is not an "attribute of God, but rather God is Love itself (p. 28)." A distinctive feature of Sri Chinmoy's theology of the divine nature is his teaching that "God is always transcending God's own being." Brahman's infinity, eternity and immortality are constantly evolving. Aware of the paradoxical or even illogical nature of the claim that infinity increases, Pedersen explains it as truth ascertained by the heart and not the rational mind. This is one of the very interesting insights of Sri Chinmoy that deserves a more amplified discussion. Creation and Evolution (Chapter 3) centres on Sri Chinmoy's teaching that the creation is inseparable from the creator; the world is God in multiple forms. God creates or becomes the many, "in order to fulfil Itself through the cosmic Lila, the Play or Game of the universe" (p. 45). The unity and plenitude of God is not affected or diminished by self-multiplication. The identity of creator and creation is at the core of Sri Chinmoy's teachings, echoing the well-known Chandogya Upanishad (3.14.1) declaration, "*sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma* (All this is Brahman)." Pedersen is correct in distinguishing this claim about the creator-creation relationship from pantheism or the simple equation of the creator and the creation. In both the Upanishads and in Sri Chinmoy's teachings there is an unmistakeable emphasis on divine transcendence. In Sri Chinmoy's words, "The universe in its entirety is but a tiny spark of His Infinite Magnitude" (p. 51). The author opts for 'panentheism', as the descriptor for Sri Chinmoy's theology. Panentheism emphasizes the existence of the creation in the creator, a position that is not incompatible with Sri Chinmoy's teachings. Panentheism, however, is compatible with dualism, and does not propose the identity of creator and creation that is fundamental to Sri Chinmoy's thought. In The Soul's Journey (Chapter 4), Sri Chinmoy equates the soul with the Upanishadic *atman* and speaks of its qualities as consciousness (*chit*, and bliss (*ananda*). The soul is present in everything, "in material objects, parts of the body, places such as a city or country, works of art, oceans, the planet Earth and in spiritual beings such as deities or angels (pp. 65-66)." What remains unclear is whether Sri Chinmoy understands the soul to be identical in all beings and whether the language of the soul as a "drop of the ocean of *Sat-Chit-Ananda* is metaphorical and the soul is, in fact, identical to Brahman as affirmed in the great sentences of the Upanishads ("that thou art" [*tat tvam asi*], *Chandogya Upanishad* 6.8.7 of the Sama Veda "this *atma* is *brahma*" [*ayam atma brahma*], *Mandukya Upanishad* 2 of the Atharva Veda "Awareness is *brahma*" [*prajyanam brahma*], *Aitareya Upanishad* 5.3 of the Rigveda "I am *brahma*" [*aham brahmasmi*], and the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* 1.4.10 of the Yajur Veda.[1]

Knowledge and Realization (Chapter 5) gives us a glimpse of Sri Chinmoy's epistemology. As far as the attainment of truth or liberating knowledge is concerned, Sri Chinmoy clearly affirms the supremacy of intuition. Intuition, in the words of Sri Chinmoy, "is the direct perception of Truth, which needs no mental help. It is knowledge without thought or mental form. It is direct and spontaneous" (p. 93). Intuition is higher than imagination and all mental faculties. Intuition as a mode of knowing was also championed by leaders of the Brahmo Samaj and, in particular, by Keshub Chandra Sen. Sri Chinmoy advocates Yoga as the method for the awakening of intuition. Helpful clarifications in this chapter could explore the relationship between intuition, realization and *samadhi.* Are these identical or could they be differentiated? What is the special tradition of Yoga advocated? The final two chapters, Love (Chapter 6) and Acceptance and Transformation (Chapter 7) return to the central theme of divine nature as love and the implications of knowing this truth for our relationship with God and our lives in the world. Personally, I found these two chapters to offer the most compelling discussions in

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[1] See Jha (1942), Swami Gambirananda (1965-1966), and Swami Madhavananda (1975).

Pedersen's work. God's love is without limits; in fact, "God loves us infinitely more than He loves Himself. Why does He love us so much? He loves us because He feels that His dream remains unfulfilled without us; His Reality remains unmanifested without us; without us He is incomplete" (p. 108). The idea that God is incomplete without human beings is, to say the least, a radical one that deserves a fuller treatment. The unity of creator and creation, a pivotal theme of this book, implies that we cannot know the creator by rejecting the creation. Equally important is that we cannot love God without loving God's creation. Sri Chinmoy's philosophy is powerfully world-affirming and world-embracing. Acceptance of the world is a necessity for the work of transforming the world. It finds expression in the ethics of compassion and service and in the identification with others in pain and suffering. In one of his final poems Sri Chinmoy reiterated this teaching. "World-renunciation is not for me. /World acceptance, /And then world transformation, /Is my Goal-my only Goal" (p. 129).

For almost half a century Sri Chinmoy was active as a global teacher. Kusumita Pedersen's offering of a systematic overview of his thought is a significant contribution to religious scholarship. I hope that her work inspires other similar studies that deepen our understanding of Sri Chinmoy by exploring the historical sources of his thought, his debt to Aurobindo but also dimensions of his departure, if any, from Aurobindo. Sri Chinmoy is clearly close to Upanishadic Advaita, but there are significant ways in which he deviates from conventional articulations of this tradition especially in his affirmation of the significance of the world and the importance of engagement for peace and transformation. Hopefully, other studies treating such dimensions of Sri Chinmoy's work would follow the path cleared by Pedersen.

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Rajendra Pal Gautam, a former minister of Delhi government, made headlines when he resigned from his position in the face of an allegation by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that accused him of insulting Hindu gods. Gautam who is a member of the Aam Admi Party (AAP), had attended a Buddhist conversion ceremony on October 5, 2022 (Joshi 2022) where he took an oath to renounce the Hindu pantheon. However, interestingly, this particular oath is one of the twenty-two vows that B.R. Ambedkar administered to his followers when he led the mass conversion ceremony in 1956. Needless to say, these vows are held by Ambedkarite Buddhists as guidelines for social revolution. The AAP-BJP conflict concerning Gautam's conversion oath speaks volumes about the relevance of Ambedkar's resistance to Brahmanical philosophy and the Hindu caste order in contemporary India. Ambedkar who did not dissociate religion from the social, emphasized the need for a strong moral foundation upon which a free, equal society could be erected. His quest for a eutopic world is vividly traced in V. Geetha's book as she examines Ambedkar's understanding of socialism through his study of Buddhism.

What makes this book remarkable is its eagerness to situate the theme within a wider socio-religious, political and economic context that both shaped and was shaped by Ambedkar's world-view and political endeavours. The Introduction, befittingly titled *A Haunting* not merely presents the overarching theme of Ambedkar's uneasy relationship with socialism, but it also argues that the ubiquity of Ambedkar's image as the architect of the Indian Constitution – "a bespectacled man in suit" with "a book in hand, and right forefinger pointing into the distance" (p. 1) is predominantly a creation of mainstream politics that has constructed a homogenous identity for him. However, V. Geetha clarifies that Ambedkar was more than just that. He was, as deemed by many counter-publics, a "revolutionary thinker, radical democrat and republican" and an "unusual socialist" (p. 1). It is interesting to read how she thinks through the prevailing complexities of Ambedkar's thought-world that deliberated over socialist principles, and yet, at the same time, critiqued Indian communism and communists.

Keeping in mind the fact that Ambedkar did not limit his knowledge to the territorial narrowness of a specific discipline, V. Geetha adopts a holistic approach and examines Ambedkar's engagement with socialism, from epistemic, political and ethical standpoints. The second chapter (*'A Part Apart': The Life and Times of Dr. Ambedkar*) sets the stage for this as it analyses Ambedkar's life and works vis-à-vis multiple social and political events that were at the time unfolding in his native Maharashtra, as well as in other parts of India. V. Geetha in this chapter articulates Ambedkar's awareness of the necessity for a two-pronged resistance that would simultaneously critique oppressive colonial rule and the caste-stratified Hindu social order. Furthermore, she foregrounds Ambedkar's ideological standpoint as she explains how nationalist and communist movements both showed disinterest in "interrogating the constitutive inequality of the caste order on its own terms" (p.36). However, the

inadequacy of a nation-based as well as a class-based approach to the critique of colonial rule is further emphasized in the third chapter (*Pax Britannica: Conceptualizing Colonial Rule and the State*)) where V Geetha critically evaluates the differences between Ambedkar and M. N. Roy regarding the centrality of caste to colonial rule. While, for Roy, caste ceased to exist as a functional social system under colonial rule, Ambedkar continued to maintain that the colonial government did not effectively intervene enough to unsettle the caste order. This section is important for two significant observations, which enable readers to comprehend Ambedkar's notion of socialism: a) the limited nature of the communist movements and b) the long durée of the practice of social inequality in India. The latter is analysed in the next chapter as well (*A New Time: Arguing with History and Imagining Utopia*) where V. Geetha illustrates Ambedkar's understanding of the history of inequality from ancient times, with examples drawn from his writings, including even those writings that he did not finish. Also, here she familiarizes her readers with Ambedkar's conceptualization of Buddha as a revolutionary leader whose creed reshaped polity and influenced society greatly.

V. Geetha's brilliant juxtaposition of Buddhist emancipatory ideals with repressive Brahmanical indictments reinforces the book's aim to interrogate Ambedkar's ideas on socialism. Chapter five (*Graded Inequality and Untouchability: Towards the Annihilation of Caste*) underscores the inherent asocial nature of the Hindu caste order that is fortified by endogamy. Besides, by emphasizing the absence of fraternity at both ontological and social levels, the chapter raises questions about the plausibility of implementing socialist thoughts and practices in the Indian context. At the same time, it draws on multiples sources that demonstrate how Ambedkar challenged the putatively eternal nature of caste by historicizing it and by making it an object of knowledge. V. Geetha refers to Ambedkar's long intellectual association with socialism in chapter six (*The Pre-requisites of Communism: Rethinking Revolution*) where she examines his theorization of labour question that was embedded in the context of caste and untouchability. While the chapter expounds Ambedkar's views on agrarian and other social movements, it also foregrounds his scepticism about the success of socialism in India. Communists, he argued, attempted to resolve the question of caste inequality through their appeals to workers' unity and brotherhood, but they subsumed issues of caste prejudice into the overarching rhetoric of class and comradeship. The chapter continues to uphold Ambedkar's socialist concern as V. Geetha explains how the untouchables, who were compelled to carry out the most menial and physically taxing tasks, experienced a unique kind of alienation.

Furthermore, her in-depth discussions of other issues such as the communists' failure to acknowledge the primacy of religion as well as their disapproval of Ambedkar's proposal for a separate representation of the Untouchables facilitated a logical progression to the conclusion that enshrined Ambedkar's conviction about conversion to Buddhism. This conversion was not a mere shift from one religion to another; it was rather, a means to "experience mental and ontological liberty" (p. 236). Chapter seven (*The Path to Salvation? The Conundrum of Social Reproduction*), which is the penultimate chapter of this book, connects the dots as it situates Ambedkar's response to social reproduction within the context of similar endeavours made by some of his contemporaries, who also strove to conceptualize a eutopic world emplaced outside Hindu caste order. In addition to this discussion, V. Geetha also analyses how the women's question, that was debated through the mechanisms of civic, legal and religious initiatives in late colonial India affirms the need for reviewing Ambedkar's arguments through a feminist lens that has problematized the socialist position on

reproduction. Chapter seven echoes Ambedkar's belief that conversion to Buddhism would contribute to the resolution of the women's question and this discussion in turn facilitates a perfect transition to the final segment of the book that is intriguingly titled *Buddha or Karl Marx: Fraternal Ethics and Economic Justice*. Drawing on Ambedkar's major writings on Buddhism, V. Geetha, explains why the convergence of Buddhism and socialism appeared to Ambedkar as the only viable path to the materialization of a free, just and equal society. Interesting here is the analysis of the role of *dhamma* in sustaining the gains of communism. This affirmative conclusion, which indexes Ambedkar's success in transforming the Untouchables from abject victims to historical subjects with power to reconstruct the world, raises our hope as we finish reading the book. We realize why V. Geetha argues that Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism is "not so much a point of arrival, as it was a point of departure" (p. 8).

Those who are familiar with V. Geetha's writings know how gifted she is when it comes to eloquence and lucidity. Hence, additionally commenting on this facet is unnecessary here. However, what must be mentioned and lauded, is the author's decision to include a separate section on terminology in the book. Despite the ubiquity of such terms as *varna*, caste, Hindu and Brahmanism, readers, especially those who are not acquainted with caste jargon, often seek clarity on such concepts and their implications. It is commendable indeed, that the book recognizes the need and *democratizes* what is otherwise, a formidable insular knowledge-space.

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It is either a particular irony or fittingly appropriate that the same Raimon Panikkar, who arguably redefined comparative religious hermeneutics for Christian theologians, has proven so elusive and non-interpretable, and has generated the most diverse hermeneutical perspectives on his own works and legacy. Enrico Beltramini's contribution to Panikkar studies is distinctive to others among this varied landscape, contextualizing the early Panikkar within the mid-20th century academic domains of biblical studies, patristic studies, and Catholic systematic theologies. In this endeavour, Beltramini draws upon my own foregrounding of early Panikkar texts such as "Meditation on Melchizedek" and analysis of Panikkar's use of the Bible in the first edition of *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (Ranstrom 2017), and takes these trajectories in his own direction. Whereas my scholarship argued for a reconstructed appropriation of various and selective lines of the Panikkarian theological reflection over the course of different epochs within his intellectual development as a systematic foundation for contemporary comparative theology, Beltraimini takes a further hermeneutical leap. He articulates what he believes to be the unitary, rather than evolving, theological concern of Panikkar's life that is rooted in his priestly vocation—Catholic and cosmic—and argues that this systematic coherence represents a profound achievement, transcending mere professional theology. This is the key for him to a proper interpretation of his writings, and while establishing Panikkar as an ironic theologian or philosopher, he also identifies the specific kinds of academic scholarship in theology and biblical studies that Panikkar drew upon, or was indebted to, in communicating his vision.

The volume begins with a biographical introduction of Panikkar for the reader that includes the central themes of his theology and concludes with the "problem of interpretation" (p. 11), a charge that is levelled against many interpretations of Panikkar and particularly those of Panikkar's critics. As an alternative, he seeks to then address these critiques with his particular hermeneutic of approaching Panikkar as a mystical theologian rather than a discursive thinker. The following chapter situates Panikkar's life-project within the vocational mission of preparing the Church to transcend its tribalism and embrace an authentic catholicity in relationship to other religions, particularly Hinduism. Toward this end, and in successive chapters, he addresses the tension between parochial and universal perspectives in the biblical worldview, expertly marshalling insights from a study of the meaning of God's Kingdom in biblical texts, the prevalence of monolatry within Israel's worship as an interim condition beginning in the Patriarchal age, the concurrent assignment by Yahweh of angels as patrons of the 'nations', and the movement within Scripture toward the unitive charism of Christ's economy of grace. These biblical considerations are then identified as hitherto unacknowledged elements of biblical studies acumen by Panikkar in his invoking a transcending of a "tribal Christology" and calling for a Second Council of Jeruslem. The remaining chapters offer a skilled exposition and unfurling of the Panikkarian vision, in all its depth and breadth, which is meant to induce an atmosphere of awe in the reader pondering

the scope of Panikkar's spiritual theology. The volume concludes with an appraisal of Panikkar's theological and ecclesial cosmology and its place in the Christian tradition as a descendant of the theology of Maximos the Confessor, bringing the Tradition forward in ways both new and ancient.[1]

Beltramini makes a case for Panikkar as a Catholic theologian steeped in Catholic mythos, and as being fully integrated in its 'tradition'. The book seeks to amplify an appreciation of the specific—yet widened—Catholic Christian ethos of Panikkar's theological imaginary; namely, that of a radically universal and mystical unity of cosmos, Church, and Kingdom in Christ. The arguments contained within "Meditation on Melchizedek" and the first edition of *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* are seen by Beltramini as hints that indicate to this unity, as well as the possible meaning of priesthood and its cosmic scope relative to these works. There are several laudatory features of the book. He suggests, rightly, that one must decipher what Panikkar refers to elsewhere as ideational 'telegraphing' and give special attention to the peculiar theo-poetics of what he evoked and suggested rather than explained. Beltramini introduces a place for angelology in the theology of religions with his retrieval of certain threads within mid-20th century biblical scholarship on Yahweh and the heavenly court, but curiously does not mention Panikkar's fascination with angels that occasionally found its way into many of his various texts (and which may be more tied to the Vedic devas than to Near Eastern cosmology). The mention of angelology should be taken seriously by theologians of religions, quite apart from its significance for Panikkarian studies, as it informs a biblical worldview regarding God's governance of the nations in the economy of salvation and the 'nations'. Beltramini's conceptualizing of Panikkar and Abhishiktananda's shared project,[2] as an apologia for "Christian readiness" is an arresting reformulation of their friendship, collaboration, and the ecclesial task of the Church in its relationship to Hinduism and other religions more broadly.

Beltramini also makes the compelling case that it is more than probable that De Lubac[3] had an appreciable impact upon Panikkar, given the supernatural essence that Panikkar claimed for non-Christian religious traditions, and his citation of the great theologians of *ressourcement*[4] across his major publications. On the other hand, there seems to be a much

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[1] Maximos the Confessor is best known to Eastern Orthodox Christianity of the 6th and 7th centuries C.E. as a monk and theologian whose writings on the humanity of Christ as the incorporation of humanity, and more broadly, all of creation into the divine life, was concretized in his theology of liturgy. Maximos has enjoyed a resurgence of interest in Western Christianity due to the Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988).

[2] Abhishiktananda (Sanksrit name indicating his belonging to Christ, "Bliss of the Anointed One") was born Henri Le Saux, later becoming a French Benedictine monk who moved to India in search of an Indian Christian monasticism. While in India, he became acquainted with Panikkar, and the two became co-pilgrims into the depths of the meeting between Christianity and Hinduism. He died in 1973, and declared that he had realized a spiritual awakening on the edge of life and death in his final days.

[3] Henri de Lubac (1896-1991) was a theological giant in 20th century Catholic theology, shaping the Church's consciousness on the importance of the laity, and the value of ecumenism. Most importantly for the purposes of this review, de Lubac developed a theology of creation that was skeptical of the natural/supernatural dichotomy and saw all creation as existing in God's grace.

[4] *Ressourcement* refers to a movement in Catholic theology in the mid-20th century that influenced the documents and reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). It means "return to the sources," and arguably had its greatest impact in liturgical practice and theology.

weaker link between Panikkar and Beltramini's claims for Panikkar's immersion in biblical studies research for several reasons that are shared below.

To Beltramini's credit, he acknowledges that he offers a highly speculative thesis in attributing much of Panikkar's early thought to biblical studies scholarship of the early and mid-20th century. It may have been more accurate to the charism and scope of the study for Beltramini to own the fruits of the book's conclusions as his own augmentation of the Panikkarian tradition, rather than present the steep argument of attributing a direct influence of studies that were not cited by Panikkar in his major works. As stated above, Panikkar's elucidation of a graced, supernatural status inhering in Hinduism and other religions does more to deepen a reception of that de Lubac-ian trajectory amidst the wider context of theological debate, contemporary to his time. It is another step, however, to draw a straight line between highly specific findings that pertain to biblical area-studies and the largely invisible and concealed sources that remain difficult to specify. Beltramini here operates on two levels: he operates as an intellectual historian of Panikkar's works and the influences that shaped his writings, even as, problematically, this is difficult to ascertain.

On the second level, by arguing that Panikkar's primary 'source' for his work was the Spirit rather than academic lines of inquiry, Beltramini justifies this same Panikkarian scholarly idiosyncrasy on spiritualized grounds, evident in what he interprets as the principled absence of relevant footnotes that track the latter's thoughts, in accompaniment to the absence of other conventions that are appropriate to a University-trained scholar accountable to his peer academicians. This allows Beltramini to openly speculate on how Panikkar's ideas were internally connected and formed, owing to other scholarship despite a dearth of evidence, creating the conditions for non-falsifiability. In respect to Beltramini's argument about mystical provenance, he adopts a familiar Panikkar-studies apologia by lamenting on how most scholars misperceive Panikkar and fail to appreciate the mystical orientation that led to a new religious (or in this case, Catholic) awareness. The result is the pleading for a special case and the exoneration of Panikkar from following conventional scholarly norms. This locates Beltramini's book, like other similar studies on Panikkar, as an active maintenance of the 'Panikkar myth'.

An important counterweight to this tendency in the book, is Beltramini's mention of Panikkar's financial independence as a factor that contributed to allowing for the social production of an assemblage of Panikkarian mythology. Since he was not accountable to professional employment within the academy for his livelihood, the myth of spiritual and intellectual liberation from conventionality could thrive, owed at least in part to this concealed economic reality. Still, what must be questioned in the spirit of undermining this argument about exceptionalism, is: do not other scholars write similarly, as integrated academicians with a spiritual dimension? Does following scholarly convention or analysing Panikkar's dialectical arguments as 'thought' amount only to a compartmentalized form of intellectualization? Or rather, is the aim not so much to deny that Panikkar was a spiritual theologian, or even that he lived this integration with a particular beauty, but rather to question why the privilege of holism is reserved for him alone, ascribing to others a more rudimentary plane of consciousness, disallowed from such privileges? There is a patina of gnosticism[5] and duality

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[5] Gnosticism here refers to the ancient spiritual and philosophical movement of the early centuries of the Common Era that privileged the special knowledge of the spiritual elite as opposed to the benighted and ignorant

in this approach that runs throughout the book, despite the author's best efforts to ensure an orthodox perspective. When Beltramini, for example, opposes rites to spirit, distinguishing Panikkar's sacramentalism from the "official sacraments" of the Catholic Church, the shadow of gnosticism is close at hand.

Beltramini argues that Panikkar made special use of modern biblical criticism, but questions remain as to whether his method of employing Scripture was more reliant on figurative typology that was wholly Christocentric in the early part of his career, and then later deployed as symbolic ciphers to support his theological philosophy. For example, Panikkar's treatment of Melchizedek in "Meditation on Melchizedek" is carried out, not in the light of emerging biblical and apocryphal research on covenantal differentiation, but in terms of how the lineage of priesthood in the Old Testament is fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Contra Beltramini, the early Panikkar does not follow the Melchizedekian traditions according to its ancient, Near Eastern contexts—contexts that privilege Melchizedek as a semi-autonomous and mystical-cultic figure. Rather Panikkar continues to espouse a traditional Christocentrism that privileges a theology of fulfilment, which stands in tension with Panikkar's later understanding of his own share in the Melchizedekian priesthood.

Furthermore, Beltramini relies on Melchizedek's Semitic symbology as a source of Panikkar's purported interest in Melchizedekian theology, but it can also be argued that Panikkar was investing the figure of Melchizedek with an other-than-Semitic mythos and this contextual background was of little relevance. Melchizedek's function was to serve as an imperative for a hermeneutic commitment in Christian theology, to traditions outside the Abrahamic ambit, especially Hinduism. Relatedly, there is little in the book to suggest that Panikkar's cosmic ecclesial intuitions may themselves be the fruit of an engagement with Hindu perspectives on non-dualism, rather than on ancient Near Eastern cosmology. 'Creation' was problematized by Panikkar fairly consistently in his canon for precisely this reason.

Returning to the Christian front, Beltramini's proposed understanding of Panikkar's early theology of Melchizedek is shorn of a robust 'Christic centre',[6] and is instead situated within a cosmic soteriology, which, though present even in his texts of this period, is at risk of eclipsing the salvation-historical dimension that persists, though under pressure, in Panikkar's early work. It begs the question of how the constitutive role Beltramini ascribes to Panikkar's priestly offering and 'at-one-ment' between Christianity and Hinduism relates to any rite that is outside of Panikkar's own cosmic mythos, as opposed to my research on the place of the Eucharist and the Roman Canon in Panikkar's early sacramental theology.

As always, the balance between the cosmic and historical levels is a delicate one in Panikkar studies and the reception of his legacy, and while Beltramini seeks to root the latter in the former, in the context of the primeval myth, and ensuing movements in biblical cosmology, there is a subtle displacement of the singular Incarnation. Nevertheless, Beltramini's translation of the non-dual cosmotheandrism of Panikkar into biblical categories is an innovative contribution that more properly belongs to Beltramini, rather than to Panikkar. This book is recommended for students of the intellectual history of 20th century Catholic theology

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material religionists. It was the subject of heavy critique by Catholic theologians such as St. Augustine of Hippo, who himself converted from a form of gnostic philosophy to Catholicism.

[6] This phrase, typical of 20th century theology, indicates the centrality of Jesus Christ in all Christian worship, theology, and ethics, lest Christianity lose its distinctiveness among other religions.

and biblical studies, Panikkar specialists, and theologians of religions. Beltramini capably lends his voice to the movement that already extols and endorses scholars to read Panikkar within the Catholic tradition. The book, like this review, will surely also continue to elicit further reflection—especially among those scholars working in the various areas of systematic and biblical theology—but who are unfamiliar with Panikkar's relevance.

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The title of the book strikes its readers with a rather counter-intuitive choice of words. After all, 'privileged' and 'minorities' constitute a rather rare pairing. Through the examination of Kerala's Syrian Catholic, or 'Syro-Malabar' Catholics in postcolonial India, Sonja Thomas undertakes the task of deconstructing a rather conventional understanding of religious minorities as necessarily subaltern. (p. 15) In the context of India, the dismantling of the subordinate and vulnerable image of Indian Christians may be especially illuminating; Thomas investigates the privileged positions of this subset of Syrian Christians not solely through a 'standard' set of

A drawing by Abby Brace based on a photograph by the author's father in the 1960s. Image Courtesy: Sonja Thomas

the boundaries of religion, race, gender, and class, but also within the constraints of the caste system. Through a detailed intersectional analysis of the aforementioned categories, Thomas draws an exhaustive picture of how the Syrian Christians, overcoming the impediments of numerical minority status, have negotiated themselves as a dominant community in the socio-political realities of postcolonial India.

Following conventions of postcolonial scholarship in South Asian studies, the author examines how the minority identity shapes in the foreground of state secularism. As Thomas notes in the Introduction, the field now "has been almost obsessed with critiquing state-sponsored secularism" (p. 13). What makes *Privileged Minorities* a unique study is that the book focuses on the field of education. Thomas analyses education as an arena for the negotiation of minority identity, discussing the two secular laws—Article 30 (1) and Article 29 (2)—that regulate the financing and administration of schools established by minorities (p.

13). Geographically, the author focuses her research on Kerala – the state with the highest literacy rates. By studying Syro-Malabar Catholics, who have been influential in the field of education as well as impacting the process of delineation and definition of Indian minority rights, Thomas presents a case critical for understanding the role of education in the formation and negotiation of religious minority identity in modern India.

A South Asian American scholar of feminism, Sonja Thomas enters the discourse on minorities through the prism of feminist theory. Together with South Asian postcolonial theory, the critical feminist approach allows the author to indicate with precision what lies at the base of the privileged status of the Syrian Christians, namely, Brahmanical patriarchal power. For Thomas, the theme of gender norm regulations, enacted by caste-informed patriarchal systems, undergirds all other essential aspects of the minority's life, with clothing, education, mixed marriages, racial division, and political activism being a few of them. The book draws upon a wide number of theoretical sources from the interdisciplinary fields, allowing the author a multi-faceted perspective on religious minorities and minoritization. What makes the text particularly valuable is the author's engagement with primary sources produced in Kerala. Legislative documents, textbooks, print media, and movies are among a few sources Sonja Thomas employs to effectively support her arguments. As a feminist scholar, Thomas brings women's voices to the forefront. The author conducted over eighty interviews in Malayalam. Translated into English, these conversations are excellent first-hand accounts demonstrating the process of minority identity-making. Of equal importance is the fact that the author is a South Asian American, which, as the author herself notes, equips her with a perspective of both 'insider' and 'outsider' (p. 18). Such dual status makes Thomas a helpful mediator between a Western reader and South Asia. Thomas provides small yet pertinent details essential for understanding the book overall. For example, the text explains the subtlety of terminologies used for racial discourse in South Asia; and the author's engagement with Kerala's mytho-histories provides a solid basis for understanding how gender and race oppression work among Indian religious minorities.

In trying to answer the broader question 'What does it mean to identify as a privileged minority?' the author ends up exploring the mechanisms responsible for creating and maintaining that identity. Therefore, in addressing the minority stance of Syrian Christians, the book seeks to answer other questions as well: How does the intersection of religion, caste, class, and gender prioritize one experience of oppression over the other? Does the overlooking of certain oppressions leave any ground for social change at all? How does a specific understanding of race and racialized oppression affect religious minorities in South Asia? What is the relationship between gender roles and possible definitions of the 'minority'? And finally, what norms and legal regulations specifically contribute to the privileged status of Syrian Christians in Kerala?

The author provides the rich context of Syrian Christianity as she answers these questions throughout the five chapters. *Privileged Minorities* begins with a brief history of the Syrian Christian community in Kerala and an overview of contemporary interreligious relationships in the state (chapter 1). Providing the history of Kerala, the author emphasizes that the dynamism of social reforms (including the field of education) has continuously rested on race and caste hierarchies, patriarchal privileges, and land rights (p. 31). Attentiveness to these factors demonstrates a nuanced perspective on the state of Kerala, interrogating its alleged image as an egalitarian, progressive, and economically advanced state. As Thomas points

out, the 'Kerala model of development' represents a narrow, high-caste stratum of society. Besides, the Kerala model overlooks the issues of gender paradox—while high literacy and low fertility rates indicate the alleged high social status of women, such factors as gender violence and low involvement of women in public life are often ignored by scholars in their assessment of well-being in the Keralite society (p.32-33).

Through the examination of dress as an embodied practice (chapter 2), Thomas discusses sartorial choices as a mechanism of challenging and reinforcing social inclusion. Examining the history of women's dressing in Kerala before 1947, Thomas explains that communal dress for upper-caste women, including Syrian Christians, was not only an indicator of religious belonging but a tool for reinforcing gender norms and controlling women's mobility. Since Independence, the switch to *sari* – a product of Indian secularism and a marker of national belonging, did little to facilitate women's social inclusion, as sex segregation in public spaces continued to control women's mobility, normalizing violence against them in gender-mixed public spaces (p. 58). Addressing the racial division issue in India (chapter 3), Thomas demonstrates that the Aryan-ness claimed by the Syrian Christians acts as another tool for maintaining upper-caste minority privileged status. Through their Brahmin origin, Syrian Christians claim their Aryan-ness and, in accordance with Hindutva ideology, their 'indigeneity.' Exploring the stereotypes around manual labour, the author points out the intertwining of race and caste, showing that racial differentiation in Kerala further contributes to controlling women's mobility. The detailed analysis of Kerala caste, gender, and race interactions provides the basis for the discussion of minority culture, the definitions of minority, and 'minority rights' movements (chapters 4 and 5). As the author notes, the Syrian Christian minority culture rests on the reproduction of Brahmanical patriarchy by maintaining endogamous unions within the community. The minority rights movement led by Syrian Christians elucidates that secular definitions of religious minorities do not meet the reality of how that minority has sought to define themselves. As the book shows, the marker of religion does not suffice to categorize a group as a minority; nor do the numerical or 'vulnerability' categories alone provide an exhaustive definition. As Thomas makes clear, Syrian Christians share much in tradition and status with 'Aryan' upper-caste Hindus. Being economically powerful and highly influential in the education sector, the Syrian Christian community seeks to distinguish itself as a minority group separate from Dravidians and low-caste Christians of other denominations.

In discussing how caste and religious divides contribute to minority identity making, Thomas brings attention to the use of the terms 'interfaith' and 'inter-caste' for mixed marriages. As the book emphasizes, a mixed marriage can simultaneously be an interfaith and inter-caste one; but for the upper-caste minorities such as Syrian Christian, a marriage across religion, across caste, or both, causes an equal backlash because a mixed marriage violates the moral code followed in the minority culture, endangering the privileged status of the community. Given the role of women in the reproduction of the minority culture, it is through gendered norms and controlled women's mobility that the Syrian Christians maintain their privileged stance. The book concludes with a commentary on post secular feminisms. Having analysed the participation of the Syrian Christian women in the minority rights movement, the author foregrounds what amounts to a feminism that is too narrow, conventionally attributed to secularity and opposition to social norms. Thomas provides a short but exhaustive reference on the participation of Syrian Christian women in the Charismatic movement to illustrate that religious practices can be an outlet for women's agency and leadership in public life. At the

same time, while Thomas sees the ritualized behaviour in Charismatic worship as self-formative praxis that allows for women's agency, the author, to the grief of the reviewer, refrains from assessing the potential of ritualized behaviour within the Syrian Christian community in terms of the same criteria of self-formation and agency (p.155). Although the author warns her audience that the book does not aim to discuss women's agency through ritual within the community, the readers might still be left with questions about that agency after they complete reading the book.

Privileged Minorities is a detailed and methodically written text of interest to a variety of readers. The study of minorities in the context of postcolonial India makes the book an engaging text for those involved in postcolonial studies. The author's significant attention to the category of gender and its role in the minority culture makes the book a useful source for feminist scholars both within and beyond South Asian studies. Though focusing on one Christian community, *Privileged Minorities* provides abundant material on caste and on what we now denominate "Hinduism," which is undoubtedly of interest to scholars of Hindu and Indic studies.

Interview

The book describes ritualized behaviour in Charismatic worship as an outlet for women's agency. What aspects of ritualized behaviour within the Syro-Malabar community should be studied to identify what makes (if at all) provisions for women's agency? How successful would the western categories of race, class, and gender be in discussing the relationship within a religious minority living in India?

As a scholar of gender and religion, I am fascinated by rituals that are maintained under the label 'tradition' and rituals that disappear under the label of 'progress' especially in the educated and supposedly progressive state of Kerala. Why are some maintained, why do others disappear? How can we understand the gendered realities of rituals as contributing to the production of 'tradition' and 'modern' (Lata Mani 1998)? Nidhan Donald has been studying Syrian Christian family histories and he has taken on some of these questions of tradition (2022) as has Susan Visvanathan (1999), who has examined rituals among Christian families in Kerala. I wrote an article (2006) on how certain rituals that have staying power in the Syro-

Malabar community centre around marriage and reproduction thereby revealing the investments of dominant caste Christians in endogamy and Brahmanical patriarchy. In *Privileged Minorities*, I examine material culture—namely, dress—as an embodied way of practicing religion and demarcating caste, race, gender, sexuality, and religion. As these embodied practices are expected of bodies and passed down through the generations, we can think of sartorial 'choices' as ritualized. Thinking through all that, my question back would be: what aspects of ritualized behaviour should we not study?

My PhD is in Women's Studies and hence, I had the fortune of being exposed to Middle Eastern feminists who have researched agency and resistance while always thinking through religion and spirituality. I still go back and read the classic essay by Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) where she explains the problems with scholars seeking to find resisters and/or explain resistance. She argues that we should think through resistance and agency as a diagnostic of power rather than

romancing resistance itself. In *Privileged Minorities,* I 'study up' by looking at political and socio-economic alliances between dominant caste Hindus and dominant caste Christians. Looking at rituals that change and rituals that do not when 'studying up' allows for a particular avenue to think through resistance as a diagnostic of Brahmanical patriarchal power. For instance, when you put the Breast Cloth agitation, a Dalit Bahujan resistance to casteist sartorial mandates, side-by-side dominant caste women abandoning their communal dress a generation later, we can see how Brahmanical patriarchal 'traditions' retain themselves in other aspects of daily life that communal and caste-based clothing practices once ritualized. I am not sure that race, class, and gender are western categories of analysis. I do think that Black feminist thought has discussed intersectionality and specifically the intersections of race, class, and gender in the US better than any other subfield of study. For that reason and many others, we should all be reading, teaching, and citing Black feminists. Studying religion and/or caste in addition to the trinity of race, class, and gender might feel like scholars of Asia are using western categories, and then adding on caste (which IS in the west) or Eastern religions. In the book, I argue that such a move is a misapplication of Black feminist thought because intersectionality does not just reveal intersections or add more categories onto observations about identity. Rather, intersectionality is a way to theorize social change and actualize justice. If Black women are harmed and bring a case of discrimination to the courts, and the courts deem that since white women are not harmed and Black men are not harmed, Black women cannot prove either gender or racial discrimination—then where is justice for those who experience both race and gender discrimination at the intersections (Kimberlé Crenshaw 1991)?

Black feminist thought teaches us all that a unidirectional analysis will not allow us to imagine or actualize social change because it cannot understand the simultaneous experiences of multiple harms or the unique discriminations of intersecting harms. Further, Black feminist thought teaches us that it is often the issues of those facing only one discrimination that rise to the top of a social movement. In such a frame, we act like there is a laundry list with priorities: first, we will focus on white women's issue and then maybe we will get to others. But, as bell hooks explains (2015), trickle down justice does not work. Thus, when we are looking at caste and minority religions AND race, class, and gender, it's important to look at how simultaneous privileges and oppressions may shape social movements of religious minorities in India. Syrian Christians are a religious minority in India, but part of a dominant caste community. Hindu Americans are a religious minority in the US, but the majority of Hindu Americans are dominant caste. Not surprisingly, we see the same political moves by caste privileged religious minorities—so apt to talk about their numerical subordination as religious minorities, but silent about casteism in their communities, if not downright hostile to caste oppressed peoples asserting their rights. With caste privileged peoples holding accrued generational wealth (class), and with caste privileged peoples claiming an Aryan racial identity (race), I would argue that understanding the intersections of race, gender, class, AND caste and religion becomes a necessity for any scholarship on religious minorities.

The participation of Syro-Malabar women in minority rights movements illustrates that post-secular feminisms properly describe religious minorities in India: for many high-caste women it is essential that their children continue enjoying the economic

and social privileges of the community they are born into. On the other hand, a discernible number of Indian couples reject the religion- and caste-based norms of endogamous marriage opting for love marriage, which prompts one to speak of a westernized, secular feminism. To what extent is the dual taxonomy of secular/post-secular feminisms applicable to the study of inter-caste/interfaith marriages? Does it require alternative understandings/ dimensions of feminism?

I hesitate to separate secular western/ 'love marriage' from religious East/endogamous marriages even when thinking through how research participants may understand 'love marriages' to be a product of Western secular feminist thinking. In the US, miscegenation laws were on the books in our generation. Isabel Wilkerson (2020) writes that Alabama only overturned these laws in the year 2000, with 40% of the population in favour of KEEPING the laws on the books (p. 111). For years, there was the Hays clause in Hollywood which were moral codes that prevented (among other things) interracial romance which still shapes representations in the US media today. Dalit activists and scholars have spoken about endogamy and caste for decades. BR Ambedkar wrote the oft quoted line in the *Annihilation of Caste* (1944 [Third Ed.])*:* "The real remedy for breaking Caste is intermarriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of Caste." In Kerala, the reformer Sahodharan Ayyappan advocated for inter-caste dining and inter-caste marriage as a way to eradicate caste. Thus, when working on inter-caste marriages, I would argue that scholars need to be critical of easy separations between West/love and East/endogamy and think through what research participants are saying/doing when such ideas of 'western secular feminisms' are revealed in the archive, in interviews, in participant observation, and

other primary sources on marriage. One thing I ask for in *Privileged Minorities* is for dominant caste South Asian feminists to rethink the very approach to the study of inter-caste/interfaith marriages that heretofore has problematically understood religion as a unidirectional avenue of analysis. Inter-caste marriages are often researched in a separate realm from interreligious marriages. When we separate caste from religion, we assume that inter-caste marriages mean marriages across castes within only the Hindu religion, and interfaith marriages become primarily about Hindu/Muslim marriages (without caste). Casteism in academia and the position of the researcher is important here: When you have so many Hindu upper-caste scholars in the academy, the invisible referent in understanding both caste and religion is often the upper-caste Hindu.

In the introduction to *Privileged Minorities*, I talk about the 'upper-caste Hindu referent' where studies on the 'Other' caste become about Dalit women (Hindu) and studies on the 'Other' religion will be about Muslim women. Thus, caste is seen to be only Hindu, casteists only to be Hindu, Dalits only to be Hindu, foreclosing the possibility for understanding the way casteism actually functions across religions and indeed, amongst any group that supports Brahmanical patriarchal power and cuts off access to 'Others'. Hence, we are left with inadequate acknowledgements that 'caste exists in other religions too' that do little to really think through how *religion* must be understood dynamically. I am arguing for a way to think through that diagnostic of power I mentioned earlier that does not take religion as a unidirectional category of analysis (something that Black feminist thought, and intersectionality warns us *against*). As I write, "because South Asian feminisms tends to, however unintentionally, rely on the upper-caste

Hindu referent when imagining caste-based discrimination and minority religion, the frame for understanding how the intersections of gender and caste functions in postcolonial India is overdetermined. The very idea that an inter-caste marriage is separate from an interreligious marriage is case in point. In actuality, one can marry across castes and religions simultaneously (an upper-caste Christian marrying a lower-caste Hindu) just as one can marry within a minority religion and not the same caste (an upper-caste Christian marrying a lower-caste Christian). In other words, an inter-caste marriage can also be an interfaith marriage just as a marriage within a religion other than a Hinduism can be an inter-caste marriage. But because South Asian feminisms tends to see Muslim women as the primary religious "other," and Dalit women as the primary (Hindu) caste "other," such a nuanced intersectional analysis of mixed marriage fails to register…[we need a] different view which can allow feminist scholars to fully interrogate not just where intersections of caste and gender are manifested and/or politicized, but a view that examines the relationship between the production of caste and the production of religion, and how these work together to engender and consolidate Brahmanical patriarchal power not just within Hinduism, but across any religious group that can access social and economic positions of power" (pp. 10-11). Post-secular feminisms, in its critique of the assumed binary between feminist/secular and traditional/religious, is one way we can rethink a unidirectional analysis because post-secular feminisms takes on a view that understands the practice of faith as dynamic. When dealing with Christianity in India, there is so much more work to be done in this regard, though. Rowena Robinson (2003) has given a bit of an intellectual history on Christianity in South Asian Studies where she explains why Christianity is a later addition into the study of religion in South Asian Studies. Ajantha Subramanium (2009) has also argued that the subaltern school problematically assumes that subaltern peoples (in her research, fisherfolk Catholics) will necessarily have religious worldviews. These critiques and intellectual histories of Christian minorities help us to understand that we should not just be thinking of Christians or any other religious minority as an asterisk add-on to the study of caste, gender, and marriage/ endogamy. That approach will do nothing to shake the reliance on the 'upper-caste Hindu referent', nor will it ever lead to a critical examination of casteism in academia that has led to such an overwhelming overrepresentation of dominant caste academics in the first place. It is important to note that Dalit Bahujan feminists have always 'studied up' and have alternative understandings of feminism. As I write in the article *Studying Up in World Christianity* (2021): "For privileged academics studying up can be seen as a choice. But it is not so for others. Dalit Bahujan feminist activists always study up. However, this work may not be published in journals recognized by the dominant-caste majority in the academy, but rather in forums such as Roundtable India, Dalit Camera, or Dalit twitter." When we think about caste and endogamy, the need to recognize and work against the invisibilized upper-caste Hindu referent is buttressed by a need to always understand that alternative understandings of feminism and critiques of endogamy/Brahmanical patriarchy have happened, continue to happen, and will happen outside of the ivory tower of academic scholarship.

Religion plays a significant role in maintaining the "moral" life within the Syro-Malabar community. That means priests have played an important role as mediators of that morality. To what extent is this mediation a reality among the Syro-

Malabar priests living in the United States and other places of the Syro-Malabar diaspora?

In *Privileged Minorities,* I borrowed heavily from the feminist historian, J. Devika (2018), in her discussions of morality and the "embourgified woman" of modern Kerala. I also borrow from Amali Phillip's work on Stridhanam or dowry in the Syrian Christian community (2003). As I argue, 'moral' behaviour often means constant surveillance and policing of dominant caste women's mobility in the public sphere and is shaped by domesticity and middle-class/dominant caste notions of 'good woman' behaviour. 'Good woman' behaviour often means that a moral life is one where Syrian Christian women use their 'share' for the good of their family which in turn means that women within the community have an economic dependence on marriage within the caste and faith. In a Brahmanical patriarchal society where bus stands need to be 'morally policed' in case, god forbid, girls sit next to boys, Christian private schools that provide 'moral classes' (aka catechism) are seen as a good that the Syrian Christian community provides to all religious communities. It is not surprising, then, that the Syro-Malabar clergy continually whips up the moral panic of *love jihad*s using casteist and Islamophobic rhetoric in their supposed attempts to 'save' dominant caste Christian women from love marriages. The hypocrisy of this mediated morality is that it occurs simultaneously to ever more media exposés of clerical sexual abuse of children and nuns. We see many faithful direct their outrage not to the lack of protection for the most vulnerable, but about the Cardinal's role in land deals gone south. We see outrage not about the casteism and Islamophobia embedded in *love jihad* rhetoric nor outrage over women not being able to choose their own partners (or not), but rather, the outrage is directed at the phrase *narcotics jihad*. Do not get me wrong, we should all be outraged with the *narcotics jihad* lies. But the *love jihad* lies, uttered in the same breath, goes by with little critique by the clergy and community. In my research, I am constantly thinking about how people are understanding 'moral' life through what is NOT said. The negative space surrounding mediated morality is something I gravitate towards because there is SO MUCH said in what is not said. What is not said is the elephant in the room, the obvious thing no one will talk about. And so when you see nuns and priests speaking out about Bishop Kallarangatt's statements about Muslims initiating a *narcotics jihad* in the state of Kerala without ever saying anything about how the bishop also whips up moral panic over so-called *love jihad*s in the same speech, something that is not said is something that is said about how the mediated morality in service to Brahmanical patriarchal norms of controlling dominant caste women's sexual freedom is one that the community accepts, or perhaps is afraid to go against.

I have been researching Indian priests—many of them from Kerala and many from the Syro-Malabar rite—who travel to rural areas of the US without a discernible South Asian American community. Are mediated moral norms translated to white or indigenous populations in rural America? Or are Western ideas of 'morality'—ideas shaped by colonial notions of brown men treating brown and white women with sexism who need saving by white men—more of a factor? For instance, while conducting participant observation I heard an Indian priest explain to (mostly white) congregants that he was warned by the diocese to not to talk about gender/sexuality in his homilies. I am not saying there is no sexism within Indian Christianity—I mean, I wrote a whole book on it! Rather, I am thinking through how the

mediation of a moral life is not just shaped by Brahmanical patriarchy and religious hierarchy, but also by the racist patriarchy and religious hierarchy. I do think that questions of mediated morality can play out differently in the diaspora in places with large South Asian populations than those with small populations (or no population at all). I am encouraged by new research on gender and caste within Syrian Christian communities in the diaspora and I am following the work of junior scholars such as Irene Promodh (for example cf. 2021) and Soulit Chacko (for example cf. 2020) who are looking at gender, caste, and Syrian Christian communities in the Gulf and US diaspora respectively. I am following groups like Transparent Malankara aimed at protecting and supporting survivors in the Indian American Christian community and holding clerical sexual abusers accountable for their actions (and the Malankara Church accountable for their previous lack of action in protecting survivors). And I am working with students in the US who are leading their colleges and universities to add caste as a protected category in institutional non-discrimination policies. In this emerging and difficult social justice work, it is telling that mediated morality is less of a guiding factor for the community than the actual work done by students, activists within the community, and junior scholars. I find their determined leadership on all these fronts (and more) an example for how to lead the most moral life—a feminist anti-racist/ anti-casteist life.

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Joel Lee, *Deceptive Majority: Dalits, Hinduism, and Underground Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pp. xviii+335. ISBN 978-1-108-84382-9 (Hardback). Price: Not Stated.

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"Shakuntala", a portrait from 'Deceptive Majority', by Sanya Darapuri. Image Courtesy: Joel Lee

In some ways, *Deceptive Majority* is a book within a book, with each chapter bearing internal linkages to different sections, in addition to the immediate chronology of the discussion plan. This permeability across sections and chapters is perhaps the book's most unique feature, producing it as metaphorical, in addition to a brilliant and seminal masterpiece on subaltern history and anthropology in India. The internal open-endedness of the book indicates metaphorically to the multifaced nature of the subject itself, i.e., the layered history of Untouchability in India, and the ambivalent but tacit production of 'Untouchables' as a caste category, erroneously linked to Hinduism—first in colonial census records, and then within the evolving scape of postcolonial politics that witnessed the intensification of Hinduization in the first half of the 20th century. Lee describes how Hinduization entails a historic and systemic process of erasure that transformed 'Untouchables' into Balmikis and their deity, Bal Mik (or Bal Nek or Bal Rikh) into the *Rishi* Valmiki. All the while, despite erasure, there is a red thread that Lee shows, runs through the community, and through his chapters that

describes a recognizable and distinct 'Untouchable' identity (*pahchan*), ideologically unifying in nature. The erasure continues as simultaneously as the worship does—Lal Beg is regularly revered and recognized, and this is combined at the same time with the physical demolition of shrines and the inhabitations where 'Untouchable' communities live. Despite various late colonial and postcolonial endeavours to categorize 'Untouchables' as Hindus—aimed at increasing the Hindu demographic-political strength, Lee minutely describes how 'Untouchable' difference recognizes itself as distinct from Hindus (*Hinduana*) and Muslims (*Musalmana*). Though their affinity with the *Musalmana* identity is closer compared to Hindu rejection and revulsion centred around cultural and ritual impurity, the difference of 'Untouchable' identity remains strong and as yet, dissimulated and ambivalent—a subversion characterized by blurred boundaries that produces memetic and separative layers simultaneously.

Deceptive Majority is organized in seven chapters, divided into three sections. The first section (*Untouchability and Alterity, Now and Then*) consists of two chapters: *Introduction: Signs, the Census, and the Sanitation Labor Castes* and *The Ummat of Lal Beg: Dalit Religion before Enumerative Politics*, while the second section (*Making "Untouchables" Hindu, or the Great Interpellation*) consists of three chapters: *Missionary Majoritarianism: The Arya Samaj and the Struggle with Disgust*, followed by *Trustee Majoritarianism: Gandhi and the Harijan Sevak Sangh*, and *Hinduization and its Discontents: Valmiki Comes to Lucknow*. The third and last section (*Semiotics of the Oppressed*) contains two chapters: *Victory to Valmiki: Declamatory Religion and the Wages of Inclusion*, and *Lal Beg Underground: Taqiyya, Ethical Secrecy, and the Pleasure of Dissimulation*, followed by an *Epilogue*. Even though these titles and headings are self-explanatory, some of the finer points in Lee's arguments are of specific and additional interest. The first section describes among other things, describes how the colonial census described, classified and identified the numerous 'sanitation worker' castes in North India by numbers for historically unknown reasons. The group of enumerated 'Untouchable' communities amount, according to records, to a conglomerate of 583 (*paanch sau tirasi*), indicating further to their distinct and collective identity. This distinct collective have their own deities, and Lee describes the panethon of Lal Beg or Bala Shah (or Shah Bala or Bala Shah Nuri) in significant detail—a set of deities that the 583 claim as 'their own'. Lee also provides moving descriptions of the *Jamghat*, a festival celebrated by the 583 just after Diwali in honour of Lal Beg and his worship at non-descript community shrines that suddenly become alive on the festival day, when roosters are sacrificed to the deity. Made by placing bricks in a tiny square/ triangular shape with five small domes on top, the architectural design of the shrine was said to be deliberately designed to identify Lal Beg with a Sufi-Muslim saint—a dissimulation that averted the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's ire, as the story goes, from falling on the community. According to oral narratives of the Lal Begis cited by Lee, he is the prophet of the 583s, created by Allah and contained in an egg (pp. 58-59):

> He shared the conditions of the sweepers in in earthly life and ensured their passage to paradise in the next. His birth was miraculous: he emerged from a pot, or the cloak of a great Sufi saint, or a hair of Allah's beard, or a drop of Shiva's semen, or he was born of a barren Mughal woman blessed with fertility by a saint. He was suckled by a hare. Clad in red and given to visions and intoxicants, Lal Beg swept the steps of heaven with a golden broom, drove camels in Kashmir, led his people to conquer Kabul, ate bread baked by Prophet Muhammad's daughter Fatima, won from praise from Ali, resurrected a dead and eaten horse, rescued the

sweepers from the wrath of a king, and will intercede for his people at the day of judgement (*Qayamat*). Alongside Lal Beg in the oral traditions are several other ancestral and tutelary figures: Pundri, a maiden who herds swine and cures leprosy; Bhadli Halalkhori (or Sati Chuhri), a woman who protects food and chastises the gods; Khwaja Jhaumpra who bargains with Allah; and other traditions…The majority of stories cast Bal Mik as a magician of Ghazni (and father of the swineherd Pundri) who brings about Lal Beg's miraculous birth, whether out of his own loneliness and desire for a son, or at the request of a barren woman or a sheikh of Multan…After Lal Beg's advent in the world, he and Bal Mik weather adversity and triumph as they travel with their followers to cities and provinces suggestive of an early Mughal itinerary: Kabul, Kashmir, Kashi, and Thanesar.

The second section of the book contains archival and historical documentation and discussion about the late colonial period—of how the Arya Samaj, and especially Swami Shraddhananda sought to integrate (convert) 583s into the Hindu fold by constructing a demonizing narrative about Muslim rulers, who were said to be responsible for enslaving and punishing the 583s by forcing them into manual scavenging. According to this constructed narrative—much like Saruman who told Orcs that they were once Elves, Arya Samaj activists told 583s that they were once a Hindu upper-caste group, who were descendants of none other than the *Rish* Valmiki himself, who were subsequently punished (for being Hindus) by Muslim rulers. While the Arya Samaj sought to instil a Hindu identity among 583s by endorsing anti-Muslim-ness, they combined their politics with education, emphasizing vegetarianism and stressing the community's necessity of adhering to Vedic rituals. By forcing 583s, at least formally, to accept their tenuously constructed genealogy that reframed Bal Mik as the *Rishi* Valmiki, Lee demonstrates how the Samaj nevertheless continued to impose the moral duty of manual scavenging on 583s—an occupation (manual scavenging) that Gandhi himself endorsed as divine. Though Gandhi was opposed to the 'missionary' modus of the Arya Samaj for its demonizing of Muslims, he nevertheless refused Ambedkar's proposal of defining 583s as an independent electorate, separate from Hindus, under the pretext that this would deplete Hindu demographical ranks. Holding naively unto the notion that eradicating Untouchability would bring 'Untouchables' back into the Hindu fold, Gandhi declared manual scavenging to be a holy task—a task that he himself started publicly performing, calling himself a Bhangi— a performance of his moral politics. Disaggregating occupation from caste, thus, Gandhi misunderstood the core of Untouchability: it was not manual scavenging that produced 'Untouchables', or scavenging castes as Untouchable—ascribing Untouchability as mere response to physical dirt would produce Untouchability as marginally logical; it was Untouchability itself that dehumanized the 583s, forcing them into the lowest kind of occupational imposition.

The last chapter of section two: *Hinduization and its Discontents* is perhaps the most chilling, in which Lee describes the benefits of the Arya Samaj's Hinduization drive for 583s, reflected in their increasing acceptance of the Valmiki or Balmiki identity (surnames). While acceptance resulted in the changing of first names as well, from Muslim-sounding to Hindu-sounding ones—it conferred Balmikis with political acceptance. Balmiki-Hindu identities afforded community members school admission, job reservations, and it afforded Balmiki-Hindu men the patriarchal right to control the bodies of women from their communities. Now Balmiki men were encouraged to police their women's sexuality, 'rescue' them violently from marriages and consensual sexual alliances with Muslims, and forcefully remarry them with either other

583s or with non-583 Hindus. The acceptance of Hinduization changed lifestyles. It forced 583s to renounce the Muslim cooking pot, the *deg* that had once allowed them to communally partake of meat dishes at relatively low-costs. Now the round *deg* was replaced by the flat, Hindu *bhagauna*, a symbol of vegetarian food—falsely justified as being cheaper than meat. All the while, as 583s performed Hinduism in exchange of personal emancipation—alleviation from manual scavenging and receiving government benefits, they adopted a sign-language that Lee calls the 'semiotics of oppression'—a concealed way of indicating to a continuation of their 'own' traditions—the worship of Lal Beg and the celebration of *Jamghat*. Despite benefits though, the stigma too, continued unabated. None of the non-Balmiki onlookers of Balmiki declamatory festival processions that had the latter dress as Hindu deities (*jhanki*), or the non-Balmiki participants of programs (*karyakram*) that brought dignitaries as chief guests to Balmiki community occasions, ever doubted their identity as anything but 'Untouchable'.

In the final section of the book, Lee returns to the theme of subversion and *taqiyya*, that explains the nature of religious practices, specific to endangered and a highly stigmatized, threatened group. *Taqiyya*, disavowal or dissimulation, has traditionally helped endangered communities like Shias to seemingly melt away from public life and too jarringly distinct an identity to emerge as a subversive and subterranean existence, characterized by an independent set of semiotics—cryptic allusions, recognized by and within the group. *Taqiyya* in this case is accompanied by a mimesis of Hinduism and an ascription to Hindu reform, that simultaneously runs parallel to, and is mediated by the worship of Lal Beg and the celebration of *Jamghat*. So blurred and overlapping are these layered, negotiated identities, that the 583s's mimesis of Hinduism acquires a separate meaning—a style that simultaneously adheres to and conceals the Lal Begi identity. Lee describes how this subversive site of *taqiyya* that entails both adherence and concealment is self-conscious, enacted and thus a site of pleasure—fun (*maza*) for his interlocuters who cheat those who try to erase and convert them, by saying 'yes', reaping the material benefits of saying 'yes', while secretly holding on to what are practices of heir 'own'—parallel lines in infinity. The theme of the history and politics of Untouchability in India and 583s is complex and entangled, offering readers multiple points of aperture to unravel the community's emplacement. Reflecting this complexity in its very writing style, *Deceptive Majority* begins and ends in the 'middle' of what is a painful story of systemic erasure and subversive pleasure (*mazey ki baat* …). The seeming 'messiness' of it all is part of the same theme that argues against 'Untouchables' constituting India's Hindu majority demography—it is just a deceptive enactment of this majority.

Reading the *Epilogue*, I pondered the mysteriously omnipresent and yet blurred figure of Lal Beg—both embodied and disembodied—a reflection of 583 layered identity and heritage. Although Lee makes a powerful analysis of the 583s' subversiveness, *Deceptive Majority* has its sadness. There is helpless discomfort and guilt about Untouchability for *savarna* scholars— products of systemic privilege in India. Our silences have obfuscated privilege—an unspoken conspiracy against the eradication of Untouchability. This discomfort is exacerbated by denial—when prevailing silences about Untouchability are produced as truth, to insinuate that there is nothing to say, and no Untouchability to talk about—academically, or politically.

This book must have been difficult to write despite its powerful story of subversion. I thank Lee for writing on the subject with moving interiority. Apart from the specific subject of Dalit history and anthropology, *Deceptive Majority* has something for every reader, methodologically located between archival history, oral history, anthropology, postcolonial

studies, religious studies (Hinduism and Islam), area studies (India and South Asia), and political science (history of political movements). I recommend this book for all undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and of course, for all researchers—academic enthusiasts of subaltern studies, critical race, area studies, and ethnicity studies.

Interview

In many ways, this book is two books in one. The first overarching book explores the entanglement of a historical-political web around the religious identity of 'Untouchables' in colonial and postcolonial Northern India. This first book merges discourse analysis with thick ethnographical descriptions to bring home to the reader, the various 'tussles' that took place in erroneously classifying 'Untouchables' as Hindu. The second book that fits closely inside this overarching discourse, is a fascinating book about Lal Beg. As I read your first, second and seventh chapters together, I got onto Lal Beg's trail and subsequently searched for him and his associated pantheon—Bal Mik, princess Pundri, Kwaja Jhaumpra and others in every nook and cranny of your book. These encompassed two kinds of reading journeys for me in your book. Did you feel you were writing more than one book at the time you were compiling all your research together?

I really like the way you have put this. Yes, it did feel like two books, but two books that needed to be written together. One is the history of an idea: the idea, absolute bedrock for Hindu majoritarian politics, that Dalits are originally and essentially Hindu—that before the question of conversion to Buddhism, Islam or Christianity arose, these populations understood themselves and were understood by others to be Hindu. Its claim to antiquity notwithstanding, the idea is scarcely a century old, and when radical Arya Samajists, working with the classificatory schema of the colonial state, began promoting it in the 1910s and

1920s, they met resistance both from many Hindus—who found it offensive to be categorized in the same religious community as 'untouchables'—and from many Dalits, who often had their own sacred traditions. The second 'book' is a study of precisely such a tradition, one of the great Dalit religions of South Asia. The red-clad antinomian prophet Lal Beg is at the centre of the pantheon, and he's accompanied, as you point out, by a host of ancestral and tutelary figures—healers, sorcerers, swine-herds, Dalit women and men of legend who challenge brahmins, sultans and even God on questions of justice and belonging. Much discussed and relatively well-documented in the colonial period—Lal Beg shows up even in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*—the populous, transregional Lal Begi tradition was all but erased from public consciousness over the latter half of the twentieth century. As my interlocutors in Lucknow slowly revealed to me, though, this was less a matter of actual erasure and more a matter of hiding in plain sight. There is so much more to say about Lal Beg and the Lal Begi tradition—far more than is in *Deceptive Majority*—but it seemed to me crucial to tell this story alongside that of Hindutva's majoritarian project. One cannot actually be told without the other: without the rise and installation into postcolonial law of the idea that Dalits must be Hindu, one cannot explain why and how the Lal Begi tradition went 'underground' in the way that it did. And the paranoia over numerical strength that has propelled Hindu nationalism from its inception, it turns out, emerged in the early twentieth century not only from the competition for numbers with Muslims—as

is well known—but also from the encounters of Arya Samaj activists in Delhi and Punjab with Lal Begis and other Dalits with their own sacred traditions.

I have repeatedly returned to the concept of taqiyya that you have used to explain, on the one hand, the strong internal feeling of adhering to the one and only ek-hi, even while simultaneously engaging in dissimulation and non-contiguity— 'believing' in reform but remaining true to nibhana of older tradition and the caste identity. It is as you describe: the semiotics of protection, concealment, and revelation that takes place at the same time. Thinking of the invitation you and your children received to the Jamghat that you mention at the end of your book, did you actually get to speak with any respondents about taqiyya? I know you say this very strongly at one point, that no one ever openly accepts to dissimulating. I am just interested in the interiority of taqiyya in this case.

Disavowability is integral to the practices I am describing as resonant with *taqiyya* theory—that is, with the body of Shi'i thought on the social ethics of secrecy. The efficacy (and elegance) of these signifying practices—not unlike that of *ma'na afrini* in Urdu poetry—lies in their careful ambiguity, their holding open of dual or multiple interpretations. To insist on one being true and another false is, in a way, to vitiate the very structure of the sign. Generally, I followed my interlocutors' lead in avoiding such a move, resisting the imposition of a fixed singular meaning on polyvalent signs. On the few occasions that I did raise the question explicitly in terms of *taqiyya*, responses were mixed. Thus it was all the more stunning to me when the man I call Bhairav Lal, when I met him in the particular conditions I describe at the end of chapter 7, made the dramatic avowal

that he did. In the months that the book has been out, a number of researchers have reached out to me with related evidence from elsewhere in India. The rites of Lal Beg quietly continue, it seems, not only in Awadh and Delhi, but in Rajasthan, Hyderabad, even Warangal. On practices of tactical concealment, keep an eye out for forthcoming publications from Raju Chalwadi, PhD candidate at IIT-Bombay. In his extraordinary doctoral research, he has found that many of his interlocutors, north Indian Valmiki migrants living in Mumbai, describe themselves as performing a Hindu role in public space while nurturing autonomous Dalit traditions, or in some cases Buddhist or Christian commitments, at home.

Your book is the most detailed readers could ever find in this decade, on the politics and religion surrounding Untouchability in India, but something I have often observed in my own fieldwork (and hence missed in your book) was the implication of 'syncretism' that you rightly say, is organized along caste lines. According to my observation, the fallout of being categorized on caste lines—an exterior perspective that then attaches the category with ghrina, dirt, and the normativity of Draupadi's revulsion, is the health issue. You mention this briefly while describing Lady Fatima's boon to the cleaner of the child's excrement, of being protected forever from diseases. This idea that the more external dirt 'they' clean, the more 'immune' to disease and internally pure they are, is a pervasive superstition in the Indian health sector that is often witnessed in rural clinical work. It is extremely painful to watch and too strenuous to fight after one point. Dalit women are at the receiving end of systemic negligence, and inadequate medical help and support. Does this resonate with your fieldwork, which may not have been a part of this monograph?

As hospitals filled and the lethality of Covid became apparent in the early months of the pandemic, several friends in the Lucknow sanitation work force told me that, despite the daily exposure they continued to face as essential workers, they had no fear. They had already been exposed to so many pathogens in their years as street sweepers, they told me, that they must surely be immune to this new threat. There is a kind of bravado that prevails in parts of the community, a boldness born of the routine taking of lethal risk. The oral tradition of Fatima's boon of immunity may be one source of this, and, as you suggest, it likely relates in a way to prejudices about Dalit bodies that continue to circulate in some parts of the medical sector itself. I do not directly discuss questions of health in the book, but there is no escaping its shadow. Environmental casteism—the disproportionate funnelling of toxic matter into Dalit neighbourhoods, workplaces and bodies—works its violence sometimes quickly, as with the deaths of sewer and septic tank workers, but more often slowly. Many sanitation workers do not reach the age of retirement. One of my deepest regrets is not being able to complete the manuscript in time to show it to two of my mentors in Lucknow, Shakuntala Devi and Sohan Lal, before they both passed away from illnesses linked to their work in sanitation. Their portraits are in the book, done by a brilliant young artist. Given what they saw of medical negligence in their time, I think they would be pleased to know that in the last three years, three of their grandnieces and nephews—among the first Valmiki youth of Lucknow to do so— have taken up postgraduate study in medicine.

Gendered Modernity and Indian Cinema: The Women in Satyajit Ray's Films (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2022).

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This book is dedicated to aspects of Satyajit Ray's films and their portrayal of women. Ray was an auteur, a filmmaker with a personal vision to offer, and on the strength of his film *Pather Panchali*, became a leading filmmaker of the 'Third World' in the 1950s. It is notable that in various nations around the world with a colonial legacy, there arose a group of individual auteurs at the time, who were usually members of the post-colonial elite. They tried to create their own national cinema based on the Hollywood model in what could be described as 'realist' genres that explored social and domestic life hitherto unexplored in Western cinema, Third World. Filmmakers of

An artistic representation from Satyajit Ray's 'Devi', released in 1960 (Image Courtesy: Deepra Dandekar)

this group like Ray, who often acknowledged the influence of Italian Neo-realism on their cinematic productions, also included stalwart film-makers like Fernando Birri from Brazil, Leopoldo Torre Nillson from Argentina, Tomas Alea and Humberto Solas from Cuba, Antonio Eugenio from Bolivia, Youssef Chahine from Egypt and Lester Peries from Ceylon (later Sri Lanka). Their cinematic productions have by and large, received utmost respect, partly because their works strongly opposed the 'mindless escapism' of contemporary Third World commercial cinema and could moreover, be judged by aesthetic standards familiar to the West (Armes 1987: 85).

In the years immediately following independence in 1947, Indian cinema was caught up in the endeavour of nation-building, and as a result, offered narratives that provided a detailed blueprint of the challenges and choices that was facing its audiences. Popular cinema had on the other hand already contributed to a 'pre-national' cinema by this time, and was engaged in the task of suturing social differences, and addressing national issues that were contemporary to the time of independence, although the nation was yet to become independent. As an instance of some of the common issues addressed by cinema under colonialism, the motif of the weak man and strong woman in films like Mehboob Khan's *Aurat* (1940) and P.C. Barua's *Devdas* (1935) had highlighted the common crisis of masculinity, which described the ordering of sexualities and its crises under colonialism. But what was most important was, that since nationhood was an existing notion even before 1947, there was a sense of a shared national-community feeling among educated audiences. Ray could

not but have been drawn into that milieu, like many of the other filmmakers of the Third World, though he expressed himself in a different idiom from that of popular cinema. Nehru's concept of Modern India involved the creative use of the state to reconstitute Indian society, and to reform it by bringing it into line with what he considered was universal history and a conscious movement towards historical progress. Nehru was a socialist, and preferred to inculcate a developmental model that was based on planning. By the mid-1950s Nehru was successful in implementing and executing his ideas, with the years between 1950 and 1962 given to great optimism. Jawaharlal Nehru's foreign policy initiatives played a crucial role in rebuilding national self-esteem, and Ray's own creative trajectory converged strongly with that. One could even propose that Ray's 'internationalist' idiom was a product and reflection of Nehruvian dreams.

Italian Neo-Realism that had also been trying in its own way to participate and recalibrate the project of nationhood after Italy's defeat in the Second World War proved to be an advantageous model for what Ray was attempting to do through *Pather Panchali*—which after the Second World War was namely to synthesize a language of cinema that was able to express Indian reality. After 1947 the state was paying special attention to cultural policy, and although Ray may not have articulated it thus, his films strongly addressed the following questions (a) the position that the state and the cultural establishment took with regard to a form such as a national cinema in mobilizing a national fantasy around independence; (b) positioning itself in the hierarchy of already established arts such as literature and other visual arts; (c) the role of cinema in determining and influencing the public and public cultural policy at the same time. That modern Indian art had undertaken such a project has been brought out by Bhaskar Sarkar and he argues for what he terms the "construal of national culture and heritage, its discourses and practices seeking to form an aesthetic canon" Ray was instrumental in conveying the culture of Bengal (as depicted in Bibhutibhushan's novel and later Tagore's) into the realm of cinema. The important thing for this book, however, is the fact that Ray, throughout his career as a filmmaker, went about creating characters by adapting from literature, often from novels from after 1947. One is clearly able to recognize Indians from the post-independence era in the protagonists he created, to quote Geeta Kapur (2003: 205) constituted "self-regarding members of the middle-class intelligentsia." One can even see Ray's protagonists as models for the kind of educated citizenry that newly independent India produced, that was noticed by film critics worldwide. While categorizing these characters and relating them to the milieu would perhaps entail a separate ethnographic exercise, this book primarily explores the subject of Ray's cinematic representation of women.

Women in Ray's Cinema

One of the important features of modernity in cinema, rests on the increased visibility of women in the medium. As Urvashi Butalia observes (1994: 109), "As women become more and more visible on the screen, however, it becomes important to ask what this visibility consists of. What are the sorts of roles women play? How are they projected? Do women film stars serve as models for Indian women? How far do their films reflect social attitudes towards them? How far do they shape such attitudes?" (Butalia 1994: 109). It is with this context in mind that this book proposes to study the representation of women in Satyajit Ray's cinema, and analyse the different ways in which he presents his women characters, in addition to examining how Ray's presentations extend to the representation of the feminine in modern

India. In 1948-49, the French film director Jean Renoir had come to Calcutta to scout for locations for his film, *The River* and it was Ray's experience as Renoir's Assistant Director that was to leave an indelible impression on the latter's film-making career, as did watching the unfolding careers of Italian Neo-Realist film-makers – Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, Guiseppe De Santis and the early phase of Luchino Visconti's productions. This experience was evidently of utmost importance since the only other experience of film-making that Ray might have gained access to would have been limited to Bengali, and local cinema. Cinema in Bengal dates back to the 1890s when the first 'bioscopes' were shown in the theatres of Calcutta. In this decade, Hiralal Sen was the first to set up the Royal Bioscope Company in Calcutta and was generally considered the first Bengali film director in India. The first Bengali feature film by him was released in 1919. It was called *Billwamangal*, and followed six years after Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* that was considered India's first feature film. During the 1930s two actors-turned-directors, Debaki Bose and Pramathesh Barua directed a number of movies, thus giving new impetus to cinema in Bengal. Bengali cinema saw a brief revival in the years between 1947 and 1956 that witnessed the production of 460 films, second in number only to Hindi films produced in that period. This growth indicates to the rapidity with which Bengali cinema had developed since its inception in the 1890s. It must however be noted, that from its very inception, Bengali cinema as well as Indian cinema in general was largely dependent on the Hollywood model of film-making. However, Bengali aesthetics, evident in the regional tradition of fine arts and literature, also underwent significant transformations in the 1930s and 1940s, with prevailing aesthetic norms being challenged, and new norms being ushered in. Cinema with its potential as an art-form became duly recognized as a result of this transformation and it was almost inevitable that Bengali cinema would see changes with young enthusiasts like Ray being exposed to World Cinema through the 1952 International Film Festival held in India that screened films from France, Italy, Japan and other countries for Indian audiences.

Satyajit Ray was generally perceived as being focused on a world that was centred on and peopled by men, although he did make films with strong women protagonists. The objective of this book has been to primarily focus on the women characters Ray created in his films, and provide a critical exploration of his approach to women characters. Studying the representation of women in any filmic space is tantamount to reading the construction of the feminine identity itself, developed, as they have been, in the socio-cultural and political milieu and context, as perceived by the author and film-maker. This book follows a closely analytical reading of these cinematic texts with special reference to women characters, based on feminist film theory and representation theory along with a study of the socio-political and economic conditions pertinent to Ray's women characters. The primary texts of this book consist of a reading of some films by Satyajit Ray that spanned the four decades between *Pather Panchali* (1955) and *Ghare Baire* (1984). This exploration follows a thematic schema that underlies feminine roles, broadly based on a categorization of feminine characters into 'types', based on their relationships, in Ray's films. These 'types' include the 'the receding mother figure', 'transgressors', 'beacons', 'the new woman' and 'the amoral woman'.

The Receding Mother figure is best represented by the figures of Sarbojaya (*Pather Panchali*), Doyamoyee (*Devi*), Anima and Labanya (*Kanchenjungha*), Joya (*Aranyer Din Ratri*). For this particular type, my book examines the sacred figure of the 'mother' in Ray's films that is also an object of deep respect in other Indian cinemas of the time (especially the Hindi films of the 1950s). In Ray's cinema, their depiction as 'retreating' figures within the film narrative, is

counterbalanced by the arrival of the individual within them that comes to the forefront. Motherhood for Ray was thus not the ultimate goal of women's life, and demonstrated instead as a politically deliberate and mistaken frame that essentializes womanhood through their associated social roles and relationships. While Sarbojaya remained the quintessential self-sacrificing mother of the 1950s; by the time we come to reading Joya, we see her push aside her role as a mother, to give way instead to her individual desires and longing. This early feminism is also perhaps commensurate with the changing milieu within which Ray worked. Ray's transgressor type has protagonists like Charulata (*Charulata*), Bimala (*Ghare Baire*), and Seema (*Pikoo*.) This is a significant category in itself, because the women in their roles, pursue illicit love in spite of obstacles that society sets up for them, whether it be through the mechanism of *purdah*, or through the institution of marriage, and, in Seema's case, the perceived attachments of motherhood. The 'transgressors' stand out in Ray's cinema as women who are 'modern' in many ways, although in the case of Charulata and Bimala, they nominally belong to the colonial period and not to the context independent India, even as their figures harbinger the cinematic ethos of proto-independence. They are agents who usher in modernity by their sensibilities and intelligence to internalize the winds of change that independence brings. The category 'beacons' includes Aditi (*Nayak*), Tutul (*Seemabaddha*), and Aparna (*Aranyer Din Ratri*). These are women who are attractive to men, but they nonetheless maintain their distance from them. They scrutinize the men for their foibles, and this is especially significant because the men they scrutinize are considered to be successful men in what is a man's world, and betray signs of complacency. The men are themselves at moral crossroads, and the presence of women as 'beacons' serves to steady them. The category of 'the new woman' can be seen exemplified in the characters of Monisha (*Kanchenjungha*), Karuna (*Kapurush*), Mrinmoyee (*Samapti*), and Arati (*Mahanagar*). This chapter of my book exploring 'the new woman' specially looks at women protagonists who are placed in coercive situations whether this coercion is related to their marriage or to their limited family situations involving questions of economic independence and financial security. Common to the four women, is the fact that they exercise judgement and deliberately choose their course of action in order to empower themselves. They are mostly young women, striving to reach beyond their lot in the world, in a bid to lead better lives, either in the economic and/or emotional domain. The final category of 'the amoral woman' is represented in the roles of Sutapa (*Pratidwandi*), Kauna (*Jana Aranya*) and the prostitutes in (*Jana Aranya*). These films are set in the turbulent era of the 1970s in Calcutta, when employment was scarce, and when men had to take recourse to devious and often humiliating means to earn money. In this context, these women depicted by Ray, strike out on their own so as to enable their families to survive economic crisis. How Ray treats these women, whether as rebels or as victims is the primary focus of this chapter.

Satyajit Ray's cinema is essentially Bengali and hence, this book is also a study of how his films highlight the condition and status of women in the various historical eras of Bengal, providing deeper insight into the socio-political structures prevalent in post-Independence Bengali India. What is significant about Ray's work is, that while gender concerns were already prominently featured in his cinema, he seemed to have anticipated the views of later-day feminist theoretical critics who wrote on cinema—critics like Laura Mulvey ([1975] 2009) Jaqueline Rose (1986) Annette Kuhn (1992), and Cora Kaplan (1988). Anticipating their viewpoints, Ray's cinema nevertheless remained firmly grounded in the social context of independent India and postcolonial Bengal. A great artist, after all, perceives societal matters that are only theorized about, much later.

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Missionaries and Modernity: Education in the British Empire 1830 -1910 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).

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Christian missionaries were some of the most prolific providers of schooling in the British Empire. At the start of the nineteenth century, many Anglican and Protestant missionary societies were able to establish schools mostly unhindered by colonial regulations. By the end of the nineteenth century, government regulations, examinations, inspections, teaching qualifications and standards were the norm in many mission schools that sought government support and funding. The increased intervention of colonial governments into mission schools led to many missionary personnel being concerned about the secularization of mission schools, and the expected harm that such secular education would 'unleash' amongst non-Europeans. As mission schools grew in size and number, missionary societies expanded their work and were often reliant upon government funding to help support their schools. However, with government support came increased demands on what needed to be taught, leading missionary societies in some

Image Courtesy: Felicity Jensz

cases to jettison religion from their core curricula. This led to the paradox of secular mission schools. I examine this paradox in my book, which reflects what this meant for relationships between different parties that had vested interests in schooling, including local teachers, local pupils, colonial governments, and missionary societies.

This is not a book about the origins of missionary schools. Nor is it a book about the exact numbers of people who attended. Rather, it is a book that follows the aims and ideologies
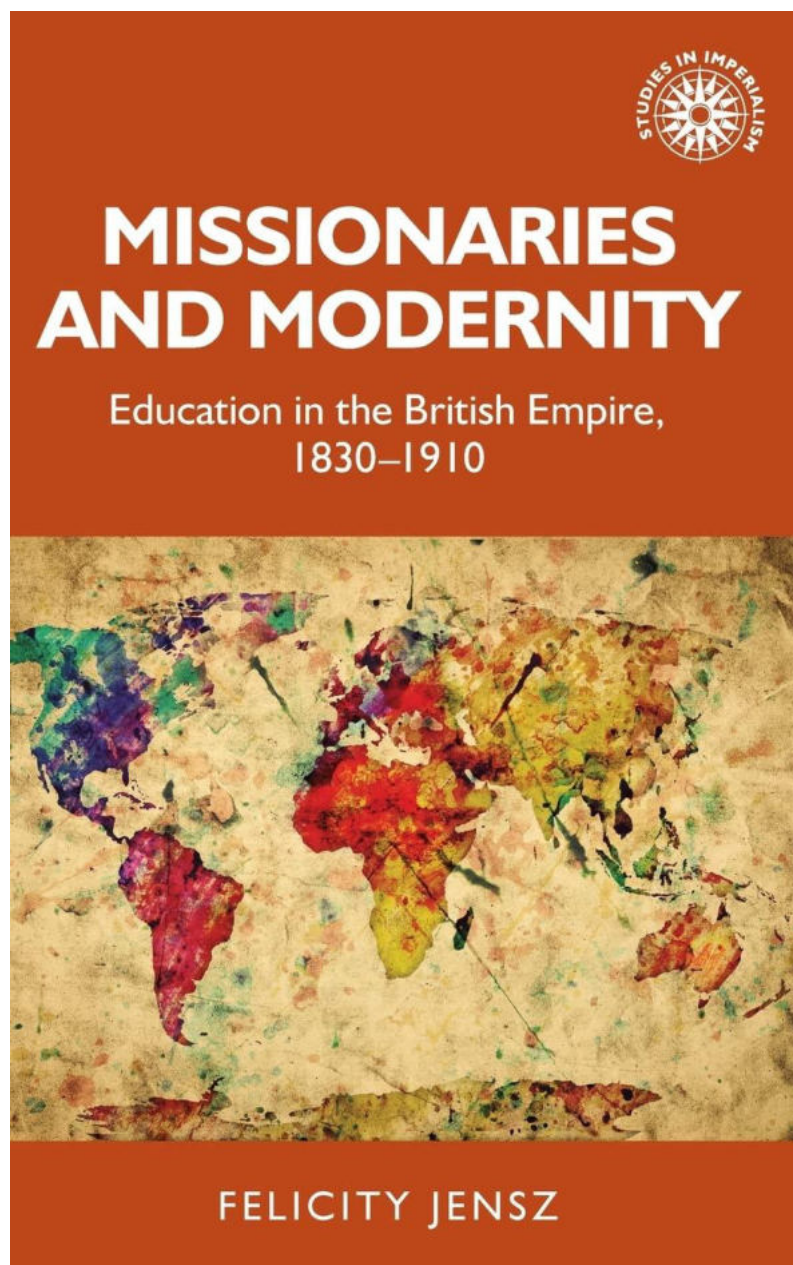
behind providing missionary schooling, and what happened when these aims were not met. It begins by examining the discussions surrounding the establishment and implementation of the so-called 'Negro Education Grant', a grant that was provided from 1835 to 1845 to schools predominantly run by religious groups to provide schooling for the children in the aftermath of emancipation in the British West Indies. Whilst slave owners were provided some £20 million in compensation for their 'loss', a very small amount of was put aside so that the supposed moral vacuum that emancipation would leave could be filled with Christian education. Both government officials and missionary groups agreed that the education supplied should be based on 'liberal and comprehensive principles, for the religious and moral education' of the children to be emancipated. A topic that was not, however, so unanimous was who should supply schooling to the children of emancipated slaves, as previously the Church of England was the only religious group allowed to access government funds. Motivated by a perceived need to establish many more mission school quickly, other Nonconforming groups, such as the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS), the London Missionary Society (LMS), the Moravians, and the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS) joined together with the Church Missionary Society (CMS) began to lobby the government to provide them funding for schools, and thus established themselves as partners of the government in the provision of education.

Yet, as I ague in the book, there was a difference in government and missionary ideologies behind providing schooling for local, Indigenous and formerly enslaved peoples, as governments used education as a means of creating good subjects, able to fit into the colonial society, through for example, being able to work within and for colonial frameworks and structures. In contrast, missionary groups, I ague, had as their primary focus the conversion of people to Christianity, and with this the focus on training good Christians. Within the logic of colonial expansion, many missionary groups followed the ideas of modernity, yet this needed to be led by a Christian framework. To differentiate between government and missionary objectives within the broader framework of 'colonial modernity', I offer the concept of 'missionary modernity'.

I make a distinction between what David Scott has called 'colonial modernity' (1995) and what I term 'missionary modernity'. Both of these types of modernity recognised that different cultures 'modernized' at different rates, and there were differences in how 'modernity' was implemented in different cultures and colonies, with much of these dependent upon the institutions and peoples encountered. Yet, both forms rested on the assumption of Western superiority of politics and religion. Colonial modernity, it has been argued, was driven by aspects of colonial governmentality that shaped and categorised non-Europeans into political subjects through 'modern' political instruments such as voting, political participation and censes. Following this logic, the rationale driving missionary modernity was religious rather than political. This form of modernity took on many of the liberal ideas of the age such as economic independence of individuals through the toils of their own labours, universal education, and female emancipation from 'traditional' roles, including those associated with 'traditional' marriage. Missionary modernity focused the superiority of Christian faith and morality, and the rejection of 'heathen' superstition and 'traditional' religions. Religious instruments, such as church order and moral discipline, were used to shape non-Europeans into religious subjects, with modern forms of media, such as mass published tracts and periodicals, photographs and magic lantern shows, used to raise awareness and support amongst potential donor communities to extend missionary reach in colonised lands.

Schooling was an integral instrument of missionary modernity. In every continent that Christian missionaries went to, they established schools. And even as the concept of missionary modernity shifted over time and space to respond to local and larger circumstances, schooling was a consistent means used to instil Christian morality and to create strong ties to denominational identities. I argue that, although missionary modernity co-existed within a colonial system, it did not always do so easily, nor did all participants in mission schooling conform to various ideals of modernity. This is explored in a chapter examining the work of the Church Missionary Society in Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon), which examines biographical notes of predominantly Singhalese young males who attended the CMS schools, to uncover their motivations for attending mission schools. In Sri Lanka, as in British India, there were varied positions taken as to the need to teach English, with some people arguing that English led to the denationalizing of local people and to political discord. A further situation that was damaging to missionary groups was that higher level schools often had a focus on subjects preparing for government examinations, with the curriculum being so full that there was no time left for religion in the timetable. To not offer religion would have put the rationale of such schools in question, but to offer religion would mean the reduction of pupil numbers as parents would take pupils elsewhere to ensure targeted learning for government exams and a possible future as a government employee.

The role of missionary schools was dynamic and could change with government regulations and the changing aspirations of pupils and their communities. An argument developed within the book is that British missionary groups sought to combat their marginalisation in the nineteenth century during a period of secularisation by dynamically positioning themselves as the most capable providers of education to non-Europeans within the British colonies. In examining schooling as an aspect of missionary modernity, the book underscores the ways in which missionary groups proved and maintained their legitimacy in a modernising and secularising world amidst countervailing criticism from varied sources.

The book ends with an examination of the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference which revealed a crisis of identity for missionary societies in their provision of education. The report stemming from the conference demonstrates that missionary groups self-reflected on the results of mission schools and found them lacking. In many colonial spaces, Christian schools were deemed a foreign influence rather than institutions that were deeply embedded in local lives, societies and politics, nor were they adapted for the local situation. Rather than give up, missionary groups reinvented themselves as experts on education and continued to maintain the belief that they were the best situated to provide education to local people. For as, Jabez Bunting, Secretary of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, wrote to the Colonial Office in London in 1834, education without a religious component would fail to shape non-Europeans into useful members of colonial society and of the British Empire. This belief continued until well into the twentieth century.

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Telugu Christians: A History (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022)

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Located at the intersections of multiple belief systems and at the social margins of the Telugu society, Christianity in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana evolved to be distinct, as Christian as its counterparts elsewhere and as Telugu as that of its neighbours in the region. In the last half millennia, Telugus of various social locations embraced, resisted, appropriated, and transmitted Christianity. Their social aspirations, gender experiences, spiritual needs, political interests, and cultural backgrounds as well as historical contingencies influenced these processes of accepting, resistance, appropriation, and transmission. In this volume, James Taneti narrates the social history of Telugu Christian communities and their engagement with Christianity in chronological order.

In the first half of the book, Taneti locates the transmission and appropriation of the Christian message among the Telugus in the contexts of western colonialism and modernity. Telugu Christianity was a

Image Courtesy: James Taneti

site of confluence between three worlds—the Dalits, their Hindu neighbours, and Christian missionaries from the western hemisphere. Dalit converts and women leaders reinterpreted the tradition both by drawing from and also challenging the same pre-Christian traditions they were drawing from and were victims of.

The second half of the book relates the story of Telugu Christianity in the postcolonial era and examines its various appropriations. The gradual eclipse of western missionary influences and the greater degree of agency among the native Christians in the postcolonial era
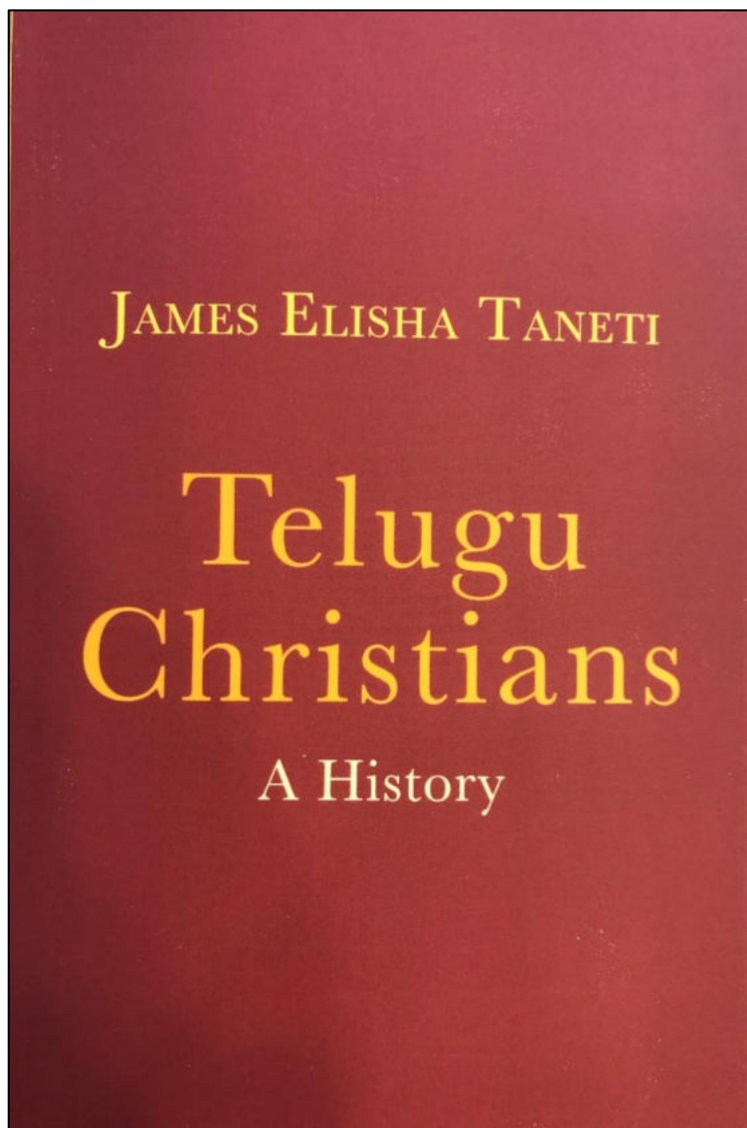
precipitated newer eclectic and expansive movements. Although they had their beginnings during the colonial period, Pentecostals flourished after the 1960s. Christian communities with roots in the missionary/colonial era experienced transformation and renewal. Local philosophers and religious leaders claimed Christ and challenged the sacraments, resulting in a myriad of religious movements in and outside the institutional church.

Even while recognizing the role of the colonial milieu and the presence of the western missionaries in the evolution of Telugu Christianity, Taneti highlights the agency of Telugus in the making of their faith. He accentuates the unity and multiplicity of the Telugu Christian faith and demonstrates how the social locations of the communities contributed to its distinct contours. In this attempt to narrate the story of Telugu Christians, Taneti focuses on Christianity's interface with its religious neighbours and the impact of the socially disenfranchised groups on its development.