

**CASTE AND POSTCOLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY:
CONSTRUCTIONS OF PAST IN BANGLA DALIT WRITINGS**

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submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur

University is based upon my work carried out under the supervision of Dr. Nilanjana Deb of

Department of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata and Dr. Kiran Keshavamurthy of IIT

Guwahati; and that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any

degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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Note

This dissertation has been written by following the 17th edition of the Chicago Manual Style guide. The ‘footnote and bibliography’ pattern has been followed to make the dissertation more convenient to read. All Bangla original words are italicized, except a few like ‘Dalit’, ‘Bhadralok’ or ‘Mulnibasi’ that have become well-known in other Indian vernaculars or in the English language. All translated paragraphs from various fictional and non-fictional texts are my translations, except when it is otherwise mentioned.

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Introduction: Past as Present¹

“An individual can live only in the present. The present is not just something which comes after the past; much less something produced by it. It is what life is in leaving the past behind it. The study of past products will not help us to understand the present. A knowledge of the past and its heritage is of great significance when it enters into the present, but not otherwise. And the mistake of making records and remains of the past the main material for education is that it tends to make the past a rival of the present and the present a more or less futile imitation of the past. (John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*)²

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language.” (Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*)

1.1 Locating Caste within Modernity and its Postcolonial critiques:

This dissertation explores those various ways through which a conception or imagination of the past becomes a fundamental characteristic in the Bangla Dalit writings that started emerging in the 1980s and more specifically after the establishment of the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha (Bangla Dalit Literary Association) in 1992. As I elucidate later in this introductory chapter, retrospective thinking or imagination of one’s individual and collective communitarian pasts are important features of their autobiographical narratives and semi-autobiographical novels and stories. However, this dissertation does not merely attempt to

¹ I borrow this phrase from historian of ancient India Romila Thapar’s eponymous book, as I consider it as an apt template for my research’s thematic trope. See, Romila Thapar, *Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities Through History* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2014).

² I am indebted to my partner Sunanda Roy for directing me to this paragraph in John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*. See John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2017).

underscore how these narratives offer us ‘alternative histories’ or a mere ‘democratization of history’. Rather, I am interested to discern the myriad methods and ways through which a sense of individual and/or caste-community’s past get mediated and represented through literary and cultural narratives in order to offer us some characteristics of historical thinking or insights in historiography beyond the familiar models of modern historicism. Since the very idea of history is often seen as a significant product of colonial modernity or European modernity in general and history is often perceived as a required characteristic of colonial civilizational indictments, we must situate the question of caste and caste based lived experiences or the ways of thinking past they offer, within the broader templates of modernity.³ This is also important, I explain later, for such engagements in modernity are central concerns of some of the most salient models of historiographic literatures in Bengal or in South Asia, especially historiographic discourses such as the Subaltern Studies project. Thus, any concern for thinking history in the Bangla Dalit narratives that have started emerging in the last three to four decades (starting from the 1980s), must engage with a more general discussion in terms of caste and modernity. It, in other words, must begin by asking some fundamental questions: is caste a result of modernity? Or is this primarily a pre-modern social attribute that has become a defining feature of everything ‘Indian’?

While British colonial rule is largely held responsible for creating some of the more recent, relatively modern social codifications called ‘caste’ and the idea of ‘caste’ (derived from the Portuguese word ‘casta’), as we know it in our times, to a considerable extent, is a result of perceptions of ‘purity of blood’ (*limpieza de sangre*) that the imperial traders and Christian missionaries from the Iberian peninsula (Portuguese and Spanish) had brought to the Indian sub-continent⁴, the social stratifications based on ‘varna’ or some pre-modern

³ Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

⁴ See Sumit Guha, *Beyond Caste: Identity and Power in South Asia, Past and Present* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2013).

forms of social hierarchisation in the loosely defined communities in the South Asian region or the idea of social outcast or chandala, have all been present in many pre-modern texts. Some of these texts retrospectively constitute the philosophical discourse upon which the putative claims of being ‘Hindu’ resides. Whether the modern manifestations of caste are , by and large, results of the colonial enumeration programs or census narratives produced by the racialised visions of H. H. Risley or W. W. Hunter in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, such pre-modern discursive presence and socio-religious legitimization of hereditary and professional social stratification have given birth to the common sense that caste is simultaneously ‘the most intrinsic element’ that defines both the Hindu society and the Indian nation; especially in the context of how these two are, more often than not, conveniently overlapped in much of our modern political imagination. These initial observations and statements are important for underscoring some significant facets of caste-based socio-cultural and political equations that are mediated in the fictional and non-fictional writings of the so called ‘lower caste’, or ‘untouchable’ groups or “Dalit writings” -- an archive that I attempt to explore in this dissertation:

- a) While these draw attention to the fact that modern avatars of caste are mediated through colonial ethnography, anthropology, ethno-metrical studies, enumeration policies etc., there is not much scope to reduce our observations to a rather simplistic observation that caste is predominantly a product of modernity. As I elucidate later, the many Dalit narratives that I engage with in this dissertation, are often ideologically based on pre-modern textual citations of social categories as much as they refer to the manifestations of caste in statist (colonial or postcolonial) narratives to deduce their politics and aesthetics.
- b) Secondly, these contextual observations help us to tentatively define the modern term Dalit neither solely in terms of colonial or postcolonial modernity and governmental

categories nor predominantly in terms and concepts of social exclusivity charted in the pre-modern scriptures such as *Manusmriti*, *Chandogya Upanishad* or *the Gita*. While too much of textuality might itself be a hangover of modernity's authenticity fetish, it is undeniable that social exclusions have been in existence in most significant societies that we now categorize as Hindus. This duality, as I argue later, helps us locate newer ways of perceiving different constructions of past that many Dalit constituencies conjure through their everyday lived experiences. The fictional and non-fictional narratives that I explore here bear testimony to the fact that 'caste' based lived experiences are to be seen through such ambiguous terrains. If we need to think of their sense of past or history, this ambivalence has to be brought to the fore as they pave ways for further points of departure. As Nicholas Dirks suggests⁵, the modern conceptions of caste in general and colonial perception of caste's enormous monstrosity, were both based on certain obsessive textual readings of ancient/pre-modern texts like *Manusmriti*. While these were strictly textual readings, Dalit literary writings offer an experiential template to the caste question. In my dissertation, I also see how Ambedkar, in his own writings, combined this 'textualist' (prescriptive) and 'experientialist' (descriptive) registers to bring about his politics. While James Mill based his disparaging remarks on caste as the quintessential marker of the Hindu socio-religious order primarily on the basis of the orientalist scholar Sir William Jones's translation of Manu's *Code of Law/ Manusmriti*, Ambedkar's famous, politically charged act of burning *Manusmriti*, I argue, is both a continuation of Mill as well as a contradiction of Mill. In the last chapter, I also hint at how Ambedkar cannot be so easily perceived through the prism of modernity, either in terms of its

⁵ Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

critique or in terms of an unquestioned subscription to modernity. Ambedkar himself draws attention to such duality on numerous occasions. For example, while quoting extensively from different pre-modern texts on varna and caste in his *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar says that this textualism might not have been followed in totality in the actual lived social existence.⁶ But, nonetheless, these do indicate that there was some presence of such social hierarchies. This ambivalence at the intersections of textuality and experientiality must be underlined in a work such as this dissertation. While it is important to focus on how Missionaries and colonial administrators perceived social stratifications and codified them as different castes, such a shift from textualism to experientialism can be exploited, I argue, to construct an immanent critique of caste and caste based lived experiences. In other words, I imply that critiquing such orientalist, missionary or colonial bureaucratic visions can constitute a significant part of our postcolonial predicament and yet might fall short of making nuanced observations on Dalit critiques of caste that, more often than not, rely on their lived experiences of social exclusion. Such experiences typically get foregrounded in non-statist narratives of life experiences and do not follow the textualist syndrome that Dirks speaks about. However, some Dalit non-fictional accounts do exploit those narratives produced by the colonial anthropologies and yet distort them and tweak them to construct their past and thereby brings forth possibilities of a futurist politics of emancipation.

- c) Thirdly, many social anthropological works like that of Nicholas Dirks that try to perceive caste predominantly in terms of late colonial codifications often overlook the crucial roles that the colonial 'go-betweens' or 'native informants' play in codifying the same. In most cases, such colonial informers were Brahmins and other 'upper

⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, ed. S. Anand (New Delhi: Navayana, 2014).

varnas' who incited as well as informed the British enumerators to follow the Brahminical texts as their sources for unmediated descriptive knowledge about various Hindu societies. The colonial exercise of codifying caste according to the broader, fourfold *varna* structure (a model that H.H. Risley and other colonial ethnographers often used) was quite interestingly based on a Brahminical textual tradition of *dhramasastras*. We must remember, as Dirks rightly suggests, that these prescriptive texts should not be taken as the ultimate statements in terms of their descriptive values. But Dirks, despite making references to such Brahminical interventions in helping the colonizers to codify caste, never pays much analytical attention to them. On the contrary, Susan Bayly⁷ places a much higher weightage on the roles played by Indians in such complex processes of codification. While Dirks and Bayly both use seventeenth, eighteenth as well nineteenth century archives as their resources, they arrive at different conclusions in relation to who played a more defined role in categorizing and shaping caste - Indians or British colonizers? These differences in their inferences are apparently based on the degree or extent of their emphasis on each of these two parties. However, as John D. Rogers informs⁸, such differences were premised upon their methodologies as well as the larger politics they believed in. While Bayly relied more on traditional methodologies of anthropological research on societies and structures, Dirks shares much of the broad templates of postcolonial area studies that attempts critiques of colonial modernity as its larger frame of reference. These differences, as Rogers emphatically puts, are also occurring because of conflicting interpretations of Indian nationalism. Both Bayly and Dirks

⁷ Susan Bayly, *The New Cambridge History of India (IV.3): Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁸ John D. Rogers, "Introduction: Caste, Power and Religion in Colonial South Asia", *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 41 no. 1 (2004): 1-6, accessed February 7, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F001946460404100101>.

refer to Indian nationalists and other modern leaders in terms of their negotiations with caste. In that discursive register, Dirks believes that Indian nationalism is primarily based on negotiating with institutions and structures of western statism as Indians encountered them during the colonial rule and Bayly thinks that there is a fair number of indigenous traditions in shaping the ‘modern’ contours of Indian nationalism and in that sense, Bayly argues, Indian nationalism is quite an ‘original’ construction.

These debates might have originated within the disciplinary boundaries of social anthropology, but these are debates that keep surfacing in our contemporary political references and often create polarized perceptions on caste- ‘caste as predominantly a modern affair’ and ‘caste as a quintessential marker of Indian society’. As a result, many historians and social scientists on South Asia have either inferred that caste must be done away with through rigorous social scientific approaches to its various avatars or have deduced that such social scientific interventions willy-nilly carry forward the essentially negative perceptions of caste that the proselytizing and colonizing missions saw- a stumbling block and even a hydra-headed monster called caste.

Be that as it may, experiences of social discrimination, untouchability and such norms and forms of social as well as cultural and political exclusions are mediated through the autobiographical or semi-autobiographical narratives produced by these constituencies that are often loosely called “Dalit sahitya” or Dalit literature. Sahitya or literature might not be synonymous categories for easy cultural translations either. But, taking the general common-sense understanding of these terms, one must proceed to examine the claims of canon-formation that are put forward by the constituencies that produce these cultural texts. These debates become a point of origin of a discursive impasse for this project where I primarily look into the politics and history of localized (postcolonial West Bengal) cultural and

literary movements that emerged in the last decade of the twentieth century- described as Bangla Dalit literary and cultural movement. In these investigations, I argue, the frame of reference as well as the archives are radically different from the many social science literatures on caste, especially caste in Bengal. The cultural and literary texts and other related narratives are produced neither by the colonizers or missionaries on civilizing or proselytizing missions nor can they be easily defined in terms of a nationalist politics apropos of caste. To either say that caste is a modern phenomenon that colonizers decisively shaped or to say that caste is perpetuated through several developmental and governmental policies of the postcolonial nation-state make little sense to people at the receiving end of everyday caste-based discriminations and atrocities. They look peripheral and yet these are significant modalities to think through any radical anti-caste politics- statist or non-statist. In this project, the narratives that I explore are produced at different complex points of intersectionality. Some of these (e.g., Bauri) are based on colonial texts and yet they distort them and contest them continuously without, however, falling into the usual trope of a nationalist empty ‘homogenous time and space’ (to use Walter Benjamin’s phrase). At times, some of these constituencies negotiate with the colonial and post-colonial nation states and yet always remain the ‘limit cases’ of any statist history. It is in this sense that I revisit these anthropological debates to engage with “caste vis-à-vis modernity”- a broad template that, as I will show later, has several interesting ramifications in a research that looks for a historiography of one of the most precarious constituencies within the broader Indian postcolonial predicament. Therefore, the load of caste-based experiences as they get mediated in cultural narratives serve as a point of departure to look for newer ways of negotiating with these debates. These debates are also particularly significant as one looks into the narratives produced at a particular geo-political space that became one of the earliest sites of encounter with colonial modernity i.e., Bengal. But, before I move on to look deep into the regional

specificities of the caste question and Dalit movements in Bengal, it is necessary to have a brief overview of the Dalit cultural movement in other parts of India, especially in Maharashtra. Since Marathi Dalit panther movement is widely held as the beginning of such literary, cultural and political movements in other parts of India, I will restrict this overview to Maharashtra and then delve into the localized equations of Bangla Dalit cultural movements, both in terms of its ideological interactions with the Marathi Panthers and in its local specificities. My observation on the mediations of caste equations in Bengal are, however, marked by my occasional references to Dalit literary movements occurring in several other parts of the Indian subcontinent.

1.2 Understanding the term ‘Dalit’: Marathi Dalit Panther movement vis-à-vis West Bengal

According to most commentators on ‘Dalit literature’ the term ‘Dalit’ - signifying the ‘lowest untouchable castes’ in the Indian Hindu society- gained currency particularly after the rise of a cultural movement in Maharashtra- Marathi Dalit Panther movement. The Marathi Dalit Panthers, according to their declarations in the *Dalit Panther Manifesto* (1972), were influenced by the American Black Panther Movement that waged war against racism and slavery in the modern United States. Such inspiration was perhaps ideologically based on a framework where race and caste become comparable categories of social exclusion, excommunication, segregation, oppression and exploitation. Such a framework was first formulated by the nineteenth century Marathi social reformer Jyotiba Phule in his book *Gulamgiri (Slavery)* in 1873. This text attempted to create an ideological bridge by linking the experiences of oppressed ‘lower’ castes in India and the experiences of racial discrimination and slavery of the African –Americans in the United States of America. Arun Prabha Mukherjee summarises these ideological similarities between the Marathi Dalit Panthers and the American Black Panthers:

The term 'dalit literature' was first used in 1958, at the first ever Dalit literature conference in Bombay. However, as an identity marker, the term 'Dalit' came into prominence in 1972, when a group of young Marathi writers-activists founded an organization called Dalit Panthers. The name expressed their feelings of solidarity and kinship with Black Panthers who were engaged in a militant struggle for African-Americans' rights in the United States of America.⁹

This movement also sought inspiration from the political activism and ideologically loaded writings and speeches of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century leader of the 'depressed classes' and 'untouchables' - Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. In course of time, such an ideological template served as a guide map to channelize similar experiences, sentiments and resultant cultural and ideological politics in other parts of the country like Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and other parts in North India. However, such ideological inspirations were always tied to local inspirations during the subsequent manifestations of this politics in other parts- Iyothee Thass or E.V. Ramasamy Naicker in Tamil Nadu. Therefore, it is important to understand the interpretive underpinnings of the term 'Dalit' especially within its initial local context and thereafter, one needs to underline the trajectories through which the term gained currency throughout India and in my present context of post-1990s West Bengal. Such a methodology is also useful to underscore the localized manifestations of caste in the Maharashtra context, despite its role in providing the ideological impetus for a pan-Indian 'Dalit' literary and cultural movement.

The term 'Dalit' literally means 'crushed', 'grinded' and consequently carries the connotation of 'being oppressed'. In the translator's introduction to the English translation of Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, Arun Prabha Mukherjee defines it:

The term 'Dalit' forcefully expresses their oppressed status. It comes from the Sanskrit word 'dal', which means to crack open, split, crush, grind, and so forth and it has generally been used as a verb to describe the process of processing food grains and lentils. Its metaphoric usage, still as a verb, can be seen in description of warfare and vanquishing of enemies. Jotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar, two towering figures in the pantheon of Dalit history, were the first to

⁹ Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee (Kolkata: Samya, 2010) xii.

appropriate the word, as a noun and an adjective, in the early decades of the twentieth century to describe the extreme oppression of untouchables.¹⁰

In the common sense understanding of the term, it refers to the lowest rungs of the traditional Hindu society. But, in extension (as I will show later in the third chapter on the Bauris and the fourth chapter on the Mulnibasi movement) the term can be understood as embodying many marginalized communities cutting across governmental categories, ethnicities and even religious identities. In case of other such corresponding constituencies in other religious groups they are usually described by hyphenated terms like ‘Dalit-Christians’ or ‘Dalit Muslims’. These terms widen the implications of the term ‘Dalit’ and in extension, the equations of caste by suggesting that birth based occupational groups or descent groups are in no way restricted to the sub-continental Hindu society. Caste, if it is present in its most pronounced avatar in the Hindu society, also gets its several other incarnations and equivalents in terms like *quam*, *quabila*, or Persian *zat* that are not always associated with the Hindu society. Such terms offer us the possibility of perceiving caste not simply in terms of the religious notions of purity or impurity nor does this allow us to be indifferent to the political economies of caste in South Asia by providing us with what social-anthropologist Sumit Guha describes as a ‘confluence of terms’.¹¹ This, in turn, gives us what Nathaniel Roberts calls a ‘synoptic view of caste’.¹² Such synoptic view of caste is especially significant as we encounter different facets of their literary and cultural movements in the subsequent chapters in this dissertation. But, by and large, this is a term that refers to those people who are placed at the lowest sections of the Hindu society- people traditionally known as ‘untouchables’, ‘lower castes’, ‘Shudras’, *shudratisudras* (used by Jyotiba Phule, the

¹⁰ Mukherjee, Introduction to *Joothan*, xi-xii.

¹¹ Sumit Guha, *Beyond Caste: Identity and Power in South Asia- Past and Present* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2016).

¹² Nathaniel Roberts, *To Be Cared For: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2015).

nineteenth century Marathi social reformer), *panchamas*, outcastes etc. In popular understanding, this means those caste groups that are put in the categories of Shudra in the scriptural traditions of *dhramsastric* texts as well as people who are born out of inter-group sexual unions-traditionally known as *chandals* or outcastes or *varnashankaras* (mixed breeds). The category of Dalit, in its modern parlance, primarily refers to people who have been classified under the label ‘Scheduled Castes’ in the Constitution of Independent India. In other words, ‘Dalit’ has become a more ‘polite’ way of describing such constituencies without evoking the pejorative connotation that caste Hindus usually associate with terms like ‘scheduled caste’ or ‘untouchable’. However, this was not intended to be such a reductive and parochial term in its original estimation in the Dalit Panther Manifesto that came out in 1972 in Maharashtra. The broader definition of the term implied “members of scheduled castes and tribes, Neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion”.¹³ However, we must also remember that such a term has also not been easily accepted by many ‘lower castes’ or ‘untouchable’ constituencies who refuse to embrace it as a self-descriptive category. For example, the Rajbangshis in the Northern parts of West Bengal do not easily identify themselves as ‘Dalits’ despite their constitutionally ascribed ‘scheduled caste’ status. Such anomalies are not absent in other parts of India either. In some cases, these disagreements on linguistic implications of these anti-caste politics often lead to hostilities and conflicts by overlooking goals that are otherwise ideologically foregrounded. Gail Omvedt, in her preface to *Poisoned Bread* says:

Today, though the word Dalit remains the most recognizable word at national level, it is probably true that the majority of people classified as scheduled caste reject it for self-identification. It is rejected for varying reasons. In some cases, as among the new Buddhists of Maharashtra (mainly, but by no means uniquely, Mahars), Dalit is felt to be negative and confining, while being Buddhist gives a broader, positive and humane identity. At the same

¹³ Raiot Collective, “Dalit Panther Manifesto”, *Raiot: Challenging the Consensus*, January 23 2016, <http://www.raiot.in/dalit-panthers-manifesto/>.

time, the differences among scheduled castes have become stark, negating any unity that might be expressed in the use of words like Dalit. In almost every region of India, there are a multitude of castes who were originally considered untouchables and are now classed as scheduled castes; of these, there are generally two large communities, one more educated and first to organize, the other more backward in educational and economic terms. The second group is now mobilizing, often in opposition to the first group. The conflict between Malas and Madigas of Andhra has now become notorious; but there are also the Chuhra/Bhangi group of the north and west, who identify themselves mostly as Valmiki, the Matangs of Maharashtra and others. In most cases the latter group is wooed by various Hindu forces to identify themselves as Hindus, not Buddhists. In Tamil Nadu, the two largest groups have been the one-time Paraiyas and Pallars; the first may call themselves Dalits and frequently identify as Buddhist; the second are taking the name DVKs, Devendra Kula Vanniyar.¹⁴

Despite the dismissive tone of her remarks on the ‘uneducated’ and ‘backward’ sections of the Dalit populations, Omvedt’s primary reference to intra-group conflicts is well taken. As I discuss Manoranjan Byapari’s autobiography in the second chapter of this dissertation, such observations make further reverberations. Such contentious relationships between several ‘lower caste’ groups are amply evident in many writings by Bengali Dalit authors. The caste discourse and anti-caste politics of modern West Bengal is somewhat dominated by the most politically articulated caste group of the Namasudras- a large agrarian caste group that consolidated itself during colonial times through the twin vectors of religious reforms of Harichand –Guruchand led Matua religiosity and the charismatic political leadership of Pramatha Ranjana Thakur and Jogendranath Mondal of Barisal. In the post-partition, post-Mondal Commission Bengal that constitutes the time frame of this study, Namasudras share a tenuous relationship with many other Dalit castes. Bauri author Raju Das’s short stories often explore such tenuous relationships between the Bauris and the Namasudras. Unlike most academic monographs on the caste question in Bengal, I shift the attention to other Dalit caste groups that identify themselves as Dalits to see how such tensions unfold themselves in the discourses of cultural and literary activism. Consequently, the second chapter looks into the autobiographical narratives and post-partition refugee narratives of Namasudra writers and

¹⁴ Gail Omvedt, “Literature of Revolt: Prefatory Note”, *Poisoned Bread*, ed. Arjun Dangle (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2011) xvii-xviii.

the other two chapters engage with the Bauri writings and the Mulnibasi movement respectively. These two are relatively free from the immediate spectres of partition or refugee resettlement and at the same time identify themselves as ‘Dalit’ groups that contest the caste Hindu hegemonies of the region. Thus, this study creates many vantage points through which we can see how many-folded caste equations are played out in the socio-cultural lives of West Bengal’s Dalits. Therefore, keeping in mind such conflicts, tensions and complexities, this dissertation focuses on groups that use ‘Dalit’ as a self-referencing and self-descriptive category while not entirely subjugating neither their internal fissures, intra-group chasms. Thus, it primarily focuses on how they contest the hegemonic cultural discourses and statist narratives about their life-worlds.

However, the caste identities in the region of West Bengal or Bengal Presidency in colonial times also offer some new insights as to how the term ‘Dalit’ might only uncomfortably fit any simplified, solid, defined idea of a ‘lower caste’ descent group. This is evident in the Bauriland movement as well as in the autochthonous claims of the Mulnibasi movement. Although Bauris are described by the post-colonial nation-state as ‘scheduled castes’, the stigmatization that they face from other Dalit castes like Namasudras might have been brought about in the racialised visions of colonial ethnography or anthropology. The Burdwan District Gazetteers Report that I look into in the third chapter of this dissertation clearly implies that the Bauris were considered by colonial rulers to be a ‘semi-Hinduised Tribe’ who were later given a ‘lower caste’ status within the Hindu fold. Such colonial observations are likely to have been based on the strange definitions of caste and tribe in the Indian context. They are also the results of the racial views of colonial ethnography. Sumit Guha informs us that, in the Indian sub-continent, many British colonial officers often assumed that there are two kinds of races in the sub-continent- strong race and weaker race. In such colonial arbitrary racial theorization, the stronger Aryan race (read upper caste

Hindus) often exerted social power over the weaker races and assimilated them within the Hindu fold by giving them some caste status, albeit a lower one. Sumit Guha, commenting on the 1870 Gazetteers Report on the Gond community of the then Central Province (now Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Vidharbh) explains: “These lower “races” (Grant continued) when in competition with the “stronger” race of Aryans were reduced to low-caste status”.¹⁵

Therefore, the original inclusive meaning in which the term ‘Dalit’ was used in Marathi Dalit Panther Manifesto gets a completely different connotation in the Bengal context as it always already incorporates constituencies with ‘dubious social status’ - tribe and/or caste. It becomes interesting to see how a ‘semi-Hinduized tribe’ embraces the term ‘scheduled caste’ as well as the non-governmental term ‘Dalit’ in order to revisit such colonial articulations and yet remain at the limits of the nation’s homogenous empty space and time. While Omvedt thinks the term ‘Dalit’ has been reduced to a ‘polite’ term for Scheduled caste groups that many of them are not always comfortably embracing, it gets a new connotation as it travels to the arid south western parts of the state of West Bengal after 1990s. These references to the multifarious politics of nomenclature, naming and self-referencing, therefore, indicate a whole range of suggestions on how social norms, customs, manners, ideas of community formation keep evolving and interacting with forms of state formations and socio-political contingencies. Instead of seeing caste based lived experiences of as narrowly defined registers of pain and suffering, one needs to see the corresponding patterns of social behaviour, recognize and trace the changes that have happened and patiently think through how this system, much like other such systems, has proved itself as a resilient structure by interacting with several other corresponding terms or patterns like race, ethnicity, culture, status, rank, tribe etc. Such wide range of terms and names, intersecting

¹⁵ Sumit Guha, “States, Tribes, Castes: A Historical Re-exploration in Comparative Perspective”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 50 no. 46-47 (2015): 52, accessed February 7, 2021, <https://www.epw.in/journal/2015/46-47/special-articles/states-tribes-castes.html>.

with caste, metonymically and symptomatically, imply how social changes operate and in turn, get mediated through cultural or literary activism such as the Bangla Dalit literary movement. This essential note finds its echo in recently published works of social anthropology like that of Sumit Guha's *Beyond Caste*:

A snapshot at any point in time, therefore, will capture developing and decaying structures of social life spread out across South Asia. Some practices may lose their momentum before they reach every region, while others may decay in their place of origin but thrive in other settings. That is how dynamic processes unfold. Furthermore, some processes may never reach completion, being overtaken by the backwash of others, or indeed by phenomena such as colonization and globalization, Anglicization or Americanization. This means that some structures will never appear in every region. Through all this, however, I argue that the bounded ethnic group remained and remains a powerful presence across the whole South Asia.¹⁶

These lines are uttered by Guha in his efforts to turn our glances at the multiple forms of the caste system, especially its political economy and social structures of kinship and local knots of power structures. My dissertation, while taking cognizance of these, also pushes the discussion into how non-statist life experiences of Dalit castes, in recent post-Mandal Commission West Bengal, intersect with statist histories. In that, literary and cultural movements such as the Dalit literary movement not only ends up challenging the hegemonic narratives of the caste Hindu dominated civil society, but also opens up newer opportunities to see localized variations of caste experiences, how caste interacts with race and tribe, how lived experience acts as a limit on the statist historiography or how caste communities are formed. Such localized manifestations of caste or the overlapping of the twin registers of 'tribe' and 'caste' are not only pronounced in the equations between the Bauris and Namasudras, but are also present in the very narrative of the origin of Bangla Dalit literary movement as it begins with the tale of ethnic discrimination against a young lady, Chuni Kotal, who belonged to the 'de-notified tribe' (DNTs, as they are called) called Lodha. In the subsequent sections of this chapter as well as the succeeding chapters of this dissertation, I

¹⁶ Guha, *Beyond Caste*, 6-7.

will have occasions to reiterate why and how Guha's initial words can guide us into interesting contours of various patterns of caste and such life forms. Since the Bangla Dalit literary movement began in early 1990s, it is also important to see how forces such as neo-liberal market policies (S. Guha's Americanization), globalization and so on had definitive impacts on questions and relations of caste based social hierarchies. Taking the cue from Guha's last line in the above quoted section, one must not consider the birth of the Dalit movement and the rise of identarian politics in the era of 'Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation' (LPG model) that India ushered into in the early part of the last decade of twentieth century, as entirely unconnected.

1.3 Brief history of social hierarchies in Bengal to a possible 'present history' of Bangla Dalit Sahitya

Any brief history of Dalit literary movement in major Indian languages other than Bangla begin primarily by charting out various particularities as well as generalizable features of caste-based life experiences in their corresponding regions or literatures, without facing the obligation to address emphatic dismissals about the very existence of caste system there. No one, in other words, would deny the existence of caste and therefore, the presence or necessity of Dalit anti-caste literary movements in those states and regions. While this remains a simplistic statement, this can be considered as valid, especially if it is compared with the caste scenario in Bengal. Bengal in general (this includes pre-modern societies in Banga and colonial Bengal Presidency) or West Bengal in particular, does not offer such easy terrain. The dominant academic as well as 'popular' perception of the caste question is that caste hardly exists in Bengal. While it is extremely difficult to trace particular, verifiable causalities behind such perception, it remains the dominant narrative apropos of the caste question in the region. Only a wide and vaguely defined cluster of reasons might be cited for this- the Buddhist past during the Pal dynasty, the encounters with Bhakti movements, the

presence of 'subaltern' life practices such as *sahajiya*, the cult of the Vaishnavite movement, an early encounter with colonial modernity, colonial educational policies, encounter with European Enlightenment ideas and ideals, the social and religious movements in the nineteenth century colonial Bengal or the so-called Bengal Renaissance, the complex land tenure systems -like Permanent Settlement -implemented by the colonial rulers, an overriding socio-political force of nationalist Swadeshi movement in early twentieth century, the overwhelming blood baths of the sub-continental partition, long Left front government led by the Marxist political parties, the polarization of social identities in terms of religion and a polarization of political identities in terms of party affiliations. One or all of these features and characteristics in Bengal's history are regularly cited to substantiate an almost dogmatic final statement on the caste question of Bengal i.e., it hardly exists in Bengal. And yet, a series of counter-narratives are equally powerful: the Kulin system presumably established by the Sen dynasty, the presence of social hierarchies in pre-modern literatures, the Advaita loving more orthodox fractions within the otherwise heterodox Vaishnavs, Kartabhaja movement, the exclusions of several social groups from the institutions of colonial education, the colonial and missionary writings on community formation in Bengal, the religious movements of the Matuas led by Guruchand Thakur and Harichand Thakur, the subsequent politicization of Namasudra movement before the sub-continental partitions, the writings of modern cultural icons like Rabindranath Tagore, Saratchandra Chatterjee and others during colonial modernity, the articulations of social exclusion through rather amorphous cultural terms like Bhadrak/Chotok, experiences of untouchability of Chandals or Namasudras and other caste groups, the emphatic political negotiations led by the charismatic but largely forgotten leader of the Namasudras- Barisal's Jogendranath Mondal, the migration of lower caste populations during and after the Partition, differential treatment in refugee resettlement (e.g., the controversial and infamous 'Marichjhanpi massacre') etc. These are some of those

innumerable narratives that might give us a counterfactual history of caste in Bengal. The origin and progress of the Bangla Dalit Movement is unmistakably derived from the Phule-Ambedkarite ideology but it certainly begins its discursive journey by foregrounding these debates and by contesting the ‘dogmatic progressive-ness of the hegemonic Bengali Bhadrakalok’. However, their politically loaded, historically selective, literary or cultural articulations also find some reverberations in the observations made by social historians of pre-modern and early modern Bengal. Niharranjan Ray’s *Bangalir Itihas* or *History of the Bengali People: From Earliest Times to the Fall of the Sena Dynasty* is one such example.¹⁷ Ray’s narrative on caste in pre-modern Bengal is hardly free from some common modern racial histories of caste as he analyses caste’s early avatar in Bengal in terms of an Aryanisation story. However, Ray’s people-centric history of early Bengal is a significant document in the sense that it throws interesting light on the various intractable and amorphous characteristics of caste and caste-like social structures. Ray’s account of early and early modern history of Bengal draws attention to two important features of the social hierarchies of the region. Firstly, the idea of *varna*, despite being present here, was not as solidly demarcated and socially understood as it was in other regions of the sub-continent. For instance, Ray informs, the intermediary varnas of Kshatriya and Vaisya were not present in the region. The fish eating non-vegetarian Brahmans understood society in terms of Brahman and Shudras. Among the Shudras, however, there were two types: *sat-sudra* (presumably higher in social rank) and *asat-sudra* (understood as lower in social ritual ranking). Such categorization, as Ray suggests, were possibly alien to the rest of Northern Indian sub-continent, if not in the entire sub-continental landmass. Moreover, Ray shows us

¹⁷ Niharranjan Ray, *History of the Bengali People: From Earliest Times to the Fall of the Sena Dynasty*, trans. John W. Hood (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2013).

the presence of what he calls ‘the hybrid castes’ and ‘mixed castes’ in Bengal. Ray’s observations, we must note here, were based on readings of several Brahmanical texts such as *Brahmabai Bartapurāṇa*. Dirks, in his *Castes of Mind*, shows how this text was exploited by Risley to arrive at the colonial classification of social groups that would be called ‘castes’ as well as ‘tribes’ in the British enumeration narratives. Therefore, Ray’s documentation, despite being an important account of early Bengali social history, is not entirely free from the charges of textualism that Dirks noted in colonial ethnography. However, Ray’s account is remarkable as it was his ‘history from below’ that relied heavily on literatures produced in the region in order to make sense of social mobility and hierarchies. Such a literary turn in writing early Bengali history might prove to be more than useful in the present context. For instance, Ray, looks at all the major cultural texts produced in between thirteenth and sixteenth centuries in order to focus on the idea of *kulinism*. Kulin System or Kaulinya is the second and possibly more important feature of social hierarchy that we notice in Ray’s research on Bengali society. His references to several texts like Nulo Panchanan’s *Gosthikotha*, Dhananjay’s *Kuloprodip*, *Varendra Kuloponjika*, Sarvananda Misra’s *Kulatattvarnava* -all draw our attention to how the Bengali society, despite having a loosely defined varna structure, did have some sense of clannish affiliation or affiliation to social groups that can be retrospectively termed as ‘caste’ or some early form of it. According to popular historical understanding, this focus on ‘kula’ or familial affiliation, or ‘gosthi’/social group got transformed into a more defined and more rigid structure of social management through Sena dynasty’s focus on ‘Kaulinya Pratha’ or ‘Kaulinya system’. This system did have a pronounced similarity with the caste system as was analysed by Ambedkar in his first major essay on caste – “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development”- that was presented at Dr. A. A. Goldenweiser’s anthropology seminar at the Columbia University. The ideas of ‘surplus men’ and ‘surplus women’ are quite central to how caste operates,

Ambedkar argues.¹⁸ But, according to Ray, such ascription of *kulin* system to Sena dynasty cannot be easily proved through textual evidences as, in most textual inscriptions of the time, there is no reference to Vallal Sen or Lakshman Sen as being *kulin* or as propagators of *kaulinya* system. Nevertheless, the *Charyagitis* – Sahajiya Buddhist text(s) – do have some references to social outcastes. In the narratives of Vusukpaad, Kukkuripaad, one comes across an interesting social picture of people who were given the status of ‘antyaja’ or ‘outcastes’. Doms, Kapalis, Chandals were ascribed such social status, Ray informs. These references to Brahmanical as well as Buddhist (e.g., Jataka Tales) or Jaina (e.g., *Anarangasutra*) or Sahajiya Buddhist tales clearly give us a complex picture of social mobility as well as social stratification. *Vrihadharma Puran* or *Brahmabaibartapuram* or *Charyagitis* do tell us about social exclusions and untouchability. Therefore, caste or some forms of its pre-modern manifestations did exist in Bengal in post-Aryanisation era. It is this ancient or early history that gets newer forms during subsequent Mughal and colonial phases.

Given this extremely complex historico-cultural context, retrospectively speaking, one can reasonably say that Bengali literary or cultural texts have always reflected social hierarchies and stratifications since pre-modern times. One can also recall the presence of the Mangal Kavya traditions or Bengal’s troubadour poets or *Charan Kobi* or the tradition of *Kobi Gaan* or Matua Sangeet and numerous other similar cultural artifacts to substantiate such observations in subsequent trajectories of social mobilization in Bengal. In more recent times, one might also recall examples like Adwaita Mallabharman or Binoy Majumder. Bengali literary or cultural histories also include caste Hindu or *savarna* writers like Manik Bandopadhyay or Tarashankar Bandopadhyay who have focused on the different registers of stigmatization and marginalization of traditionally ‘lower caste’ people in their novels, short

¹⁸ B. R. Ambedkar, “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development”, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* vol.1 (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), 5-22.

stories and essays. Rabindranath Tagore, the cultural icon and a writer par excellence, was at the forefront of several social reformist movements that promoted inter-caste dining or marriages and wrote about the plight of the ‘lower castes’ in his fictional as well as non-fictional writings. Despite such focus on ‘lower caste’ characters or Dalits in their texts in Bengali literary traditions, Bengali literature had to wait till 1990s to witness the emergence of an organized, institutional literary movement that put caste at the centre of literary circles. In early 1990s, the state of West Bengal witnessed the infamous Chuni Kotal incident. According to the narratives of Dalit authors like Manohar Mouli Biswas and literary activists like Mahasweta Devi, Chuni Kotal, a Lodha tribal student of Anthropology at Vidyasagar University at Midnapur, was allegedly forced to commit suicide due to mental agony caused by regular slurs and insults by her professors and some fellow students at the university. Death of this young social science student eventually resulted in a massive protest by the Dalit and Adivasi groups as well as some parts of the urban civil society. However, this tragic incident formally marked the beginning of a vigorous cultural assertion in the form of Bengali Dalit literary movement. In 1992, in the wake of these protests, the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha or Bengali Dalit Literary Association (henceforth, BDSS) came into being. The present President of the organization, Manohar Mouli Biswas, summarizes this history of the BDSS’s origin in a critical note in the appendix added to a Namasudra autobiographical novel - “Khoma Nei” by Nakul Mallick:

In 1992, an Adivasi (tribal or indigenous) girl named Chuni Kotal was forced to commit suicide because of ethnic and caste (varna – pronounced as ‘barno’ in Bangla-might mean both a racial composition as well as a caste group) discrimination in West Bengal. On the basis of the complaints of this young female student of the Vidyasagar University, the university formed an enquiry committee that consisted of three college principals. After the investigation got carried out, they submitted a report. Her experiences of discrimination and suffering were painfully narrated in this report. But these truths were conveniently suppressed. The judge delivered his verdict after forming a one-man committee. He declared that no one can be held responsible for Chuni Kotal’s death. Due to circumstantial pressures, she committed suicide. A number of plays have been written on this sudden demise of Chuni Kotal. I do not know if any novel has been written on her life or death. But what is important is that, in the same year of 1992, the

agitated Dalit people of West Bengal formed an organization of protest literature – Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangshtha.¹⁹

1.4 Critiquing “Is there a Bangla Dalit literature?”

As far as the academic critical literature on the tentatively termed canon of ‘Bangla Dalit Literature’ is concerned, there seems to be quite a void. Amidst such scarcity of critical understanding, there are only a few prominent works in this critical literature. It is interesting that almost all the significant critical works on Bangla Dalit writings have been produced by the Dalit authors themselves. Academic research on this area has only begun. Translations of their literary works are increasingly emerging in the market. This partly explains why the critical ‘scholarly’ literatures on this domain are so scarce. Manohar Mouli Biswas is undoubtedly the foremost among the Bangla Dalit writers and poets who felt the need to inform their readers about the ideological underpinnings of this discourse. He is the most important theoretical voice in the domain of Bangla Dalit literature. His books like *Dalit Sahityer Digbalay* (1992), *Dalit Sahityer Ruprekha* (2007) are significant contributions that connect Bengal’s caste question with the pan-Indian Ambedkarite anti-caste cultural struggles like that of the Marathi Panthers. His works like *Dalit Sahityer Digbaloy* are not only works that create the ideological and intellectual foregrounding but also important commentaries on Bengal’s hegemonic cultural perceptions and assumptions. The polemical thrust of these works can never go unnoticed and yet they are robustly informative and full of subtle nuances on the intricate dialogues between aesthetics and politics. *Dalit Sahityer Digbaloy* is one of the first such books that came out in Bangla literature. While a large section of the book is an extended commentary on Telugu, Marathi and Tamil Dalit writings, his primary focus is to look for discursive possibilities of a similar cultural politics in Bengal. He discerns such

¹⁹ Manohar Mouli Biswas, Afterword “Upanyasher Notun Paromita”, *Khoma Nei*, by Nakul Mallick (Kolkata: Dalit Sahitya Sangsad, 2014), 103.

possibilities in not only the instances like Advaita Mallabharman or Binoy Majumder but also see the anti-caste ethos in Bengal's Baul songs and troubadour poets. In his commentary on the ancient and early modern Bangla literature and the presence of 'low caste/class' writers in that domain- "Adi Modhyo Kaller Bangla Sahityer Dhara o Nimnobarano"- Biswas gives us a detailed account of the Baul songs that have often served as anti-caste statements in the region.²⁰ He also traces the anti-caste cultural politics in Bangla literature back to the Charjapada literature. His book *Dalit Sahityer Digbaloy* is dedicated to Charja poet Shabaripaada. His English book on the canon formation of Dalit literature- *An Interpretation of Dalit Literature, Aesthetic Theory and Movements through the Lens of Ambedkarism*- came out in 2017. Published by Choturtha Duniya, the publishing wing of the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha, this book begins with a detailed description of the fundamental claims of canon-formation of Dalit literature.²¹ This focuses on the pan-Indian dimensions of Ambedkarite cultural politics and how Ambedkar's writings are central to the Dalit cultural movement in Bengal as well as the entire country. After drawing upon Marathi and Tamil Dalit writings, he turns his critical lens on Bengal's caste question. These sections that focus on Bengal typically try to address why he sees 'the absence of Bangla Dalit writings' or 'absence of caste in Bengal's society and culture' as completely distorted perceptions. While he critiques the apparent Left and liberal sentiments of the upper caste Bengali Bhadrakol, he also recognizes the progressive potential in some of the important events in Bengal's cultural and political sphere e.g., Young Bengal, Progressive Writers etc. He offers us a comparative analysis of the Marathi Dalit Panthers and the Young Bengalis and remind us about the differences in their cultural politics. But more significantly, this book upholds various Dalit, Adivasi cultural and socio-political icons to articulate his vision of anti-caste cultural politics.

²⁰ Manohar Mouli Biswas, "Adi Modhyo Kaller Bangla Sahityer Dhara o Nimnobarano", *Dalit Sahityer Digbaloy* (Kolkata: Dr. Ambedkar Prakashani, 1992).

²¹ Manohar Mouli Biswas, *An Interpretation of Dalit Literature, Aesthetic Theory and Movements through the Lens of Ambedkarism* (Kolkata: Choturtha Dunia, 2017).

He writes passionately on not only his Namasudra community's hagiographic narratives on Harichand Thakur and Guurchand Thakur but also on Adivasi leaders like Birsa Munda and Ramchand Murmu or Bauri leader Sonajibon Bauri. In other words, the cultural politics I explore in the narratives of past, origin or community history or the ancestral myths I explore in this dissertation, are all put on an Ambedkarite ideological platform to imagine a Buddhist anti-Brahminical past for Bengal's Dalits. This is a major intellectual contribution as well as an ideologically charged statement in the scholarly literatures on caste and cultural politics in Bengal.

Jatin Bala's book *Dalit Sahitya Andolon*, although not exclusively focused on Bengal, inevitably throws some light on the region's anti-caste cultural and literary instances.²² Bala, like Biswas' *Dalit Sahityer Digbaloy*, begins his book with detailed commentaries on how some of Babasaheb Ambedkar's writings provided them with an ideological template with which they could articulate their anti-caste consciousness in autobiographical narratives and semi-autobiographical novels. Bala is interested to chalk out an anti-caste framework that would incorporate Buddhist, Marxist and Ambedkarite thoughts to contest the Brahminical cultural dominance. Like Biswas, Bala also traces ideological connections between the Marathi Dalit Panthers of 1970s and the beginning of an Ambedkarite cultural politics that would be articulated in Bangla Dalit writings in 1990s. He informs his readers about an important feat that the Adivasi poet Waharu Sonawane achieved by winning the Kusumagraj award given by the Maharashtra Sahitya Parishad in 1987. Bala informs us that Bangla Dalit writers like Nakul Mullick and activists like Bimal Biswas, Ranendralal Biswas received this news and felt the urge to initiate similar cultural politics and literary activism in West Bengal. Taking inspiration from the Marathi Dalit Panthers and Sonwane's achievements, Mullick and other Dalit intellectuals eventually formed an organisation called Bangiya Dalit Lekhak

²² Jatin Bala, *Dalit Sahitya Andolon: Utso, Itihas, Mulyayan* (Kolkata: Choturtha Dunia, 2002).

Parishad in 1987. A few years later, such cultural politics got more solidified after the unfortunate demise of Chuni Kotal and this resulted in the birth of the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha in 1992 under the leadership of Manohar Mouli Biswas, Shaymol Pramanick and others. Bala's book makes a detailed survey of various strands in Bangla literature. He makes a wide range of commentary on Rabindranath's writings, literatures of the 'progressive writers', Marxist writers, 'Kallol Kali Kalom' era's writers, writers and poets of the Hungry Generation and then underlines the fact that, despite their sincerest efforts, most of the caste Hindu writers have not been sufficiently able to depict the painful realities of Bengals' Dalits. In this book, he raises the question of the late emergence of the idea of 'Dalit literature' in Bengal and blames the Indian partition and consequent rootless life of Bengali Dalits for this delayed arrival of this Ambedkarite anti-caste literary and cultural movement.

In 2007, Bangla Dalit writer Monoranjan Byapari's essay on a brief history and evolution of Bangla Dalit writings came out. This is arguably the first of its kind history of this literary activism in Bengal written in the English language. Therefore, this essay in the *Economic and Political Weekly* becomes extremely significant in the writing of any history of this movement. However, this does not imply that other similar and even more elaborate history of Bangla Dalit literature was unavailable in Bengali. As I have explained in the last section, examples like Manohar Mouli Biswas' *Dalit Sahityer Digboloy* or Jatin Bala's *Dalit Sahityer Itihas* and numerous articles on a similar history had been published before this essay came out in the *Economic and Political Weekly*. But, at any rate, a more determined shape of academic engagement on Bangla Dalit writings found a prominent milestone in this piece. Moreover, Byapari, in order to write this piece, also consulted various sources in the vernacular that the Bengali books also discuss at length. To that extent, this piece can be a convenient shorthand to discuss the evolution of this literary and cultural activism. Noted Indian academic Professor Meenakshi Mukherjee, in this article, has introduced Manoranjan

Byapari who is now widely known and celebrated as a prominent Dalit writer from West Bengal and then translated his original Bengali essay (written in the form of an introduction to as well as an inventory of Bangla Dalit writings) into English. This article begins with Professor Meenakshi Mukherjee's references to her own intellectual unease in relation to an apparent absence of Bangla Dalit writings. According to Mukherjee, this apparent absence might be a result of several causes: the relative 'absence' of caste-based discrimination in Bengal, the unimaginably poor condition of Dalits that do not allow or have not allowed them to produce such literary works etc. While the first cause is often reiterated by the upper caste dominated, urban middle class Bhadrakal constituency, the later cause is often a frustrated utterance of those who occupy the lowest sections of the caste hierarchy. Since my dissertation focuses on not just this apparent absence of the loosely defined and somewhat tenuous canon or a 'late emergence of Bangla Dalit sahitya' but also look at the culturally corroborated caste-based assumptions in Bengal, this puzzling dichotomy between these two common reasons is a telling point of departure for me. This essay introduces Byapari as a Dalit writer in an extremely interesting fashion. At the outset, one must point out that Byapari, alongside his public recognition as a Dalit author, predominantly identifies himself as an unmarked literary craftsman and 'a writer from the working class' (*sromojibi lekha*). Moreover, Byapari is not a member of the most prominent organisation in the field: Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha (BDSS) with which he shares a tenuous relationship and serious ideological disagreements.²³ One sees such ideological incompatibilities in the two volumes of his autobiography- *Itibritte Chandal Jibon* ("Chronicles of A Chandal's Life"). Most of his writings, starting from his *Jibishar Galpo* to *Amanushik* or *Bastash Baruder Gandho* to his most recent novel *Maron Sagarer Pare Tumi Amar* (a novel on the famous Naxalite

²³ Interestingly enough, Monoranjan Byapari has been appointed as the President of the Paschim Banga Dalit Sahitya Academy established in 2020 by the Department of Information and Technology, Government of West Bengal. The prominent members of the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha like Manohar Mouli Biswas and Kalyani Thakur Charal are also important members of this newly founded organization.

radical Shankar Guha Neogi) do not reflect the caste structure, caste-based atrocities or caste discrimination in any immediate manner. Barring some sporadic and occasional references to such discriminatory experiences and the two volumes of his autobiography, there is not much of his writings that can even loosely qualify the adjectival phrase of ‘Bangla Dalit sahitya’.

This reference to the apparent lack of a visible, assertive, ideologically loaded ‘Dalit sensibility’ is referred here not to dismiss any anti-caste politics that his works might be representing or to dismiss whatever he says in this essay primarily in the capacity of a Dalit interlocutor interacting with both mainstream academia (through a journal like *Economic and Political Weekly*) and a predominantly upper caste dominated urban English educated constituency. I refer to such ambiguous territories of self-identification or ideological conflicts primarily to underscore the deeply heterogeneous picture of this canon and invoke dominant as well as counter-hegemonic perceptions about any existing or potential anti-caste politics in Bengal. The ideological conflicts I referred to, do not just throw light on either ‘populist politics’ apropos caste nor do I draw attention to these to predict the futility of any potential anti-caste politics that Dalits are trying to organise in Bengal. Rather I try to throw some light on the caste-class equations that are central to any understanding of the caste question here (either in pre-colonial Bengal/ Banga about which we really know very little or colonial Bengal Presidency or undivided Bengal and the post-Partition two halves of what we have known as West Bengal and Bangladesh).²⁴ This line of thinking is often challenging as, despite such ideological differences between Byapari and the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha members, they might not be very outspoken about such issues in the interviews conducted by researchers. Hence, like prejudices, there seems to be a considerable amount of intractability or elusiveness that I must encounter here. But this challenge seems worth some merit when

²⁴ I use the phrase ‘populist politics’ more in the sense Ernesto Laclau deploys it. See Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London and New York: Verso, 2005).

we look at the primary apple of discord between Byapari and the BDSS. For Byapari it is absolutely important to simultaneously battle caste and class as two corresponding and complicit conceptual categories of social reality and relations of production while members of the BDSS, it seems, are more inclined to assert caste based cultural politics where class concerns do not appear as matters of significance. One cannot have a nuanced view of this cultural politics without underscoring these issues, notwithstanding the challenging intractability that one must encounter in archiving such discrepancies.

Apart from being known as the first prominent ‘critical’ literature or ‘secondary writing’ in this discourse and the first critical inventory of Bangla Dalit writings, this essay, for me, is also important because of the way it introduces a Dalit writer like Byapari. The article introduces Byapari as if his life looks like a wonderful ‘rags to riches tale’ with identifiable liberal overtones and it seems to be loaded with what Gyanendra Pandey calls ‘the common sense of the modern’. Byapari’s tale has been put in front of us as a unique saga of suffering and how one, with one’s indomitable spirit, overcomes them to become a successful writer:

Manoranjan did not get a chance to go to school, his childhood was spent in grazing goats and cows. When he was a little older, he tried to earn- sometimes as a helper in tea shops, at other times as sweeper, car cleaner, coolie, cobbler, and for a while he even begged on the streets to collect money for an orphanage, a percentage of which he was allowed to keep. At some point he got involved in militant politics and thereafter drifted towards an anti-social way of life. As a result, he had to spend some years in jail. It is in jail that he learnt to read and write from some of the other inmates. This was a skill that excited him and he practised writing regularly by using a stick on the dusty jail yard. By the time he came out of the jail he had got into the habit of reading magazines even though he could not always understand all the words. He became a rickshaw-puller for a while and would sometimes ask his passengers the meanings of words that baffled him. At this point a serendipitous event changed the course of his life.²⁵

Byapari, who was a cobbler, a sweeper, an anti-social, due to a serendipitous event of meeting the noted writer Mahasweta Devi, could transform his life and became a successful writer. One cannot help but recognise the unmistakable note of what social historian

²⁵ Manoranjan Byapari, “Is There Dalit Writing in Bangla?” *Economic and Political Weekly* 42 no. 41 (2007), accessed November 28, 2020, <https://www.epw.in/journal/2007/41/perspectives/there-dalit-writing-bangla.html>.

Gyanendra Pandey calls ‘universal prejudice’ in this depiction. In his book *A History of Prejudice: Race, Caste and Difference in India and the United States*, Pandey discusses two kinds of prejudices: ‘universal’ and ‘vernacular’. While caste or race are often recognised as prejudices that are local, localisable and recognised as the basis of unequal social structures or hierarchies, the teleological faith in a universal modernist goal, loaded with post-Enlightenment liberal values, is a ‘universal prejudice’ that we all share. Quite significantly, Byapari, unlike most other notable Bangla Dalit writers, never received state sponsored institutionalised education and has also expressed his reservations against the ‘quota’ system. All these factors, as I have argued in my article in *Bangla Journal*, have made him a popular icon in a liberal, middle class, urban, educated Bhadrakalok Bengali society that cites Byapari as an example of liberal notion of ‘merit’ and ‘hard work’.²⁶ It is this aspect of his writings and his life that come to the fore through Professor Mukherjee’s introduction. While addressing the various causes for the late emergence of ‘Bangla Dalit literature’, Byapari also singles out partition and post-partition refugee resettlement as two related and significant logistical impediments that did not allow Bengali Dalits to produce literary and cultural mediations of their lived experiences. While this does explain the lack of literary productions made by the Namasudras who were primarily concentrated in Bakarganj and Khulna regions of eastern Bengal and therefore directly got affected by the partition, it does not sufficiently answer why other prominent Dalit constituencies living in the western part of Bengal, despite their relatively unaffected status during or after partition, could not produce a considerable anti-caste cultural and political movement against the Brahminical social and political hegemony of caste Hindu constituencies. It has often been pointed out by various historians and social scientists like Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Jaya Chatterjee and Dwaipayan Sen that

²⁶ Kalyan Kumar Das, “Caste and Politics of Culture in Contemporary West Bengal: Bhadrakalok’s celebration of a Chotolok’s Story and the Curious Case of Monoranjan Byapari”, *Bangla Journal: a journal on Bangla and Bangali* vol. 13 no. 21 (December 2015):227-246.

partition has damaged the Namasudra movement which could have emerged as a huge political force of Dalit politics in colonial and post-colonial times. While I agree with such explanations, I fail to see how this explains the apparent ‘silence’ of Bauris, Doms, Bagdis, Rajbangshis and other such Dalit constituencies who have been inhabiting the arid regions of Purulia, Bankura, Midnapur or are residing in the Northern parts of Bengal. The essay, like the general scenario of Bangla Dalit politics and cultural space, seems to be dominated by Namasudras. This, in turn, is reflected heavily on the academic focus on the caste question in this part of the sub-continent. This counterintuitive observation helps us shift our focus from two extremely overdetermined tropes through which Bengal’s caste scene has been traditionally thought of in the academic writings: partition and Namasudras. Most academic, critical writings are heavily dominated by either a focus on partition or a focus on the Namasudra/Matua community.²⁷ It is undeniable that during colonial times, particularly after the first census of 1872, Namasudras consolidated various sub-castes under a semi-mythical and *de facto* governmental name (they negotiated with the colonial administration to call themselves Namasudras instead of the traditional occupational and pejorative name- Chandal) to emerge as a strong political force in the eastern parts of the undivided Bengal. This consolidation is comparable only to the emergence of Babasaheb Ambedkar’s Mahar caste as an extremely assertive political force in the Maharashtra region. Therefore, no researcher can afford to ignore the presence of Namasudras as a leading Dalit constituency in Bengal. However, a shift in focus would raise other important ways through which I can critically engage with other anti-Brahminical traditions that have been in existence in Bengal and this

²⁷ Starting from Sekhar Bandyopadhyay’s multiple volumes on Namasudra politics in colonial as well as post-colonial times to the most recent works by Dwaipayan Sen or Praskanva Sinharay are examples of how scholarly literatures on caste in Bengal are obsessed with Namasudra and/or Matua cultural and political writings. See, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Sage, 2004); Dwaipayan Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question: Jogendranath Mondal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: Namasudras of Bengal 1872-1927*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011); Praskanva Sinharay, “West Bengal’s Election Story: The Caste Question”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 49 no. 17 (2014): 10-12, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24480107?seq=1>.

will also help me to see how some ‘tribal’ communities have been ‘semi-Hinduised’ (a term persistently used by the colonial administrator W. B. Oldham in various governmental documents to describe the Bauris in Burdwan) to give birth to various lower castes in Rarh (south-western part) Bengal. The celebration of Asura Utsav, Asura Smaran, existence of Buddhism in this region, seemingly sub-nationalist discursive claims of ‘Bauriland’ or the demands of Rajbanshis to have a separate administrative region for themselves will go unnoticed if we over-determine Namasudra/ Matua politics as the most important aspect of Bengal’s Dalit politics. My research, thus, attempts to shift this focus to the writers from south-western districts of West Bengal.

This shift in focus also achieves another result. Most of the prominent Bangla Namasudra Dalit writers live in and around Kolkata. Although most of them are living in the peripheries of the modern city of Kolkata, there is a strong interaction on their part with the metropolitan middle class and academia- something that Bauris or Doms do not possess. This lack of exposure to the urban middle-class life often leads to relative invisibility of and downright ignorance about their presence. But my research implicitly underscores whether this lack of proximity with the urban metropolitan cultural centre and lack of academic attention also very often lead to unique ways of negotiating with local powers within the caste-class social continuum of districts like Midnapur, Purulia and Cooch Behar or Dinajpurs as these Dalit constituencies, by and large, are neither haunted by the neo-liberal demands of the publishing industry nor heavily dependent upon the liberal receptions that I have already pointed out in Byapari’s case. This essay has almost nothing to say about such other major Dalit constituencies.

This preoccupation with the Namasudras’ trauma of partition does occupy a large part of this dissertation as most of the Dalit autobiographies (e.g., Jatin Bala’s *Sikor Chenra Jibon* or Nakul Mullick’s *Khoma Nei*) are haunted by the spectre of partition. This focus, in itself, is

significant, because it draws our attention to differential treatment in refugee resettlement in post-partition West Bengal that various Dalit immigrants had been subjected to. But the reservations that I have raised earlier help me to go beyond such apparent logistical obstacles and also addresses the long gap of almost four decades since the partition during which none of these Dalit immigrants has produced any significant body of literary works (barring instances like Advaita Mallabharman's *Titas Ekti Nodir Naam* about which I have more things to say later in this review). Once we recognise the banality of such perspectives reflected in the academic writings on caste in Bengal, we can have a critical domain of culturalism through which the caste question in Bengal has been mediated both in colonial and post-colonial modernity. Social historians like Sekhar Bandyopadhyay have shown how the Matua movement or much of Namasudra politics was heavily brahminised and how it continuously dissociated itself from *sahajiya vaishnav* cults that shaped the initial trajectories of these movements. These can also be partly explained through what Andrew Sartori calls Bengal's own version of 'culturalism' through which Bengal created its own concept of culture as a mark of being progressive and modern.²⁸ Much of this silence that we talk about here also had a direct relationship with such culturalist structures that emerged in colonial times- structures that very often combined earlier Brahminical caste hierarchies with a modernist refashioning of the emerging middle-class bourgeois liberalism.

This essay by Byapari and Mukherjee has also mentioned two icons of Bengali literary and cultural scenario- Binoy Majumder and Advaita Mallabharman- as two 'Dalit writers'. It is to be noted here that both these writers/poets enjoy quite prominent places within the cultural sphere of Bengal. Both have been received and celebrated as cultural radicals by the upper-caste dominated Kolkata centric Bhadrakalok section and both, in their

²⁸ Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008).

life-time, have not been particularly identified as ‘Dalit writers’. We must recognise that these two writers/poets have been retrospectively and posthumously described as ‘Dalit writers’ by various self-identified Dalit writers like Manohar Mouli Biswas or Manoranjan Byapari. When Advaita Mallabharman’s magnum opus *Titas Ekti Nodir Naam* was celebrated it was hardly recognised as a Dalit literary text and Majumder’s important works like the anthology of *Fire Eso Chaka* (also mentioned in this essay) has never had the anti-caste Ambedkarite ideological imprint that we usually look for in any piece of ‘Dalit writing’. These observations, therefore, help us recognise how caste/anti-caste consciousness and concomitant social mobilities or negotiations are deeply local in nature or make us recognise the functional modalities of caste and secondly these draw our attention to how some of these writers have been recognised retrospectively as ‘Dalit writers’ particularly after 1990s- an important juncture in the temporal trajectory of the Nation-state. These two lines of thinking are my points of intervention as well as points of departure to look beyond such naming and claiming. If we recognise the Phule-Ambedkarite ideological imprint (notwithstanding its undefinable, elusive status) as a yardstick to identify ‘Dalit writing’ then much of what Mallabharman and Majumder wrote cannot be taken, in any ideologically defined sense of the phrase, as pieces of ‘Dalit lives’ and their ‘lived experiences’ of oppression and marginalisation. Here I do not become dismissive of such cultural (re)claiming. Rather, I draw a line of distinction that can ideologically separate them from Byapari, Biswas or Bala who otherwise occupy my primary focus in this dissertation.

1.5 Interrogating the ‘late emergence’ hypothesis:

At the beginning of this research, I was more driven by a desire to look for reasons that apparently did not allow the Dalit movement in Bengal to emerge. More specifically, this meant that the Bengali Dalit literary activism, coupled with any form of political assertion, was a relatively late emergence. But such theories of late emergence imply an implicit

subscription to a historicist and teleological assumption that expects Bengali Dalit writings to follow the footsteps of Marathi or Hindi or Tamil Dalit literatures. Indeed, the initial phase of literature review of secondary critical resources on Bengali Dalit literature inevitably includes texts like “Is there a Dalit writing in Bangla?” that suggests such teleological anxieties. While this interrogative mark in the title shows how the caste question in Bengal is almost always punctuated by the assumption that ‘caste hardly exists in Bengal’, it also speaks of the assumed derivative status of any putative definition of ‘Bangla Dalit sahitya’. Focusing too much on ‘why did Bangla Dalit sahitya emerge so late as compared to Dalit literatures produced in other vernaculars of India?’ assumes, in the first place, this predictable trajectory- “Dalit literature’s epicentre has been Maharashtra and every other region followed its footsteps.” Such teleological assumptions, however, gloss over many significant aspects of the Dalit literary movement either in Bengal, Maharashtra or any other part of the country:

- Firstly, it assumes that Dalit assertion of either socio-political or cultural kind have been foreign to Bengal’s history and it is because of the Ambedkarite ideological impetus in other parts of the country that Bengal also eventually started discussing it. Thereby, it does not allow us to focus on the literary texts or social movements that precede the dates of the birth of an organized Dalit literary movement in 1990s.
- Secondly, it does not allow us to focus adequately on the local specificities of Bengal that have significantly shaped the possibilities for the emergence of a ‘Dalit consciousness’ as this ‘late emergence’ theory restricts the understanding of ‘Dalit consciousness’ to an always already accepted nebulous ideological template of ‘Phule-Ambedkarite’ tradition.

While ‘the late emergence’ hypothesis allows us to focus on the South Asian partition that has damaged the logistical possibilities of Dalits writing about their lives or the long Communist rule in the state of West Bengal that has apparently focused entirely on class and

has ‘overlooked’ the significance of caste in the socio-political and cultural lives of the province, this does not convincingly address a lot of other related issues. Accepting that the Dalits in Bengal could not bring about a significant literary or cultural movement as early as the 1970s (when Maharashtra started having its own Dalit literary movement) because of a long post-partition ‘refugee’ resettlement problem and resultant logistical hindrances, one wonders why Bauris, Rajbangshis, Bagdis, Doms or Poundra Kshatrias did not come up with a political or cultural assertion of the kind one notices in 1990s? These Dalit constituencies in Bengal were not directly affected by the aftermath of partition in the way Namasudras-the largest Dalit constituency of undivided Bengal- were affected by it. While, the perception that Marxists focus on class as opposed to caste or Partition have undoubtedly damaged the Dalit movement scenario in Bengal enter the common sense of the Dalit literary discourse led primarily by Namasudras, this dissertation seeks to put forward such counter-intuitive contestations while exploring mediations of past or imaginations of individual and collective histories in these writings. How do we explain the ‘absence’ of these constituencies if we focus too much on the Namasudra movement either in undivided Bengal’s politics or post-partition state of West Bengal? Therefore, despite my focus on the Namasudra autobiographical narratives and the spectres of partition that haunt them in the first chapter, I focus on Bauris in the second chapter in this dissertation. In doing so, I shift the modalities of my research from the temporal qualifier loaded with teleological underpinnings- ‘late’, to a focus on the ‘emergence’ of a tentative and highly contingent template of Bengali ‘Dalit’ literary activism and movement.

Once I make such a move, it becomes possible for me to focus not only on the other Dalit constituencies of Bengal and their specific heterogeneous aspects but also to recognize the key and most pervasive element in these movements- reconstruction of past in exploring the futurist possibilities of the present in these narratives. All the three chapters on Dalit

writings in this dissertation are narratives of constructing and reconstructing the past of not only the first-person narrators but also their constituencies or communities. We must also recall here that the formation of the canon of Bangla Dalit sahitya with its ideological emphasis on ‘lived experience’ also came with some retrospective assertions made by leading ‘Dalit’ authors like Manohar Mouli Biswas or Kalyani Thakur Chanral of the Bengali Dalit Sahitya Sangstha (henceforth BDSS). Many of them, in refuting the ‘late emergence’ thesis claim that Dalit sahitya or Dalit movement in Bengal is not unprecedented either in colonial/postcolonial times or in pre-colonial or pre-modern times. In arguing this, these Dalit authors assert that starting from Kartabhajas in Bengal to the autobiographical works like *Titas Ekti Nodir Naam*, Bengal has had a long tradition of ‘Dalit’ writings. However, such claims apparently collide with their other assertion that Dalit literature qualifies to be Dalit literature when it carries not only the unmistakable imprint of lived experience (as opposed to the participant’s observation of Manik Bandopadhyay or the simulated experiences of Tarashankar as reflected in his texts) but also some imprint of ‘Ambedkarite ideology’. Most of these texts that are retroactively perceived to be examples of Dalit literature in Bangla lack such Ambedkarite ideology of anti-caste perspective. Raising such questions are not directed towards a dismissal of what these writers are saying. But underscoring this ‘retrospective’ contemplation of past, according to the demands and concerns of the present seems to be an undercurrent that flows across the texts and movements I study in this dissertation. Thus, this dissertation shifts its focus on analysing the various fictional, non-fictional and autobiographical narratives produced by the various Dalit communities in West Bengal that inform us about different patterns in contemplating individual as well as collective pasts of these constituencies. In other words, I am arguing that the ‘late emergence’ of Bangla Dalit writings is only valid in so far as we are talking about a Phule-Ambedkarite ideological template or Dalit panther like cultural politics and literary movement. In the

cultural counter-hegemonic discourse that Manoranjan Byapari, Jatin Bala, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Sunil Das, Raju Das, Mulnibasi ideologues are constructing in the post-Mandal Commission West Bengal, there is certainly some sense of novelty as this template was absent in Bangla literary world. This does not mean ‘lower caste’ authors like Majumder or Mallabharman were not writing literatures. It is just that the ideologically charged retrospective readings of Charjapad literature or the writings of Mallabharman and Majumder are recent developments. But this sense of retrospective ideological reading, I argue in this dissertation, entails crucial paradigm shifts in the anti-caste politics of the region as these authors are not simply writing their individual or caste-community’s histories but also revisiting their ancestral myths or in some cases, debunking their mythical narratives of origin. In some instances, these narratives are replete with different conceptions of past that are also defying the norms and characteristics of ‘history’ that is born out of Western philosophical thoughts of Giambattista Vico, G.W.F. Hegel or Leopold von Ranke. Moreover, all these Bangla Dalit narratives are constantly shifting their focus on some reconstructions of past (individual, particular caste community’s and critiques of nationalist pasts) that seem to be earmarked by historicist tendencies i.e., there is some truth about their present predicament in the ‘unknown’ histories waiting to be explored and made known. But by looking into how these Dalit narratives are mediating different types of ‘pasts’ I am not simply suggesting the possibility of knowing an alternative cultural or social history of Bengal/ West Bengal through the conceptual prism of caste or the ideological prism of Ambedkarite anti-caste politics. Here, I am more interested to underline those various methods and ways through which Dalit histories in such Bangla Dalit literary and cultural narratives are offering us insights in historiographic thinking. This, in turn, is then discursively connected to look for possible frameworks through which those concerns in Dalit postcolonial historiographies can be tied to certain philosophical frameworks. Since

much of postcolonial historiographies offer us not only critiques of modern western rationalist, objective, statist models of historiography but also more general critiques of European post-Enlightenment modernity, it is important to see how these mediations of past speak to Ambedkar's intellectual inheritances or how we can look for tentative conceptual templates through which Dalit historiography might speak loudly.

1.6 Reconstructing the Past- Caste, Subaltern historiography and Dalit movements in West Bengal:

In most of the critical literatures and narratives on how Bangla Dalit writings have emerged, the writers' claims seem to be haunted by a common anxiety i.e., to prove that this is, contrary to the popular belief in this state and elsewhere in the country, not a recent development. This is often followed by a claim that such literatures produced by the so called 'lower caste' groups have been there for a long time, at least hundred years or even more than that. To that extent, a survey of those writings, Dalit critics and authors assume, will prove the legitimacy of claims on canon formation. If such writings have been there, the claim that there is some canon called 'Bangla Dalit sahitya' can be established on more concrete grounds. What is interesting in such claims, however, is that the past or history itself serves both as a proof and a causal factor that brings about such claims on canon formation in the present. Thus, in such claims, one notices how history of this literature becomes important to either debunk or contest the contrary claims and assumptions that 'there is no Bangla Dalit literature' or 'it has only come into existence very recently'. However, such claims on past have multiple variants in the present cultural or literary politics of the various Dalit constituencies in the state. As I explore the post-partition autobiographical accounts of Namasudra writers in the first chapter of this dissertation, I notice how personal recollections are not only intertwined with collective community's pasts and evolutions, but they also expect that some meaning or worth can be derived out of those reminiscences or recollections

of a person—a compulsive desire that forces upon the author to narrate his or her tales. Such personal/communitarian explorations or excavations (to use the archaeological metaphor) are often premised on the assumption that personal or community's histories can bring about some meaning-making i.e., of how a person's or his or her community's plights and sufferings are to be narrated and archived in order to render them meaningful. But more significantly, such recollections are based on certain truth claims. Like almost all autobiographical accounts, these narratives assume themselves to be offering unmediated or unadulterated access to truth—truth of one's own experiences as well as the collective experiences of their communities. While most of these narratives proceed with the common claim that they are going to be tales of sufferings and plight of Dalits in Bengal, many almost invariably discuss such sufferings alongside multiple other registers of everyday, quotidian experiences that constitute human lives—what they eat, how they conduct their everyday affairs, how the first-person narrator looks at his/her own life etc. However, what is interesting in such recollections is how they consider these narratives to be truer than the official narratives of 'statist history'. Most of the post-partition narratives that I engage with here, clearly make those truth claims on the basis of such memory excavations as 'truths' that are greater than the truth those professional pedantic historians can offer on the basis of facts. Unlike such facts-based histories of the nation-states, all these narratives offer glimpses of everyday truths that look at the limits of statist histories. Therefore, the following chapter explores such possibilities of having non-Hegelian narratives of histories by engaging with Namasudra autobiographical narratives. Such engagements also help us in understanding how the politics of caste in undivided Bengal got ruptured in the multiple layers and waves of partitions in the Indian sub-continent and how such politics of partition has long underplayed the role of caste as a crucial discursive space of contestation. Contrary to the tradition of nineteenth century 'savarna'/bhadralok male autobiographical accounts or *chorit*/self-writing

that invariably identified their narratives with the larger narrative of the nation, these Dalit autobiographies persistently contest the claims of the nation-state's 'homogeneous empty space and time' by either focusing on the quotidian experiences or by underscoring the precarious existence of Dalit refugees in the post-partition postcolonial Indian nation-state.

In the third chapter I engage with the various fictional as well as non-fictional writings produced by the Bauri authors and playwrights. While, Namasudra narratives offer such post-Hegelian possibilities of thinking the past, Bauri community writers offer other paths of exploring history or past to constitute politics in the present. Most non-fictional accounts written by Bauri writers are willy-nilly various accounts of their community's past. Writers like Sunil Das or Raju Das are constantly claiming not only 'pre-modern' but often 'primitive' origins of their communities. These 'community-historians' often go deep into the history so much so that the anthropocentric history of their community overlaps with what historians have started calling 'deep' geological history of the planet earth. Thus, Bauri authors keep going back to the Pleistocene era or some such geological temporal unit to claim that they are not only the original inhabitants of the territories they presently inhabit; but they are the present civilizational remnants of the earliest humans on this planet earth. The sub-textual suggestions can be summed up thus: by laying a claim to such remotest points of time in history, their existence as a constituency can be rendered meaningful. History, in such utterances, holds the magic key to rendering their present lives free from the oppressed precarious existence of 'now'. This is amply evident in the writings of Sunil Das who takes the help of modern anthropological and ethnographic narratives to substantiate his claims of his community's antiquity. This offers us a significantly different perspective on how a so-called lower caste constituency contests the normative statements made on their community by the colonial state's representatives like W. B. Oldham, the District Commissioner of Burdwan. Ironically enough, this is done by claiming a presence in the remotest past or

history with interestingly distorted exploitation of anthropological, geological and ethnographic narratives which have deep colonial and racial overtones. Bauris have also come up with a movement called ‘Bauriland movement’. However, unlike many such movements in the country, this does not get translated or conceptualized essentially as a secessionist movement. It remains, I argue, as a heterotopic museum space – a discursive space for the collective history of the community that is cartographically represented. But this cartographical representation never gets translated into any convenient ‘sub-nationalist’ claim. In the fourth chapter, I look into the cultural traditions and articulations of the Mulnibasi movement’s autochthonous politics. This movement, like the Bauriland movement, focuses on the roughly defined registers of indigeneity. In this chapter, I try to see how these autochthonous claims of being the ‘original inhabitants’ of the land have an ambivalent relationship with the larger normative discourse of the nation-state. A significant part of this cultural articulation is undoubtedly based on making a claim on the space and time of the nation by declaring the ‘original inhabitant status’ of these people- Dalits and Adivasis. But, on the other hand, it inadvertently contests the homogeneity claims of the nation-state by putting Muslims, Dalits, Adivasis and other backward classes within its definition of ‘Mulnibasi’. To that extent, it creates the ‘cultural other’ in the image of the Bengali Bhadrakalok-supposedly comprising of members from the three dominant castes- Brahmin, Baidya and Kayastha. We must note here that the Bengali Bhadrakalok, as a socio-historical category, does not easily lend itself to such caste-class equation. Many other castes like the Subarnabaniks, Gandhabaniks were also getting assimilated in the so-called category of the Bhadrakalok as it emerged in the social sphere of the nineteenth century Bengal. Also, such social grouping formed on the basis of shared marginality is constructed by often reclaiming ‘indigenous’ status for social groups that do not traditionally identify themselves as stigmatized, even if, in some cases, they can be marginalized. In many ways, these claims

of indigeneity are based on an overriding of differences within these disparate caste/class/religious groups in constructing and identifying a cultural/social/political 'other' by equating the 'other' with the image of the 'outsider'/'foreigner'/Aryan invader etc. In this project, once again, it is history, imagined or otherwise, that gets invoked and incited. To make these claims look legitimate and politically viable, a common and shared history of contestation-ideological and cultural- is configured.

Since, history or 'reconfiguring past in order to make the politics of the present possible' seems central to all these chapters, I feel the need to philosophically formulate how these constructions of past are speaking or not speaking to our general historicist tendencies or how they contest or subscribe to the Hegelian statist history or official, fact based, objective history of the nation-state. This somewhat more abstracted framework is attempted in the fifth chapter. In order to do so, I have tried to push these narratives of the first three chapters and the caste question that cuts across them, towards a discursive interaction with the Subaltern Studies project of writing south Asian history that came into being in the 1980s and has subsequently had a lasting impact on south Asian historiography. There are multiple reasons why I choose the subalternist historiography to exhibit those discursive equations apropos caste in South Asian history. Advertently or inadvertently, the narratives that I engage with in my dissertation do come up with contestations of the three dominant historiographies in the region i.e., colonial, nationalist and Marxist historiographical projects. For example, the Namasudra narratives simultaneously critique both the nationalist and Marxist historiographies and the chapter on Bauriland and Bauri writings does have possibilities to show how these constructions of the past can tweak, twist and alter the normative assumptions of the colonialist historiography. One apparently obvious reason for choosing the subalternist school of history writing as the primary discursive interlocutor in this project is that it is, by its story of origin and evolution, focused on South Asia which

captures my geo-discursive space of investigation in this dissertation. Secondly, this historiography makes more pronounced, determined and more strategic use of literary narratives and a dissertation like this one that puts itself at the intersections of literature and history, can presumably, benefit from such a framework. Thirdly, my interactions with these Dalit narratives have offered possibilities of seeing how history as a discipline can be or must be reconfigured if it has to make itself amenable to the study non-western locations like South Asia in general or Bengal in particular. Fourthly, there is also a polemical point of entry as far as using Subaltern Studies in a work like this is concerned. Most Bengali Dalit authors often make dismissive comments on the Subaltern Studies on the basis of their assumption that the term 'subaltern' is a handy term that signifies any marginalized social group and yet the Subaltern Studies scholars like Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty and others have not 'bothered much' about the 'real subalterns' called Dalits or lower castes in their own areas of social origin. While the term 'subaltern', in the way it has been used by Ranajit Guha and others in the Subaltern Studies school, does signify socially and politically marginalized people, the term has connotations that are not necessarily tied to the singular idea of being marginalized by caste identity. The Gramscian notion of the term, as Guha informs, is used both in terms of how non-modern life worlds interact with modern institutions of state power as well as its implications like 'down under' (the Gramscian play upon the military term 'subaltern'). According to these Dalit authors and activists, these scholars who all belong to the hegemonic social group of Bhadrals in Bengal, have in effect created a discourse of 'subalternity' for the undifferentiated category of the formerly colonized societies in the so-called 'Third World' and have not bothered to look at the 'fourth world' inhabited by the Dalits in their homeland. This is why Dalit authors like Manohar Mouli Biswas and his associates tend to identify themselves as inhabitants of the 'fourth world' or 'choturtha duniya'. In fact, it is this ideological contention that is encoded in their

politics of naming the little magazine they published – “Choturtha Duniya” or the publishing wing that they manage- also known as “Choturtha Duniya”. A significant part of this Bengali Dalit literary activism is focused on plays and these authors/activists have also formed a theatre group called “Choturthomukh” (Fourth Face). Therefore, this school of Subaltern Studies and their observations on South Asian or Bengal’s historiography has to be perceived in terms of the general critique of caste-Hindu socio-cultural hegemony that these Dalit authors are attempting to construct. It must be noted here that there are similar polemical critiques of this school of south Asian historiography within the discipline of modern Indian history and occasionally, such Dalit critiques might converge upon those critiques from within the discipline of history i.e., Sumit Sarkar’s criticism of the Subaltern Studies or Ramachandra Guha’s criticism of this school.²⁹ While Ramachandra Guha’s critique can be identified as, broadly speaking, a secular-nationalist response to Subaltern Studies, Sarkar’s critique came as a by-product of his historiographical project that holds a general apprehension about Subaltern Studies’ discomfort with Enlightenment modernity’s grand narratives. Sarkar’s critique is to be seen within a much larger disciplinary debate in history that is hung between Marxist and post-structuralist or postmodernist historiographical projects. One must also note here that despite being originated within the larger Marxist environment (Ranajit Guha’s association with Communist Party of India or Gramsci’s influence are good examples), Subaltern Studies came as an internal critique of Marxist historiography and to that extent, it shares an interestingly tenuous relationship with Marxist history writing. It has come to see itself as a critique of the inherent ‘elitism’ in history writing of not just colonialist or nationalist but also of Marxist historiography.³⁰ But, Bengali

²⁹ Sumit Sarkar, “The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies”, *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalisation of South Asia*, ed. David Ludden (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002); Ramachandra Guha, “Subaltern and Bhadrakal Studies”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 30 no. 33 (1995):2056-2058, accessed February 9, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4403102?seq=1>.

³⁰ Ranajit Guha “On Some Aspects of the historiography of Colonial India”, *The Small Voices of History* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012), 187-193.

Dalit activists are attempting, as I pointed out earlier, a polemical criticism of the Subaltern School for discursively undermining the ‘caste question’ in this project on South Asian history. That this is polemical is often reflected in the fact that they see this absence as a general trend in Marxist social sciences in India that allegedly undermines or ignores the caste equations and it does not recognize the significant differences between the Marxists and the Subalternists. This polemical nature of it is also evident in the way Biswas and others in this activism often respond to Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. They bypass the fact that Spivak’s intervention in the Subaltern Studies project happened much later and her essay was not a part of the collective intellectual output of the Subaltern Studies group. In fact, her essay was also a critical response to Ranajit Guha’s problematisation of representational politics apropos of the ‘subaltern’ social groups.³¹ Partha Chatterjee, as a founding member of the Subaltern Studies group, in one of his revisionist accounts of the history of the group’s intellectual position within South Asian history writing, identifies Spivak’s intervention as a necessary turn.³² Therefore, bracketing Spivak with the Group also involves problems that Dalit activists often tend to overlook. But one has to keep aside these aspects in order to engage with the more general problem that Dalit activists see in the project- a ‘silence ‘on the caste question in Bengal within the Subaltern Studies’ postcolonial historiographic concerns. It is this pivot around which my engagements with the twin registers of Subaltern Studies and Dalit writings evolve in this dissertation.

To begin with, one must note that the Subaltern Studies discourse, even though it did not arguably engage with the caste question in an exhaustive fashion, did raise issues that are more generally connected to non-modern or pre-modern patterns of social behaviour.

³¹ Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), 271-313.

³² Partha Chatterjee, “A Brief History of Subaltern Studies”, *Empire and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

Therefore, once we place the caste question within the temporal logic of modernity, there is indeed a lot of scope to raise issues of subalternity that the Subaltern Studies group could have or should have engaged with. But even while agreeing with such a criticism, one must note that there are quite a good number of essays as well as books on caste/Dalit narratives that have been written by these scholars. Some of these writings might not have been produced directly under the aegis of the collective and yet, all of these pieces share the fundamental characteristics of the group's discursive points of emphasis. For instance, Gyanendra Pandey's book that I have mentioned before was not part of the collective. But it certainly shares the anxieties and apprehensions about modernity and its grand narratives that Subaltern Studies generally speaks about. The list can be extended further by citing examples like the works by Nicholas Dirks who was not directly part of the collective and yet, shares the same frame of reference that critique modernity in its engagements with caste. One can also cite examples like Debjani Ganguly's book on the narratives about Dalit lives that directly adopts the Subaltern Studies essays to create a framework to look at caste subalternity.³³ This list can be extended further by citing similar examples and this shows that the project of Subaltern Studies might have been declared closed only formally. It continues to have further reverberations in other similar or related fields, especially the broad and somewhat nebulous domain of postcolonial studies. In literature departments, postcolonialism continues to flourish as we grapple with newer forms of modernity and its corollary narratives of developmentalism, globalization, neo-liberalism etc. and consequently, we do need to engage with some of the pieces that came out as part of this project and yet go beyond that. So, far from being a dead horse, this project continues to hold some sway over the general body of work that we classify under the term "South Asian studies" or "South

³³ Debjani Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity: Notes on postcolonial hermeneutics of Caste* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

Asian literatures and cultures”. But, within the so called ‘main’ or earlier corpus of their writings, one does notice the presence of the caste question. Ranajit Guha’s “Chandra’s Death” or Partha Chatterjee’s work on the Hadi community in Bengal are good instances of such pieces.³⁴ Therefore, one needs to move beyond the polemical perspective that criticises the group and its contributions by simply saying that they did not engage with caste. What we might benefit from, as I have argued and suggested elsewhere, is by asking how exactly they engage with the caste question.³⁵ Once we ask this question, we get to see some problems in the general framework that the Subaltern Studies adopts, particularly with respect to caste and Dalit narratives or Ambedkar’s writings. In the fifth chapter of my dissertation, I engage with this philosophical framework by critiquing Guha’s *History at the Limit of World History*. In my earlier work, I did adopt a similar methodology to suggest that the question of statism as the *locus standi* of history is undoubtedly the vector through which Guha’s discomfort with ‘official’ history is articulated and we must make attempts to see why it is not tenable to see marginalised constituencies as apologists of statism as they work with and elaborately (Latin *elaborare* meaning to work with or stay with) negotiate with the apparatus of state. I arrived at a question in that essay- is Ambedkar an unalloyed modernist? In this fifth chapter I further elaborate those anxieties of mine by looking closely into the process of Guha’s rebuttal of Hegel’s pedantic, official, statist history as he cites Rabindranath Tagore’s idea of ‘historicality’ as a radical response to Hegel and thereafter, offer my tentative suggestions on possible alternative intellectual frameworks to inform, contest and critique the Subalternist historiographies. Since, my dissertation is focused on how Bengal’s various Dalit communities work their ways through the corridors of state, nation, history, historicism and

³⁴ Ranajit Guha, “Chandra’s Death”, *Small Voice of History*, 271-303; Partha Chatterjee, “Nation and Its Outcasts”, *The Nation and its Fragments, The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013):173-199.

³⁵ Kalyan Das, “Subaltern Historiography to Dalit Historiography: Tracing Heterogeneity in Dalit Subalternity”, *Economic and Political Weekly* L No. 7 (2015): 60-65, accessed February 9, 2021, <https://www.epw.in/journal/2015/7/special-articles/subaltern-historiography-dalit-historiography.html>.

modernity as the hotbed that captures all these, it was important for me to read *History at the Limit of World History* neither entirely by dismissing Guha's criticism of Hegel nor entirely by unquestionably subscribing to Guha's suggestions. This helps me to attempt a 'different' (not necessarily a project that can be conveniently called an 'alternative epistemology') framework where anti-foundationalist thoughts of the Western philosophies (American pragmatism, deconstruction) and similar philosophies of the so-called East (Buddhism) can offer us a productive conversation to read Dalit histories. This, I tentatively suggest, is possible in Ambedkar's writings. Since, Ambedkar, as Debjani Ganguly suggests, initiated the Dalit discourse in 'modern' India (she compares it with the Foucauldian notion of initiating a discourse with examples like Marx or Freud) it is important to look at these philosophical, intellectual and ideological connections between Bangla Dalit narratives and Ambedkar's intellectual inheritances.

In the concluding section, I push it further by engaging with Dipesh Chakrabarty's notions of 'minority history' and 'historicism' as elaborated in his significant work – *Provincializing Europe*.³⁶ In doing so, I try to revisit his definitions of these terms and try to see what they entail for my present project- do these Dalit narratives suffer from historicist assumptions that Chakrabarty finds rationalistic and hence, problematic, in so far as they subscribe to modernity's temptations and Hegel's thesis on history? Do they offer something different if we imaginatively construct and reconstruct their negotiations with these registers of Enlightenment modernity in general or 'using history for the present' project in particular? With these questions in mind, I suggest that we engage with what I describe as "Dalit historiography" in terms of its contingent, ambivalent and heterogeneous nature. I call this a tentative suggestion as I realize that my archive, at any randomly given point in time, never

³⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000).

allows me to arrive at any easy conclusion, just as modernity does not allow us to have easy options- to either subscribe to dismissive criticisms of it in the time of postcolonial thought and to get back to a pre-modern romantic past without the vagaries caused by Kants and Hegels or to uncritically subscribe to the apparent glamour of the grand narratives of modernity. My dissertation is a result of my ongoing struggle with both these discursive knots and my suggestions apropos of ‘Dalit’ historiographies. These are the by-products of this intellectual and perspectival anxiety and the resultant inconsistency that we willy-nilly inhabit in our postcolonial predicament.

1.7 Methodological notes and ideological clarifications: caveats and disclaimers

Since most of these chapters engage with the writings by Subaltern Studies historians, this dissertation may seem rightly as another critique of the Subaltern Studies. This is indeed one, among several other dimensions of this work. But one must remember not only the polemical responses to the arguable ‘lack’ of engagement of these historians with the caste question that came from various Dalit activisms, but also consider the many criticisms that came from the so-called more ‘orthodox’ Marxist groups. Many such Marxist and more ‘economistic’ approaches that do not shy away from keeping those ‘metanarratives’ of the Enlightenment modernity as their political framework of academic activism or on-the-street politics, had started critiquing the conceptual and analytical assumptions of the Subaltern Studies group right from its inception. At times these more ‘Marxist’ criticisms came from former contributing members like historian Sumit Sarkar. Sarkar sums up my hints in this way:

[In Subaltern Studies] colonial cultural domination, stripped of all complexities and variations, faces an indigenous domain eroded of internal tensions and conflicts. The possibility of pre-colonial forms of domination, however modified, persisting through colonialism, helping to mediate colonial authority in vital ways, may be even functioning autonomously at times-for all of which there is ample evidence- is simply ignored. Colonial rule is assumed to have brought about an absolute rupture: the colonized subject is taken to have been literally constituted by colonialism alone. And so, Gandhi’s assumed location ‘outside the thematic of post-Enlightenment thought’ can be described as one ‘which could have been adopted by any member of the traditional intelligentsia in India,’ and then

simultaneously identified as having ‘an inherently “peasant-communal” character. The differences between the ‘traditional intelligentsia’, overwhelmingly upper-caste (or elite Muslims) and male, and bound up with structures of landlord and bureaucratic domination, and peasant-communal consciousness, are apparently of no importance whatsoever; caste, class, and gender divides have ceased to matter. (408, 400-429)³⁷

But this not a homogeneous cluster of ‘more Marxist’ or more ‘economistic’ or more ‘pro-Enlightenment’ groups, as my review of these literatures suggests. This has always had its existence from the interventions and criticisms of Javeed Alam to more contemporary works of Vivek Chibber or somewhat lesser known critiques like that of Vasant Kaiwar.³⁸ In some sense, I have been benefitted from many of these criticisms from various Marxist scholars primarily because of the conflicting yet shared roots of some philosophical underpinnings of the so-called Ambedkarite frameworks that keep informing and inspiring the primary texts or Bengali Dalit literary discourse I closely examine in this dissertation. For the convenience of discussion and for some workable clarity, despite many nuanced conflicts lying within each of these strands of thought or their innumerable particularities, let me mention these three groups I am referring here: a) the historians and critics who might be roughly clubbed under the more economistic, avant-gardist or simply ‘more Marxist’ group that share the commitments to various offshoots of the overarching Enlightenment values, b) the Subaltern Studies cluster (if not a school of thought) that have been initially more marked by various Marxist concerns not fundamentally dissimilar to many concerns of the previous group’s emphasis on ‘histories from below approach’ and then moved closer to what is broadly

³⁷ Sumit Sarkar, “The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies”, *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalisation of South Asia*, ed. David Ludden (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), 400-429.

³⁸ See David Ludden, ed., *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalisation of South Asia* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002); Vasant Kaiwar, *The Postcolonial Orient: The Politics of Difference and the Project of Provincialising Europe* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014); Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2013). Kristin Plys’ recently published piece offers critiques of subaltern historiography from labour history’s perspective. See Kristin Plys, “Subaltern Historiography, the Working Class and Social Theory for the Global South”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 54 no. 43(2019): 49-58 accessed February 8, 2021, <https://www.epw.in/journal/2019/43/special-articles/subaltern-historiography-working-class-and-social.html>.

named as postcolonial studies in literature disciplines, especially the kind of interventions that Michel Foucault or Foucauldian critics like Edward Said have made. In that sense, many, if not most, of the essays in the original collections of essays this group published and many other corresponding works have spent much of their time in, by and large, critiquing Enlightenment modernity. Since, Ambedkar is primarily perceived both by this group and much of postcolonial studies as an ‘unalloyed modernist’, this group’s estimations of both Ambedkar and much of Dalit discourse have remained restricted to what can be called ‘kind and sympathetic dismissal’. The last among these three is of course the Dalit anti-caste and presumably Phule-Ambedkarite activists and academic-activists and their polemical as well as more ‘academic’ discussions that often club the earlier two groups within the same bracket. It is also somewhat true that most of these Dalit articulations in recent times have, by and large, projected Ambedkar as a modernist and as a champion of Enlightenment values. My work simultaneously allows itself to be influenced by these shared, conflicting and overlapping questions, concerns and politics and yet, makes many departures from all the three groups in order to ultimately take a somewhat ‘fresh’ look at Dalit autobiographical texts, Dalit dramas, their literatures of activism and Ambedkar’s own intellectual oeuvre in order to think of various constructions of past i.e., Dalit historiography. In doing so, by following my ‘archive’ which consists primarily of many lesser known and even obscure self-identified Dalit cultural and literary narratives, I attempt to show that these narratives and cultures of protest neither completely (‘unalloyed’?) follow the coordinates of modernity (colonial modernity of subject populations as well as postcolonial modernity of what can be called ‘citizen-subjects’) nor do they completely subscribe to more ‘non-modern’ (histories of myth or experience) templates of resistance. Therefore, the ‘Marxist’ question for the Subaltern Studies group remains a valid doubt in this dissertation in the sense that ultimately there has to be or can be an activism or politics against caste and not mere appreciation of all

non-modern ways of being as viable alternatives to the vagaries of Enlightenment. Yet, this dissertation also does not give up on the critiques of Marxist groups that emerged globally through the interventions of Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* and his concerns specific to Southern Italy or Teodor Shanin (*Late Marx and the Russian Road* and Marx-Vera Zasulich hitherto unpublished correspondences) or Hayden White's emphasis on a more narrativized understanding of history or E.H. Carr's invocation of various doubts about the Rankean or Hegelian models of fact-based statist history based on objectivity and historical truth.³⁹ Surveying my fresh primary literatures, I argue that Dalit conceptualizations of past do speak to some of these concerns that Ranajit Guha and his team raised. These dualities and contradictions then pave the way for my implicit or explicit engagement with the usual polemical claims by Dalit activists and historians like Manohar Mouli Biswas or Chinnaiah Jangam on how Subaltern Studies historians have undermined the caste question even while exploring questions of subalternity in the South Asian context.⁴⁰ Let me quickly respond to these statements by saying that this is not a correct or justifiable estimation of the Subaltern Studies engagements with caste for the simple reason that any review of their works reveals a considerable engagement with caste, in Bengal and beyond, in many of their writings. Starting from Guha's references to various caste groups like Bauris or his essay on a Bagdi

³⁹ For an idea of Antonio Gramsci's influence on the Subaltern Studies project, see Ranajit Guha, "Gramsci in India: Paying Homage to a Master", *The Small Voice of History*, 361-370. For other connections between global debates in Marxism and the discourse of not purely capitalist and modern societies in Subaltern Studies project as well as an idea of the relevance of Vera Zasulich-Karl Marx correspondences, see Teodor Shanin, ed., *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the Peripheries of Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983). For the debates in historiography see E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2018), Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

⁴⁰ While Jangam recognizes the complexities of the Dalits in our postcolonial predicament and underlines the limitations within Dipesh Chakrabarty's work in *Provincializing Europe*, he also does not offer or anticipate even a tentative framework through Dalit history could speak more productively, especially in terms of its potential contribution in the field of historiography. His mere reference to various pre-modern and post-colonial traditions of anti-caste consciousness in Telugu society, does not anticipate such epistemic departures from the Subaltern Studies frameworks of critiquing modernity and undermining the caste question in Indian social reality. See Chinnaiah Jangam, "Politics of Identity and the Project of Writing History in Postcolonial India: A Dalit Critique, *Economic and Political Weekly* 50 no. 40 (2015):63-70, accessed February 10, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24482628?seq=1>.

woman (“Chandra’s Death”) to Partha Chatterjee’s work on Hadi community or chapters on Ambedkar in *Politics of the Governed* to Gyanendra Pandey’s book-long comparative discussion on Dalit and African-American autobiographical writings- this list is not a tiny one. This is a point that I have already tried to make in some the previous sections of this chapter. Yet, it is true that caste certainly does not emerge as a single-most important conceptual trope in their writings quite in the same way as in the Dalit discourse of more recent pasts and contemporary times or in the way caste based lived experiences feature in autobiographical writings, novels and dramas and how these texts offer us insights on Dalits’ conceptualization of their individual or collective pasts. Therefore, this work remains suspended in its multi-faceted conversations with all these perspectives I listed out and yet, fundamentally, this is a work that primarily concerns itself with various conceptions of past and history that Dalit groups in Bengal attempt through their many writings. Beyond that, it tries to not only make yet another demand for democratization of the domain of history (by including several groups across the world-aboriginals, African-Americans, Tribal groups, women, sexual minorities, ethnic or religious minorities etc.) but tries to see what this democratization might offer in terms of our very philosophies of history or our many historiographical concerns.

Chapter I

Thoughts on a hauntological Dalit Historiography: Namasudra conceptions of past in mythical and autobiographical narratives

“Marichjhapi, as cold fact and sweet lullaby, comes to me at unexpected hours- when the TV ticker screams that India will deport Rohingyas or a new story on Syria brings out that old photograph of Alan Kurdi yet again to tug at heartstrings. Even almost forty years after I first heard the story of Marichjhanpi, such references take me back to an unending farm with coconut and palm trees, ponds and paddy fields, and an abiding memory of a dark secret shared in whispers as a bedtime story. It’s amazing how the most horrific sits pretty with what is serene”. (*Blood Island*, Deep Halder)

“‘What is it Kusum’, I said, ‘What are you thinking of?’

‘Saar,’ she said, wiping her face, ‘the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit there helpless and listen to the policemen making their announcement, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, was worth less than dirt or dust. “This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for from people all around the world.” Everyday sitting here with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words over and over again. Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?” (Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (2004, p. 284)

2.1 Namasudra – a static identity?

Namasudras, in the undivided Bengal Presidency, constituted one of the largest ‘depressed classes’ or Dalit ‘untouchable’ castes in the region. According to the colonial enumeration program or census of 1872 and 1881, this community, mostly concentrated in the Eastern riverine fertile islands of the Bengal Province, had a significant numerical presence as landless agricultural laborers and fishing people. While, in early to middle of nineteenth century, this community gradually developed a sense of socio-religious as well as political cohesion through which they could assert themselves as a self-confident community with increasing material prosperity and social awareness of how they had been previously oppressed by dominant caste Hindus, in post-partition scenario this community faced enormous turmoil and lost much of its political and socio-religious pre-eminence. However, in the end of twentieth century, through the resurfacing of the caste question in post-Mandal

West Bengal (where these Namasudra refugees had largely migrated after the partition) and by participating in an Ambedkarite pan-Indian anti-caste mobilization or through the rise of Dalit/Namasudra literary and cultural assertion, the Namasudra community and their Matua religious sect have partially regained that socio-political visibility. During colonial times, as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's seminal works on the community suggest, Namasudras were greatly consolidated and they increasingly mobilized themselves socially as well as politically to initiate their communitarian journey of 'upward mobility'. Although this narrative of upward mobility significantly resulted out of their negotiations with the colonial bureaucratic establishment and through colonial and Christian missionary education initiated by philanthropists like the Christian missionary C.S. Mead, this coincided with an unprecedented awareness of their sense of belonging to a socially subjugated status and lower ritual rank in the agrarian caste society of Bengal. What is of interest here is the rise of mythical narratives that Namasudra socio-religious leaders like Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur developed, circulated, disseminated and popularized throughout much of the eastern Bengal in order to spread awareness and fuel a movement against injustice. The circulation of mythical tales that often describe about their decline from a glorious past to an untouchable present as a function of their inadvertent disobedience to the customary laws and rituals of the land, became the usual plot of such familiar mythical narratives. In such narratives, Namasudras sought to achieve multiple negotiating tools within the larger context of colonial modernity and its emphasis on the possession of historical knowledge by a community as a marker of social and civilizational progress: while, on one hand, they orally transmitted much of these mythical tales and hagiographical narratives about their socio-religious leaders, in order to explain their present social degradation and cultivate ways of bettering their chances of earning social esteem, on the other hand, they simultaneously sought to negotiate with the colonial powers that be in order to exploit the new legitimacy of

historical knowledge that the colonial state had started defining and determining. In other words, the narratives of how Namasudras engaged with the colonial state to change the name of their community from a more derogatory ‘Chandal’ or ‘Chanral’ to a more socially acceptable and less stigmatized ‘Namasudra’ was coeval with this spread of such mythical tales of evolution of the Namasudra caste community. These mythical tales, for Namasudras, served certain historicist purposes as they sought to explain their degraded status as well as catalysed the initial discursive moments to ultimately contest the social hegemony of the Brahmins, Baidyas and Kayasthas- the three dominant caste groups in rural Bengal. While historians like Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has emphasized their complex bargaining with colonial establishment and embracing of colonial and Christian missionary education or changing professional lives as the primary coordinates of their politics at the time of colonial modernity, these mythical tales and their worth as narratives of history and past make the otherwise simplistic narrative of Namasudras’ embracing colonial modernity more vexed and tantalizingly ambivalent right from the outset of this encounter.⁴¹ In his more recent work on Namasudra cultural politics, historian Sekhar Bandyopadhyay reads a wide range of autobiographical accounts by Namasudra writers- from the socio-political leaders like Pramatha Ranjan Thakur (widely known as P.R.Thakur) to living Namasudra/Dalit authors like Manohar Mouli Biswas and the resignation letter of the eminent Namasudra political personality-the first law minister of independent Pakistan- Jogendranath Mondal⁴². In all these narratives, Bandyopadhyay argues, one discerns a clear sense of ambiguity. Bandyopadhyay’s preferred term over words like ‘ambiguity’ or ‘ambivalence’ is

⁴¹ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Sage, 2004).

⁴² See Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, “Texts of Liminality: Reading Identity in Dalit Autobiographies from Bengal” (Kolkata: Rabindra Bharati University, 2014). For his exploration of Jogendranath Mondal’s resignation letter see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, “Caste and the Territorial Nation: The Hindu Mahasabha, Partition and the Dalit”, *Caste, Culture Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Sage, 2004), 191-239. Also, see Dwaipayan Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question: Jogendranath Mondal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

‘liminality’. Creatively deploying the anthropological term ‘liminality’, Bandyopadhyay builds upon the original usage of the term by anthropologist Victor Turner and argues that the bifurcated and multifocal negotiations of Namasudras with both-the colonial and the post-colonial state- resulted in an inevitable and yet, irremediable and irreducible ‘in-between’-ness i.e., liminality:

But here [in Namasudra/Dalit autobiographies] marginality does not necessarily mean peripherality, but liminality. And here we may draw some theoretical insights from Victor Turner who once defined ‘liminality as a state of being ‘Betwixt and between’ structures- it is a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise. The history of the Namasudras and the Matua sect that many of them followed could possibly be located within that realm of liminality indicating new possibilities of Dalit emancipatory transcendentalism and political empowerment. But we also need to go somewhat beyond Turner. In Turner’s thinking liminality was *rite de passage*, a transient phase from which new structures emerge. But I argue that Dalit liminality is not transient; it is a permanent state of being at the edges of structures. Or we may perhaps call it a defiance of structure. In a subsequent study, Turner acknowledged the ‘possibility of a life that is permanently contained within liminality [...] Instead of the liminal being a passage, it seemed to be coming to be regarded as a state’. Here he defines marginality not only as a state of betwixt and between, but also of belonging simultaneously to multiple groups, with no cultural of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity.⁴³

In the succeeding paragraph Bandyopadhyay elucidates this with greater emphasis:

Thus, as a Dalit he resides in a perpetual state of liminality that is between and between multiple layers of temporal and structural positions. This ambivalence is not ambiguity, but symptomatic of a continuous struggle to defy the hegemony of established structures.⁴⁴

Firstly, while Bandyopadhyay does conclude his essay on a rather positive note that recognizes a revolutionary possibility of change or a perpetuity of change as the primary marker of ‘Dalit subalternity’, the agency of the individual or collective Dalit/Namasudra self is relegated to a secondary or subsidiary passive space wherein their active and deliberate negotiations with colonial modernity and Brahminical hegemony is squarely downplayed. Secondly, his first textual reference point i.e., P.R. Thakur’s autobiography and his second primary text – Manohar Mouli Biswas’ *Amar Bhubone Ami Benche Thaki* are not just vastly

⁴³ Bandyopadhyay, “Texts of Liminality”.

⁴⁴ Bandyopadhyay, “Texts of Liminality”.

different from each other in ideological terms, they are also different through a huge temporal gap, with radically different politico-historical contexts. While Bandyopadhyay does recognize this, these differences are again downplayed in order to make room for his emphasis on liminality as the defining factor of Namasudra/ Matua Dalit predicament. Moreover, I must also stress in passing that, apart from these differences that I have with Bandyopadhyay's thesis on liminality, I deploy a different method of reading Namasudra self-writings/autobiographies i.e. I do not read them as simply 'archival resources' to write history. Instead, on one hand I raise concerns about the generic features of autobiography in general and Dalit autobiography in particular and link that with questions on the nature of historical truth value and on the other hand, I shift the focus more on the affective, emotive dimensions of these texts that defy the statist norms of historiography. This methodological shift is elaborately discussed in the last section of this chapter.

One notices a similar vein of thought vis-à-vis Dalit (and Afro-American) autobiographical narratives in Gyanendra Pandey's book *A History of Prejudice: Race, Caste and the Idea of Difference in India and the United States*⁴⁵. Like Bandyopadhyay's insistence on the perpetuity and solidity of Dalit liminality, Pandey discerns a perpetual tension in Dalit subjectivity as it gets reflected through Dalit autobiographical narratives. Pandey sees this tension in terms of how Dalit autobiographical narratives exhibit almost unequivocal subscription to what he calls 'the common sense of the modern' i.e., a belief that the statist domain of modern politics will bring Dalit suffering to an end and the simultaneous encounters with reality that constantly remind them of how this is far from reality. Dalits, Pandey seems to be arguing, are forever suspended in this hyphenation. Pandey sees this as the primary denominator of Dalit subalternity. Later, in this chapter, I will show how Dalit

⁴⁵ Gyanendra Pandey, "Dalit Memoirs: Re-scripting the Body", *A History of Prejudice: Race, Caste and the Idea of Difference in India and the United States*, (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 162-193.

narratives (especially Namasudra) do not necessarily suffer from this penchant for subscribing to the coordinates of modernity or statist understanding of history to negotiate with their precarity or fail to understand their precarity precisely in terms of such statist assumptive subscriptions to modernity.

Therefore, in Bandyopadhyay's enunciation of this complexity as well as in the aforementioned recent work by Subaltern Studies historian Gyanendra Pandey, such discursive location within liminality is the determining characteristic of Namasudra/Dalit subalternity. Notwithstanding significant omissions of important Namasudra autobiographies in Bandyopadhyay's essay, I begin this chapter by attempting to differently interpret 'liminality'. In other words, according to Bandyopadhyay, in instances like Namasudras' embracing of missionary philanthropy or colonial education, negotiations with the colonial government, articulations of social injustice and their positioning within the emerging/ newly emerged post-colonial nation states- there is one definitive feature- a *sine qua non* of their subalternity- liminality. The Namasudras are, according to Bandyopadhyay, forever fixated at the middle section of a *rite of passage* that they had sought to complete. Pandey would have interpreted the same narrative of subalternity as an instance of a frustrated and incomplete encounter with modernity-colonial as well as postcolonial. In contradistinction with this reading, I do not begin by assuming that liminality automatically implies a handicap or a limitation – an incomplete journey in such a rite of passage and secondly, I seek to understand the term 'liminal' as always already entangled with 'ambivalence', something that often acts as the fundamental feature of any politics determined by endless contingencies. As I extensively discuss in the concluding sections of this dissertation, such ambivalence, if not liminality, must not be necessarily perceived as a limitation that endlessly perpetuates a community's or an individual's subaltern status. Following Zygmunt Bauman's treatment of the word 'ambivalence' as an inevitable corollary of modernity, I keep aside this possibility

of contemplating ‘ambivalence’ for the time being. With this caveat, this chapter turns its attention to the mythical origin narratives of the community as well as the unprecedented rise of Namasudra/Dalit autobiographies in post-partition West Bengal. Apart from the spectres of the sub-continental partition that haunts these narratives of migration, caste oppression in refugee rehabilitations, precarious lives at the refugee camps, these narratives are often self-consciously written by their authors as ‘Dalit autobiographies’ - as autobiographies that not only speak of a differentiated comprehension of ‘refugee’ or follow the structural and essential features of the aforementioned Namasudra narratives of early twentieth century and the hagiographies on Harichand-Guruchand, but take their readers through complex moments of remembrance, trauma, dislocation, migration and inexhaustible retellings of particular moments in the Indian nation’s more recent post-colonial past. These self-writings and autobiographical texts often narrate stories that are not transposed as some sorts of bildungsroman of the nation. These are not written like many of the *charit* writings of colonial Bengal or the ambitious truth claims of Malayali *atmkatha* that seek to retrieve the fractured social past or more recent autobiographies of nationalist leaders that are written as micro-narratives or variations of the narratives of nation’s coming of age.⁴⁶ Set at the fringes of the homogeneous claims of the nation-states, these narratives of rootlessness are interspersed with experiences of caste exclusion, untouchability and deprivation. In more personalized moments in the narratives, these tales are often more focused on the private and personal experiences that are either indifferent or hostile to the public lives of nationalist modernity. By quickly surveying how the caste question in Bengal found a resurgence in scholarly as well as public political discussions of late twentieth and early twenty first

⁴⁶ For his comments on the relationship between nationalism and nineteenth century male *charit* writings, see Partha Chatterjee, “Women and the Nation”, *Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993). For observations on Malayalam autobiographical writings of the period, see Udaya Kumar, “Autobiography as a Way of Writing History”: Personal Narratives from Kerala and the Inhabitation of Modernity”, *History in the Vernacular*, ed. Riazuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2017), 418-448.

centuries and after briefly analysing how this community's narratives of mythical origin and their subsequent downfall in society's ritual status do not necessarily have a static fixation with 'liminality', this chapter turns to Bengali Namasudra autobiographies like Manohar Mouli Biswas's *Amar Bhubane Ami Benche Thaki*, Manoranjan Byapari's *Itibritte Chandal Jibon*, Jatin Bala's *Sikor Chenra Jibon*, Nakul Mallick's *Khoma Nei* and other related Namasudra narratives like Kalyani Thakur Charal's *Kyano Ami Charal Likhi* and Kanti Biswas's *Amar Jibon: Kichu Katha*. In these readings I try to engage with the contesting truth claims between the statist narratives that describe events like Marichjhanpi and the counter-histories that these autobiographies attempt to narrate. In effect, I seek to ask how such truth claims, if they are positioned on the other side of official narratives of statist history and its legal discourse, tell us the variegated negotiations of Namasudra precarity with the historicist impulses of modernity that are otherwise imposed upon them. In such a discussion, some of the concomitant questions are: what is the link between history's truth claims and autobiography as a genre? How do we conceptualize the murky terrains of memory in order to navigate in the domain of personal narratives? How do we think of the Namasudra narratives as tales of post-memories and refugee rehabilitation?⁴⁷ What is the relationship between the personal memorization of a past moment and the extension of it in the domain of the collective imagination of the community? If Dalit autobiographies share the primary basis of their canon formation process on the idea of lived experience of the author, then do we have an opportunity to have narratives that focus on the private and often extremely intimate personal experience as opposed to many nineteenth century autobiographies that narrate lives in the 'disavowal of the private'? In other words, through these aforementioned autobiographical narratives and semi-autobiographical narratives, despite their apparently

⁴⁷ I use the term 'post-memory' in the way it has been used by Marianne Hirsch in her work on the transference of memories of traumatic political events from the generation that directly experienced it to their next generations. See Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Post-Memory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

vexed status vis-à-vis historical truth value and facticity, can we gain insights that are to be located in the intersections of autobiography and history? How do these narratives blur the distinctions between the private and the public or the private and the community?

2.2 From Chandal to Namasudra to Dalit: Myths as history and narratives of past in the politics of the present

Although this chapter attempts to closely read Namasudra self-narratives that emerged in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries as the privileged site of historical thinking of the community, it is important to have a brief note on some of the myths of the community's origin as they circulated in the interstitial discursive spaces of Namasudra resistance against Brahmanical dominance in Bengali agricultural society of colonial times and colonial modernity's classifying and categorizing tendencies reflected in the enumerative processes like census. While many of these myths get proper textual mentions in colonial records and we can never be sure of exactly when they originated, these orally transmitted mythical tales that got reproduced in various colonial anthropologies, do get circulated in many of the Namasudra autobiographical narratives and semi-autobiographical novels with which I engage in this chapter. Apart from the thematic justification of how these origin myths of the Namasudra community tell us about their historical thinking, we can also think of their presence even within the narratives of Manoranjan Byapari or Jatin Bala as further reasons for briefly taking a look at these Namasudra myths and hagiographies as early entry points to ultimately think through the complex avenues of memory of the personal/collective past as a quasi-historicist tool in Dalit historiography.

At the outset, we must recognize that the beginning and rise in circulation of these myths of Namasudras/Chandals, as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay elaborately elucidates in his magisterial work *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-*

1947, happened within a broader socio-historical context of multifaceted upward mobility that the community witnessed. Secondly, we must also take a quick note in passing that their mythical narratives of how Namasudra community came into being and eventually gained the lowly social status or low ritual ranking often resulted in their communitarian demand for a more dignified nomenclature in colonial bureaucratic documents. This certainly does not imply that they formulated and circulated these narratives primarily for negotiating with the colonial rulers as might be apparently assumed. This is amply clear from Bandyopadhyay's book that documents how even colonial rulers often partook in the commonly held caste Hindu perception of this community as a lowly community fit for 'lowly' jobs in colonial jails and offices.

To continue with the first caveat, Bandyopadhyay's research meticulously shows how these myths of origin circulated at a time when the community was witnessing several social, religious and economic shifts. The so-called rise of the Chandal/Namasudra community in early nineteenth century eastern Bengal regions like Faridpur, Bakargunj etc. happened partly because of several religious movements that attempted to undermine the social conflicts and hierarchies between different castes. While these religious influences started with the apparent egalitarian outlook of popular Islam and later witnessed a sustained (but also often limited and frustrated) influence of Christianity through the proselytizing efforts of Christian missionaries, the most formidable of these religious influences was Vaishnavism, especially certain Bhakti enunciations of it. Although the Sri Chaitanya led Vaishnavite bhakti socio-religious movement gained much popularity among lower castes, particularly Chandal/Namasudra communities, post-Chaitanya bifurcation of Vaishnavite movement into a more orthodox branch of Gaudiya Vaishnavism led by Shantipuri Brahmin Advaita Acharya and a Sahajiya Vaishnavism led by Nityananda's predominantly lower caste followers- led to increasing popularity of the second vaishnavite order among Namasudra

people. While this influence of the Sahajiya cult had more direct and sustained status in shaping the newly found social dignity and confidence of the community, other contemporary ‘heretical sects’ had an equally significant influence. This period also witnessed the rise of the Kartabhaja movement in the vast marshy tracts of eastern Bengal, inhabited primarily by the Namasudras. According to Bandyopadhyay: “[...]Kartabhaja , a deistical sect which had repudiated idolatry and caste, had established remarkable influence over the Namasudras living in the swamp areas of Faridpur and north-west Bakargunj.”⁴⁸ These major socio-religious influences often coincided with other similar heretical movements like Kishori Bhajan Sampraday of Bikrampur, Keshab Pagal’s or Thakur Kesha Pagla’s sect, Sahlal Pir’s bhakti sect that combined personal devotion (*bhakti*) with spiritual emotionalism (*bhava*) or Darbesh Sai Sampraday of Dacca. According to Bandyopadhyay, these heretical sects had a pivotal role to play in shaping the narratives of self-respect that Namasudras were increasingly trying to uphold in order to cement their economic and social mobilizations in the nineteenth century:

All these heretical sects, which had profound influence on the Namasudras, sought to initiate what James C. Scott would call an alternative ‘discourse of dignity’ and tried to create an ‘autonomous social space’ where it could be asserted. This process also helped in the construction of the community as it involved a confrontation, though inarticulate or hidden, with its other. As all these sects sought to obliterate the distinction of caste, albeit only among their members, they constituted a direct threat to the established cosmology of power. And so, the hostilities of the high caste Hindu elites towards these deviant sects were not even thinly concealed. These sects were stereotyped as plebian, since no *bhadralok* was ever associated with them. These were considered to be exotic as their rituals and philosophical constructions were totally different from the tenets of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. And what was worse, these sects were stigmatized as assemblies of licentious low-caste people united to indulge in illicit sexual activities, with an ever-increasing number of bastards welling their ranks. In this way, the high caste Hindu *bhadralok* distanced themselves from the members of the deviant sects; but as a result, the latter developed a greater sense of cohesion and camaraderie. The lines of demarcation between ‘we’ and ‘they’ were thus more clearly inscribed on the minds of the despised and disprivileged.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: Namasudras of Bengal 1872-1927*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 32.

⁴⁹ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 33.

Thus, these socio-religious 'heretical sects' influenced the Namasudras in multiple ways. While these sects infused them with a sense of social cohesion through different everyday practices of religiosity like *kirtans*, *naam gaan* and dance, they also supplied the 'lower caste' Chandals with a sense of social esteem through which they could undermine the practiced ideologies of caste in their everyday lives. This also resulted in, as Bandyopadhyay suggests, in a socio-religious polarization with a corresponding sexual homology. While caste Hindus perceived themselves as a sexually disciplined and hetero-normative community of progressivism that was already getting informed by various branches of social and religious movements of the long nineteenth century 'Bengal Renaissance', the lower castes, especially Namsudras were being increasingly perceived as a polar opposite group that could be best described by the upper castes as licentious 'nyara neri r dol' (a group of sexually promiscuous people with shaven heads). However, this polarization could hardly sustain itself as a solid and cemented one and much of the revolutionary zeal of these 'heretical sects' that undermined caste and sexual ideologies of dominant social groups eventually became more ambivalent and as Bandyopadhyay emphatically suggests, it became largely conformist by slowly accepting the dominant Brahminical codes of sexual behaviour. In course of time, all these heretical sects got merged with each other to create the most important religious site for this constituency- Matuas. Bandopadhyay informs us that the socio-religious movement of the Matua sect that circulated and popularized many hagiographical narratives of their founding fathers like Harichand Thakur of Bakargunj and his son Guruchand Thakur as well as other mythical narratives of their origin, eventually tried to accommodate the dominant sexual/social behavioural codes of the dominant caste Hindus. Thus, later Matua injunctions on previously free sexual intercourse among members of the sect laid a greater emphasis on sexual fidelity. In Bandyopadhyay's estimation this has telling parallelisms with the way their mythical narratives of origin tried to negotiate with the dominant ideologies of caste. While

the earlier stage of the presence of these deviant sects flouted caste norms, especially the sexual ones, later narratives often tried to make sense of how Chandals/Namasudras became a 'lowly' social group and thus only claimed higher ritual ranks in the society through mythical tales of their origin; rather than completely undermining the very logic of caste/varna by a complete renunciation of the hierarchical order of *jati*. Although the Matua sect led by Harichand Thakur advanced a socio-religious discourse that contested the popularized and bourgeois Vedantic dispensation propagated in different ways by reformers like Raja Rammohun Roy and Sri Ramakrishna, according to Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, it failed to register a sustained radical ideological contestation in the linked domain of caste and sexuality as they simultaneously accommodated the caste Hindu sexual disciplining and increasingly claimed higher ritual status (at times of being Brahmins who were later degraded). This 'conformist' tendency is exhibited by Bandyopadhyay in his descriptions of the mythical narratives of the Namasudra community's origin and its past:

There were in circulation among the Namasudras several myths which can be fitted into a coherent theory implying their original Brahman status, which was subsequently lost due to various historical circumstances. One legend, cited in the 1891 census report and also cited by Risley, but not repeated in any of the caste literatures of Namasudras themselves, traced their origin from the son of the Brahman sage Basistha, who was cursed by his father and lost his caste for absolving king Dasaratha who had killed a Brahman boy by mistake. The other myth, which seems to have been more popular among the Namasudras themselves, connected them to another Brahman sage called Kashyap, who allegedly had sexual intercourse with his wife during her menstrual period. This being considered illicit in the *shastra* (scriptures), the son born of that union had to be exiled in a forest. He lived there with the forest tribes and eventually married a Sudra girl. His successors, in the course of their long stay in forests in association with the Sudra tribes, lost, just as predicted in *Manusmriti* (the most authentic treatise on Hindu law), all their Brahman traits, and some of them even discarded their sacred thread, the most powerful symbol of Brahmanhood. They came to be called the Namasudras and settled in Mulghar pargana in Jessore district. From this legend followed two other theories, one mythical and canonical and the other more historical. The first one argued that in *Manusmriti*, in 'eighth sloka in chapter ten', one could find reference to the Parasab Brahmins, who had originated from a Brahman father from his duly wedded Sudra wife. There was no doubt therefore that they were the ancestors of the Namasudras and since the seed must always precede over the soil, also as per *Manusmriti* ('10 ch:72 sloka'), they should be considered as Brahmins, as a *vyavastha*, signed by 28 Brahman *pundits* from Nabadwip, Burdwan, Hoogly and Murshidabad, actually stipulated. Moreover, and what was more important too, the *Manusmriti* (9'10-64-65') had also prescribed that such degraded people after seven generations would be elevated again to the status of Brahmin. The present day Namasudras therefore certainly deserved to be considered as Brahmins, it was argued, as neither losing that status was unusual, nor was regaining it against the *shastra*.

But why did they not enjoy that status even after being elevated to Brahmanhood in the seventh generation? This is explained by another story that refers to a historical figure, Ballal Sen, the legendary Sena king who reigned in Bengal in the thirteenth century AD. He is known to have fallen in love with a lower caste girl and forced the Brahmans to participate in a ritual ceremony organized by her. For fear of losing caste through such participation, the Brahmans of Mulghar paragana fled eastwards and to conceal their identity discarded their sacred threads, whereupon the vindictive king degraded them to the status of Chandala.⁵⁰

Since this last part of the mythical narrative, that speaks of the love affair between a caste Hindu king and lower caste woman, is directly taken from the caste Hindu socio-political reconstruction of a glorious past, Bandyopadhyay reads this Namasudra myth as an anti-caste appropriation or retelling of the caste Hindu nationalist myth from Anandabhatta's *Ballalacharitam*. Bandyopadhyay's reading, in conformity with his larger interpretive framework of 'radical protest later appropriated and compromised' or what I call the 'liminality model', reads this as an ideologically incomplete mythical narrative:

The story of this controversial love affair of the Sena king was taken directly from the high-caste Bengalees' own construction of their 'historical' past, in which the episode is referred to as the only regrettable lapse on the part of a king who was otherwise the ardent protector of Hindu society. The Namasudras used this story for a different social purpose. It historicized their fall from a high ritual status and also strengthened their claim to be reinstated where they were. But it did not, like the other origin myths, ever challenge the ideology of caste ranking which in their understanding incorporated both the ideas of being and becoming, and therefore justified their aspiration for elevation to a higher ritual rank. For this reason, none of these myths ever attempted directly to subvert or invert the hierarchized social structure, since within it rather than outside of it, they sought to define their own social location.⁵¹

However, it is interesting to note how many of the twenty first century or late twentieth century Namasudra/Dalit autobiographies deploy these mythical narratives of origin of the community. Many of these narratives start by narrating the birth episode of the author and then narrate the origin myths as if they are coeval with the personal self-narratives of the Dalit authors. But these retellings of Namasudra origin myths are also narratives of departure

⁵⁰ Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 45-47.

⁵¹ Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 47.

from their earlier enunciations and they more explicitly exhibit the wholesale rejection of the caste ideology instead of resorting to a more accommodative and conformist discourse of caste as Bandyopadhyay suggests. In Jatin Bala's autobiographical narrative *Sikor Chenra Jibon: Udbastu Dalit er Dolil (Rootless Life: An Account of a Refugee- Dalit, 2018)*, one comes across detailed accounts of Namasudra origin myths. In a section titled "Mul Sikorer Sandhane", Bala narrates the story of his birth and traces his ancestry back to a mythical narrative about his community. Interestingly, Bala's narrative does mention Ballal Sen even though one can discern a complete departure from the earlier mythical narratives documented by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay. Bala's narration, unlike the myths narrated by Bandyopadhyay, does not exhibit any 'ideological compromise' by resorting to a mythical, retrospectively constructed Brahman origin in order to raise himself or his community up in the social ladder of ritual ranking. Instead, Bala's narrative offers a vignette of his community's /family's past in terms of an ideological conflict between Brahminism and Buddhism. Such a mythical rendering of past has overwhelmingly obvious similarities with Ambedkar's interpretation of Indian past in terms of the ideological conflicts between a revolutionary Buddhism and a counter –revolutionary Brahminism. Ambedkar's ideologically charged retrospective reading, as I elaborate in greater details in the fifth chapter of this dissertation, had elaborate discussions in texts like "Krishna and His Gita" – a short acerbic narrative in his unfinished text "Revolution and Counter-revolution". Here one must also take a quick note of the fact that Ambedkar's interpretation of the Indian past in terms of this ideological conflict has directly contradicted the dominant nationalist interpretations of the *Bhagabad Gita*.⁵² While

⁵² Ambedkar's interpretation of the Indian past in terms of a philosophical and ideological contestation between Brahmanism (as the precursor to modern day Hinduism) and Buddhism is exemplified in the way he interprets the *Bhagabad Gita* as a 'counter-revolutionary text'. For some brilliant insights on Ambedkar's interpretation of the *Bhagabad Gita* and how it differed from the standard nineteenth century nationalist readings, see Jimmy Casas Klausen, "Sacropolitics: how to disobey sacred scripture (on Ambedkar's *Bhagavadgita*)", in *Disobedience: Concept and Practice*, ed. Elena Loizidou (London and New York: Routledge, 2013). Also, see Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, *Three Essays on the Mahabharata: Exercises in Literary Hermeneutics*, (Hyderabad, Orient Blackswan, 2015). On how Ambedkar identifies Gita as a 'counter-revolutionary text' and other related Marxist connotations of the term 'counter-revolution' as its unacknowledged philosophical debt to the

Bala does not make this reference to Buddhism in any deliberate, conscious ideologically loaded manner, this discursive connection is more than apparent. Bala starts this part of his autobiography by stating that the partition of the Indian sub-continent is not just a tragedy in the life of his Namasudra community (he prefers to call it race) but is a tragedy of the Namasudra world that he chooses to call “Nation”. He then goes on to narrate how the sub-continental partition is not just a geographical or territorial division; but a division of the Namasudra culture, language, customs, practices and worldviews. After this opening declaration marked by spectres of Indian partition, Bala goes back to the roots of his community’s origin. It is in this context that Bala deploys his mythical history by citing two emperor kings of the sub-continent- Maurya King Ashoka and the Bengal King Ballal Sen of the Sena dynasty. Bala says:

Before the Battle of Kalinga, Maurya king Ashoka had gathered a significant number of soldiers from the southern part of the sub-continent. These soldiers had blood ties with Ashoka. After the Kalinga battle too many of the local inhabitants of Banga (Bengal)-Bihar and Orissa had died and the whole region wore a deserted appearance. At the end of this battle, many of Ashoka’s victorious soldiers stayed back in this fertile land. Anthropologically these people of India are the Dravidian autochthonous group.

At the end of the regime of Buddhist Pala kings of this region of Banga-Bihar-Orissa or Bangladesh, there came the rule of Sena dynasty. Sena kings were extremely Brahminical. The infamous king Ballal Sen, immediately after taking over this regime, ordered that all Buddhists must get converted to Brahmanical Hinduism or else they will have to embrace death. Many non-violent Buddhists were thus killed by Ballal Sen’s soldiers in this period. In this miserable period, many Buddhists were forced to accept Brahminism to save their lives. Rest of the Buddhists chose to die instead of bowing down to Brahmanism. Some managed to save their lives by escaping. Those who escaped took shelter in Jashore, Khulna, Faridpur, Barishal, Dhaka and other such remote and dangerous marshy forest lands. Another group fled all the way to Tibet to save their lives. They fled also to save their literatures – “Charja Pada”.⁵³ (My translation)

Bala then goes on to reclaim various popular (often Lokayata in its literal sense, meaning popular) rituals of rural Bengali religiosity (to differentiate these customs and rituals from

revolutionary moment, see Soumyabrata Choudhury, “The Ambiguous Debt of Counter revolution to Revolution: Reply to a Vigilant Melancholic”, *Cultural Critique* 98 (Winter 2018), 293-319, doi: 10.5749/culturalcritique.98.2018.0293.

⁵³ Jatin Bala, *Sikor Chenra Jibon*, (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2018), 32-33.

organized religions)- Charok, Gajon or Deul as originally Buddhist.⁵⁴ He claims that most of the earlier Buddhists who survived the Sena dynasty's onslaught on them managed to reinvent their religious belief by transforming them into some of these popular religious practices. One of these new popular religious leaders was his ancestor Ananda Roy who, according to Bala, had established the Bala family. Jatin Bala cites the popular name of the priests of Charak and Nil Pujo – Bala- in order to justify his mytho-historical thesis. Unlike the mythical origin narratives that Bandopadhyay describes, Jatin Bala's narration, despite its reference to Balla Sen, does not reclaim an upper varna status either on the basis of worth or *guna* or Brahminhood to escape the caste oppression his Namasudra community has historically experienced. Instead, Bala emphasizes on an Ambedkarite reclamation of the Indian past wherein the origin of caste oppression is described through two antagonistic worldviews of Brahminism and Buddhism. Although Jatin Bala informs us that his name Jatin was inspired by his grandfather's contribution to battle of Buribalam where Jatindranath Mukhopadhyay, popularly known as Bagha Jatin, fought against the British empire, the narrative of *Sikor Chenra Jibon* is overwhelmingly a default critique of Nation-statism and partition. What one does recognize here is the shift- at the level of the narrative and the ideological impetus- from earlier mythological narratives of Namasudras' origin. While many of those earlier set of narratives of nineteenth century or early twentieth century did not explicitly show any radical shift from the Brahminical ideology of varna/caste as such, this myth of Namasudras' origin and its entanglement with Jatin Bala's own ancestry has no such intention of reclaiming Brahmin origin to cement his or his community's journey towards social mobility.

⁵⁴ To recognize some of these interesting differences between the everyday practices of religiosity and organized institutionalized religions in the context of rural Bengal, see Gautam Bhadra, *Eman o Nisan: Banglar Krishak Chaitanyer Ak Adhyay*, (Kolkata: Subarnarekha, 2013)

In Manoranjan Byapari's autobiographical narrative one notices a similar debunking of those earlier accommodative and compromising reclaiming of Brahminhood to move upwards in social ritual ranking. Like Bala's narrative, Byapari also offers a Buddhist re-imagination of his community's past and goes a step further as he unequivocally rejects the earlier negotiations of Namasudra community with the colonial rulers to change their community's name from Chandal or Chanral to Namasudra. Bayapari is more assertive in his dismissal of statist method of name changing or the necessity of mythical origin narratives as he finds both-statist and mythical narratives- utterly ineffective to address the persistence of caste in his/community's lived experience.

Manoranjan Byapari's autobiography *Interrogating My Chandal Life* begins with some telling words on human memory and how it operates:

Human memory is rather weak. So, I would not press you to remember the forgotten days. But take a look at the green field outside your window. You will see a bare-bodied goatherd running behind his cows and goats with a stick. You've seen this boy many times. And so, the face seems familiar to you. That is me. That is my childhood.⁵⁵

What follows is a series of similar paragraphs of his boyhood and youth that, according to him, speak to the otherwise fragile human memory through making those vignettes immediately present- the ever present of the reader who takes up his book and goes through those pages. The author immediately interrupts his observations on how weak human memory is by attempting to briefly but jarringly telling his readers about the 'absent-present' 'Dalit' that he has been through different temporal registers of his life-childhood, boyhood and his turbulent youth that closely intersected with the tumultuous era of the seventies which witnessed the rise of the extreme Left in Indian political and social scenario. This narrative style is elaborated further with vivid details throughout the autobiography and the initial

⁵⁵ Monoranjan Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, trans. by Sipra Mukherjee, (Kolkata: Sage/Samya, 2018), ix.

pages of the narrative serve as windows through which he later elaborates the everyday-ness and quotidian nature of his tale-chronicles of his Chandal life. These initial moments immediately transport the readers into a realm of the present and yet force them to have glimpses into the immediate or distant memories of encountering similar images of a 'Dalit life'. The familiar who is made unfamiliar through the fragility and indifference of memory, Byapari declares, can only be recuperated through his autobiography. To that extent, his autobiography is both his life narrative and an unacknowledged narrative of his assumed reader- his interlocutor and confidante as well as a synecdoche of the society that rendered him invisible and unfamiliar. Therefore, memory, although a 'weak tool' according to Byapari, is incited at every stage of this recuperative process. This is a process that is recuperative as well as redemptive for both the author and his reader. Construction/ Re-construction of a tale that is otherwise forgotten, rendered unfamiliar has to be retrieved and put back as an interruption and a limit of the hegemonic narratives of the presumably secular, bourgeois narratives of the urban civil society. That seems to be the project of such an autobiographical narrative. Yet, such a project is an impossible one to undertake: "Life has made me do so many things throughout my life, I wonder if I will be able to speak of it all even if I want to." The multitudes of his life are so variegated that they cannot be captured in a single tale. That impossibility is also reflected in the felt need to write multiple autobiographies depending on different chronologies of his life.⁵⁶

Like Bala's autobiography, Byapari also juxtaposes the story of his own birth with a longish note on the Namasudra mythical origin narratives he has grown up with. His note on such mythical narratives begins with a reference to his father's habit of identifying with the

⁵⁶ Monoranjan Byapari has written multiple volumes of autobiographies. His autobiography *Itibritte Chandal Jibon* came out in two separate volumes. The second volume of his autobiography was then supplemented by another autobiographical narrative *Je Katha Itibritte Nei*. Moreover, before the publication of these more explicitly autobiographical texts, he had written many autobiographical novels based on his life experiences. Hence, my hint at the apparently inexhaustible archive of his life that he is never tired of meticulously narrating in multiple narratives.

Kashyapa gotra. While some parts of the narrative do resemble the mythical tales archived and critiqued by Bandyopadhyay, Byapari's retellings make departures that are more self-conscious than those in Bala's tale:

My father always proclaimed his caste identity with pride. We are 'Namashuddurs of the Kashyap gotra', he would say. Though people of the upper castes called us 'untouchable' and spoke of us contemptuously as Chandals or chanrals, neither my father nor anybody of our community, would acknowledge themselves as chandals. They proclaimed that we were high borns and that the blood of the Brahman flowed in our veins. This, however, is not a claim confined to the Namashudras. Almost every community inhabiting the lowly ranks of the varna hierarchy, make similar claims. For each and every one of these communities, there is some folklore present that follows them to escape the polluted inferiority that the varna system imposes upon them. Such a legend exists within the Namashudra community too.

One of the sons of Brahma the Creator was Marich. Marich had a son named Kashyap, and Kashyap had a son named Namas. Namas Muni was married to Brahma's Manasputra (born of his mind) Ruchi's daughter, Sulochona. Twin sons, named Uruban and Kirtiban were born to Namos and Sulochona. A few years after the birth of his sons, Namas Muni went off into the forests to meditate. His meditation consumed him so entirely that he lost his count of months and years. Fourteen years passed in this way. According to the Shastras, all human beings are born Shudra. It is through the upanayan ceremony, the ritual through which a young man is invested with the sacred thread that initiates him into Brahminhood, given a second birth and becomes a dwija, the twice born Brahmin. But just as you could not become a doctor simply by being born into a doctor's family, similarly just being born into a Brahmin family did not, in ancient days, make one a Brahmin. One had to earn knowledge of the Brahma through years of discipline and study to finally emerge as a Brahmin. The first step in this long journey to Brahminhood was the upanayan ceremony which had to be initiated before the child completed fourteen years. Because of the carelessness of Namas Muni, his sons were beyond this age and thus they remained Shudras. Yet being the offspring of a Muni, they were worthy of respect and hence, the tribe of the Namashudras.⁵⁷

After narrating this long mythical tale, Byapari also attempts to explain the present degraded status by shifting from a mythical, *puranic* more remote past to recorded histories of the Sena dynasty. Like Bala, Byapari traces the origin of the lowly status of his community back to this period and reads the rise of the Sena dynasty as the fall of Buddhism. But here, Byapari's symbol of Brahminical power is Sura King Adisura who sent seven hundred non-Brahmin soldiers to Kanauj to bring Brahmins. These soldiers disguised themselves as Brahmins so that they could not be easily killed by Kanauj king Virsingha. These seven

⁵⁷ Byapari, *Interrogating Chandal Life*, 8.

hundred soldiers later returned to Banga but refused to give up their sacred threads and expressed their desire to continue as Brahmins. When Adisura agreed to this demand, this outraged the Namshudras who had long been deprived of their Brahminhood. Because of their defiance, Adisura punished them by perpetuating their lowly status. While, Bala and Byapari narrate these myths, there is certainly a continuation of the earlier narratives that Bandyopadhyay describes. But these retellings make too many significant departures to be simply considered as accommodative and less radical narratives of social resistance. As I have already suggested, these points of departure, ideological or in terms of narrative plots, are unambiguously asserted in Byapari's account *Ittibritte Chandal Jibon*. After briefly describing the historical development of the politics of naming from 'Chandal' to 'Namasudra' and after sketching the mythical tales of origin of Namasudra community, Byapari finds both the methods extremely compromising and ineffective in bringing about any sustained emancipatory discursive premise for Namasudra Dalits of Bengal. Declaring the futility of these mythical tales Byapari states:

This is all history. After the Sena dynasty came Muslim rule in Bengal. That continued for about seven hundred years. After that came the English whose reign continued for about two hundred years. In all these nine hundred years, the country made advances in the domains of science, culture, knowledge, and many other areas. The one domain that has remained unchanged is the mind-set of the Hindu varna system. they have not been able to free themselves from the mentality that allows them to humiliate or oppress a person for no fault of his. Nor do they want to free themselves.⁵⁸

If resorting to past in order to explain the plight of the present or what historian Dipesh Chakrabarty calls 'presentism' falls within a broader domain of modernity's emphasis on having historical knowledge as a marker of civilization or the broader definitions of historicist thinking, then there is also a note of dismissiveness when Byapari says – "This is all history". This tone of disdain is then simultaneously extended to the statist politics of

⁵⁸ Byapari, *Interrogating Chandal Life*, 9.

naming that Namasudras once indulged in and the tendency of claiming a Brahmin root to escape the stigma of the present:

That is why I feel the long-drawn out battle for a change of name was pointless. It is not a change of name but a change of heart and mind that was required. The Namashudra community has remained neglected and humiliated because that has not happened. We have no reason to believe that even an inch of dignity has been gained. I do believe, in fact, that rather than seeking to be included within the four-varna system of the Hindus and be servile to the varna Hindus, the Namashudras should have preferred to remain as the fifth varna. He or she was nobody's slave then. The Shastras call the Shudras dasa, servant. And servility, be it religious, social or economic, is not an aid to human development.⁵⁹

Biswas' narrative, unlike those of Byapari and Bala, does not elaborately discuss those mythical tales of Namasudra origin. It begins with detailed descriptions of Namasudra rural existence in colonial eastern Bengal.⁶⁰ Biswas's narrative is a fascinating tale of how he grew up in that bucolic space despite the usual denigration of his caste and its cultural and culinary habits. 'Pork eating Namos' were certainly looked down upon in that social habitus that Biswas had inhabited in the rural Bengal. But this never completely obliterated his enthusiasm for education and his struggle to get a foothold in the domains of modernity; nor did it entirely erase the little quotidian everyday blessings of an innocent childhood and early adolescence. This is a past that Biswas gets back to in his later years and then gradually moves to the episode of his migration to post-partition West Bengal. Although, unlike Byapari or Bala, Biswas does not give us a vivid account of the enormous plight of refugee rehabilitation, his narrative is no less haunted by the spectres of partition. The rest of the autobiography tells the tale of his hyphenated presence in an urban milieu of Kolkata and his embracing of an Ambedkarite Dalit Panther led cultural politics. What is important here is how his response to such perpetuation of social stigma has changed at an ideological level, despite the stasis or persistence of caste Hindu perception of him as a 'lower caste'

⁵⁹ Byapari, *Interrogating Chandal Life*, 11.

⁶⁰ Monohar Mouli Biswas, *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal*, ed. & trans. Angana Dutta and Jaydeep Sarangi (Kolkata: Samya, 2015). Also see, Manohar Mouli Biswas, *Amar Bhubone Ami Benche Thaki* (Kolkata: Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha, 2014).

Namasudra individual. While I agree with Bandyopadhyay's reading of Thakur's autobiography as ridden with glaring omissions and ambiguities and is thus placed in a space of liminality, I do not see how Biswas's account falls in the same category. It is certainly correct that upper caste Bhadrakol perception about Namasudras in the rural eastern Bengal survives even in the apparently meritocratic, 'liberal', 'progressive', 'caste neutral', caste Hindu dominated social space of post-partition Kolkata. But, Biswas's response, like many of his Dalit peers like Byapari or Bala, has changed fundamentally. This is why Bandyopadhyay's assertion on the common liminality in both the autobiographical accounts comes with an interesting caveat:

I think the commonality of the two lives we described lies in their profound, unacknowledged and yet permanent state of ambivalence. *Thakur's ambivalence is more pronounced and apparent*, as he is evidently and deliberately straddling between sets of binaries, such as modern/non-modern, Hindu/non-Hindu, sakta/Vaishnava, nationalist/non-nationalist, etc. And this ambivalence becomes more apparent if we consider his silences or what is omitted from his autobiography -i.e., his subsequent alienation and condemnation of the Congress and his unwillingness to publish or revise his autobiography that betrayed his past inconsistencies. He had joined the mainstream nationalism, but could not rise to the upper echelons of power because of his Dalithood and ended up a frustrated man; but still, he could not totally disown his past. Biswas too suffers from ambivalence. His present which is defined by the modernity of his government job and middle-class status and is informed by his post-Ambedkarite Dalit self-consciousness, is different from his past in colonial east Bengal- a past stricken by poverty, illiteracy and discrimination. But his past does not leave his present, even after moving up the class ladder, he realizes that he cannot keep aside his dalit self, as he discovers that he is not accepted as equal even by the most liberal high caste bhadrakol, despite his caste neutral achievements. He therefore decides to celebrate his past. He expects his future to be different- his sons and grandson would have a better life. But he also wants that future to be informed by his past and that is why he writes his autobiography-to tell his progeny the story of his difficult past, lest they forget. Thus, as a dalit, he resides in a perpetual state of liminality, that is between and between multiple layers of temporal and structural positions.⁶¹ (My emphasis)

While Thakur tries his best to erase those chapters of his alienation from Congress led nationalist politics or is not sure of being a Hindu or a Non-Hindu, Biswas embraces a Dalit identity that contests Hindu cultural and social appropriation and follows an Ambedkarite path that does not let him be apologetic about being a 'lower caste' man. This is a clear

⁶¹ Bandyopadhyay, "Texts of Liminality".

departure from the earlier premises of changing the name of the community or claiming a Brahmin identity to escape social stigma or to be confused about one's position in nationalist politics or to be ambivalent about one's socio-religious position. Contrasting Bandyopadhyay's reading of Thakur with that of Biswas, therefore, makes his interpretation of the latter's autobiography (in terms of liminality as almost a cemented space) rather forced (as is evident in his caveat in the italicized section in the quote above) and his reading of Biswas or his lack of engagement with Byapari or Bala, exhibit a limited familiarity with how important ideological departures have been made within the discursive space of Bangla Dalit literary movement that emerged in the late twentieth century.

These extrapolations from different Namasudra/Dalit autobiographies, therefore, tell us how variegated these narratives can be in terms of how they respond to the casteist socio-cultural or religious behaviour. Hence, I suggest that there is no permanent and complete resistance that we can and should look for. While late nineteenth century Namasudra politics found mythical origins of the community useful to make their apparently statist claims of changing their community's name look legitimate, their subsequent frustrations within nationalist politics and their turn to an overtly politicized Dalit identity or its assertion in the domain of literature- offer insights on subsequent changes in anti-caste politics in this part of the South Asian sub-continent. Unlike, Bandyopadhyay or Pandey, I do not think these ideological changes over a period of time simply offer us the eternal frustration of being placed in a 'betwixt or between space' of liminality. In the deployment of those Namasudra mythical tales of origin in the autobiographies Byapari or Bala or the Ambedkarite politics of embracing Dalithood in Biswas's narrative, we do not find a simple historicist hangover of statist modernity, nor do we see a clear submission to the Brahminical hegemony by claiming Brahmin status in a mythical tale and following Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, we might call this new shift in Dalit cultural assertions a process of Dalitisation (as opposed to a Sanskritization

model that Bandyopadhyay suggests).⁶² However, in order to have a broader and more comprehensive understanding of how these relatively recent Namasudra/ Dalit autobiographical tales or other related self-writings and semi-autobiographical novels offer us important insights on the deployment of history or how they engage with a sense of past, we need to see those multi-faceted processes through which autobiography as a genre mediate lived experiences of caste at the limits of statism or offer insights on how the autobiographical genre retrospectively reconstruct episodes in the past that are otherwise undermined (or even declared as events that never took place) in statist historical narratives based on archives, statistics and law. One such episode in the recent history of the post-Partition 'Namasudra past' is the 1979 'Massacre of Marichjhanpi'. But before I engage with how these self-writings offer us remembrances or memories of Marichjhanpi, it is required to understand self-writing as a murky and yet rich domain of how we think of the past. It is through some methodological insights from different philosophies of history and a brief description of the recent socio-political context of post-partition refugee rehabilitation, that we can proceed to various contested and contradictory 'historical' and 'true' narratives of Marichjhanpi of 1979. While the earlier sections of this chapter show the constantly shifting nature of Dalit politics through its heterogeneous responses to caste Hindu stigmatization of their community and altered retellings of earlier mythical origin narratives, we can now pay attention to some other important domains like Marichjhanpi that keep appearing in many of

⁶² This new 'Dalit' assertion, as opposed to different processes of 'sanskritization' that Bandyopadhyay has rightly identified in the older generation of Dalit texts and assertions, is best captured by what Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd calls 'Dalitisation'. 'Dalitisation', Shepherd argues, is posited against the sociological models of 'sanskritisation' developed by M.N. Srinivas and partly supported by other sociologists on caste like Andre Bataille and it represents those Dalit assertions that do not want to aspire for 'upward mobility' along the caste ladder and articulate an Ambedkarite (Shepherd would extend that to Periyar E.V. Ramasamy as well) politics. In my reading, Byapari's discomfort with Namasudra politics of renaming or Bala's retelling of Namasudra myths of origin are contemporary narratives that carry the stamp of Shepherd's idea of 'Dalitisation'. For a brief elucidation of this concept of 'Dalitisation', see Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, "No Democracy without Beef: Ambedkar, Identity and Nationhood", *Beef, Brahmins and Broken Men: An Annotated Critical Selection from the Untouchables* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2019), 33.

these Bengali Dalit self –writings and autobiographical narratives emerging since the end of the last century.

2.3 Namasudra writings and rethinking the Dalit past: literature at the limits of statist historiography:

As has already been pointed out, Namasudras in undivided, pre-partition Bengal was arguably the largest Dalit constituency of the region. In pre-partition times, Namasudras consolidated themselves, negotiated with the colonial powers that be and constructed their community as a considerably large political constituency. The rise of their Matua socio-religious movement led by Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur and the leadership of personalities like Jogendranath Mondal, the first law minister of independent Pakistan (i.e., undivided Pakistan) and an ardent follower of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, slowly made them a massive political force that neither the colonial establishment nor the Indian National Congress led anti-colonial nationalist movement could neglect. However, the partition of 1947 is considered to be a massive blow on the political as well as social clout of this constituency. Joya Chatterjee, the author of *Bengal Divided*, argues that this also damaged the possibility of inserting the caste question in the narratives of partition or partition studies as an academic discourse in South Asia.⁶³ In post-partition West Bengal, this community has seen some extent of assimilation and yet, their presence in the social as well as political lives of present-day West Bengal is hardly less precarious than other Dalit communities of the region. On one hand, their fight for legitimate citizenship continues through several political negotiations with the state and central governments of India and on the other hand, their autobiographical narratives capture an ambiguity of existence marked by dual registers of stigmatization- caste and the ‘migrant’, rootless, ‘refugee’ existence. The second status, as

⁶³ Joya Chatterjee, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

much as the first one, gets represented through many autobiographical narratives that Namasudra authors like Jatin Bala or Monoranjan Byapari have produced. While their writings speak to an anti-caste ‘Dalit sensibility’ of other regions in India, their nostalgia for a lost land in Bangladesh or their plights vis-à-vis post-partition ‘refugee’ resettlement determine the aesthetic effect of these narratives. In this second part of this chapter, I engage with this post-partition predicament of Namasudra lives through different auto-biographical narratives Jatin Bala’s *Sikor Chera Jibon* or Manoranjan Byapari’s *Itibritte Chandal Jibon* and semi-autobiographical novels like – Nakul Mallick’s *Khoma Nei* and Jyotirmoy Mondal’s *Sukhchand*. All these narratives, I argue, demonstrate how the liminal existence of the Namasudra refugees constitute a limit to the apparent claims of legitimacy of the nation-states of India and Bangladesh and how arbitrarily drawn borders are constantly contested through testimonies and narratives that defy the universalist claims of statist historical accounts.

The Namasudra community’s post-partition autobiographical narratives often begin with a repetitive note on the long silence or absence that mark their predicament in independent India’s socio-cultural and political histories. While the spectres of partition have long haunted many partition narratives either on the Bengal side of partition or on the Punjab side of the partition, caste has not been adequately perceived as an important factor in creating a differentiated identity of the refugee as the quintessential figure of precarity that was brought about during and after the Indian partition. Notwithstanding the notable exceptions like Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence*, ‘Dalit refugee’ and its differential status within the broader signifier of ‘refugee’ or ‘illegal immigrant’ have not received substantial scholarly attention. The Bengali Namasudra/Dalit autobiographical narratives that started emerging in the last part of twentieth century, however, changed this scenario substantially and irrevocably. While many of these narratives have been broadly

perceived as Dalit tales of suffering that are analogous to the lived experiences of stigma and suffering of Dalits in other parts of the country, these Namasudra narratives offer us a picture of double precarity of being ‘Dalit Refugees’. But these texts also offer a simultaneous rupture in the much discussed ‘myth’ that caste hardly exists in Bengal. With the rise of these narratives in the last part of the last century, many of these deeply held common assumptions (that Bengali refugee is a monolith or caste does not exist in Bengal) became more contested than ever. While the Left Front government’s last few years witnessed an emphatic emergence of the caste question in West Bengal’s politics in a way that is unforeseen in post-partition Bengal, Dalit/Namasudra cultural/literary activism offered what can be roughly described as an ‘alternative history’ of post-partition refugee resettlement and the perpetuation of the trauma experienced during or immediately after the partitions of 1947 and 1971 as the trauma resurfaces through contemporary political events. Discussing the cultures of political violence, Debjani Sengupta has recently summarized how Marichjhapi, as one such traumatic episode, almost suddenly resurfaced by contesting its long absence from refugee narratives on/from the region:

In West Bengal’s postcolonial history, the name Marichjhapi is almost a forgotten chapter. Few people talk of it, fewer historians have written about it. The reason for this was perhaps the presence of a large percentage of marginal communities and lower castes among the refugees who were sent to Dandakaranya and some of whom came to settle in Marichjhapi in the Sundarbans. Neither the elitist Congress ministers at the Centre nor the urban middle class of Calcutta had much sympathy for the Scheduled Caste and OBC refugees. The tragedy was that when a Communist government came to power in West Bengal, the underlying violent character of the ‘liberal’ nation-state did not change.⁶⁴

The alleged police brutalities during the Singur -Nandigram episode that, in many ways, sent a huge political blow to the Left political establishment in the state, thus also triggered the

⁶⁴ Debjani Sengupta, “The Forgotten Massacre of Dalit Refugees in West Bengal’s Marichjhapi”, *The Wire*, October 3, 2018, <https://thewire.in/history/west-bengal-violence-marichjhapi-dandakaranya> (accessed 31st March, 2020)

Also, see Debjani Sengupta, *The Partition of Bengal: Fragile Borders and New Identities*, (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

memories of trauma that Namasudra and other Dalit refugees had experienced after a few years of the 1971 partition that gave birth to Bangladesh.⁶⁵ It is worthwhile to note that the last few years of the Left rule not only witnessed the emergence of the caste question in Bengal politics but also the birth of the Bengali Dalit literary movement (along the ideological lines of Marathi Panther movement), that considered the ‘Massacre of Marichjhanpi’ as its most highlighted and pivotal event. Apart from the many Dalit/Namasudra autobiographies like that of Byapari’s or the semi-autobiographical novels of Mallick, Mondal, Jatin Bala’s long poem “Marichjhanpir Moyna” and many non-fictional archival documents on Marichjhanpi also got published during this time. One can prepare a long list of several such books on Marichjhanpi that emerged particularly during this period: Jagadish Chandra Mondal’s *Marichjhanpi: Udbastu Kara ebong Kyano?* (2002), Mandal’s *Marichjhanpi: Noisyobder Antoraale*, Madhmoy Pal’s rich and detailed archival work *Marichjhanpi: Chinno Desh Chinno Itihas* (2009), the testimonial accounts archived and edited by Pal- *Marichjhanpi: Nijer Kathai* (2011) or the most recently published English account *Blood Island* (2019) that consists of various testimonies and interviews of Dalit/Namasudra refugees. Among more well recognized texts, the publication of Amitava Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004) also joined this sudden profusion of similar fictional and non-fictional accounts on Marichjhanpi’s much contested history. Apart from the curiosity that one encounters by contemplating this sudden emergence of a long ‘forgotten’ event in the recent cultural and political space of West Bengal, one wonders how this ‘long silence’ has managed to survive for so long. However, there were a few notable exceptions to this rule of silence that otherwise defines Marichjhanpi in the interim period from 1979 to its remembered emergence in the late twentieth century Namasudra autobiographical tales, like

⁶⁵ Deep Halder, “Sakya Sen”, *Blood Island: An Oral History of the Marichjhapi Massacre* (Noida: Harper Collins, 2019) 103-115.

Shaktipada Rajguru's famous book *Dandak theke Marichjhanpi* (1980-81). But these exceptions like Rajguru's fictionalized account of Marichjhanpi massacre or some of the news reports of the *Anandabazar Patrika* that covered this incident are just that – mere exceptions. That is why Debjani Sengupta emphasizes upon this long silence that Marichjhanpi stands for:

*The silence surrounding the massacre was to continue for decades except for stray efforts that tried to expose the lies, deceit and betrayals that had come to signify Marichjhapi. Shaktipada Rajguru's novel Dandak Theke Marichjhapi (1980-81) is the only full-length novel in Bengali that talks of Marichjhapi with candour. However, it is also not surprising that this novel has remained out of print for many years and it has never been part of the mainstream literary canon in West Bengal. The violence around Marichjhapi was more than the annihilation of a people whom the state had disowned. It was the marginalisation of a literary work that had dared to expose the violent history of Marichjhapi and a production of a culture of silencing dissent. It was doubly ironical that when the Trinamool Congress was aspiring to power in Bengal, large hoardings about Marichjhapi had come up in Kolkata in 2009 promising justice to the survivors. However, the lesson from the massacre seems to have been consigned to oblivion and the cycle of political violence continues in the state through different semblances.*⁶⁶

But one needs to go beyond the apparent recognition of the fact that these various narratives broke that long sustained silence, or as Madhumoy Pal suggests, this long 'censorship' by the state government that had apparently suppressed the incident and stopped it from coming into public domain. While these narratives-fictional and non-fictional-capture poignant and traumatic events that occurred at Marichjhanpi in the first few months of 1979, most accounts of the state government of that time have persistently denied the extent of violence. While the Trinamool Congress gained much of the Matua and/or Namasudra votes in 2011 by exploiting the spectres of Marichjhanpi, the Left government's living representatives and their supporters have persistently denied all the charges.⁶⁷ They have done so by pointing out the fact that the police records do not exhibit

⁶⁶ Debjani Sengupta, "Forgotten Massacre", *The Wire*, my emphasis.

⁶⁷ For a note on how Mamata Banerjee led Trinamool Congress won much of the Matua and/or Namasudra votes by taking the confidence of Baro Ma, their religious leader, into their fold, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, "Postscript: The Namasudras in Post-Partition West Bengal", *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 247-274.

any such truth of ‘colossal violence’ on the Namasudra Dalit refugees and also mention the Calcutta High Court verdict that declared the region of Marichjhanpi as a reserved forest area that was not to be encroached by immigrants as per the Forest Act of 1927. While most available literatures from the Left keep denying its occurrence or downplaying the extent of violence, the Namasudra narratives are jarring reminders of the unimaginable violence that they were subjected to. In other words, this episode of Marichjhanpi, beyond this never-ending chain of conflicting truth claims on both sides, offers us a classic example of how historical narratives with state support and narratives of past based on experience and memory collide with each other. Therefore, recognition of this fact makes it irrelevant for me to engage with this never-ending quagmire wherein one simply wanders and gets confused as one thinks of the *actuality* of ‘Marichjhanpi Massacre’ of 1979. Most literatures sympathetic to the refugees have focused more on how this historically disenfranchised and stigmatised community of Namasudra peasant refugees got dislocated in the otherwise celebrated event of Indian independence and thereafter experienced unimaginable atrocities and violence as they tried to settle as immigrants. What interests me, however, is how they seek to legitimize their narratives apropos Marichjhanpi by writing autobiographical tales, semi-autobiographical novels and by articulating testimonies. What kind of Dalit historiography do we see emerging in these articulations? What are the coordinates of this collective as well as subjective remembering of a past incident that the state or any statist historiography does not recognize? Why do they not simply articulate themselves through non-fictional accounts and testimonial narratives? Do these fictionalized accounts of their experience of Marichjhanpi violence offer us insights on the very nature and construction of historical truth? How do we put these textual/autobiographical observations in conversation with the existing methods and schools of historiography and different philosophies of history?

2.4 Rethinking ‘Marichjhapi Massacre: Negotiating contradictory truth claims in Namasudra writings

A wide range of fictional and non-fictional narratives that have been published in the last two decades have all focused on the state sponsored violence in Marichjhanpi that started in January 1979 and continued till May that year. But ‘Marichjhanpi Massacre’ has a prehistory that directly connects it with myriad spectres of the partitions of 1947 and more importantly 1971.⁶⁸ After these partitions, a large number of refugees migrated to Western part of Bengal in newly independent India and were sheltered as ‘refugees’ in different ‘refugee camps’ across India. Manoranjan Byapari’s autobiography poignantly narrates this episode of post-partition refugee resettlement in West Bengal in camps like Shiromanipur camp in Bankura, Mana camp, Dandakaranya camp in central India and Malkangiri camp in Orissa. According to Byapari and many of these aforementioned texts, most Dalit Namasudra refugees were sent off to these camps, known as ‘PL camps’ or ‘Permanent Liability’ camps, located in the arid areas of central India. Byapari’s own experiences as a Dalit Namasudra refugee in Chattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, according to him, is representative of the fate of thousands of these immigrants from eastern Bengal. Since the Namasudras have traditionally inhabited the fertile riverine lands of eastern Bengal, surviving in these arid regions of Chotonagpur plateau or central India, also rendered them ecological refugees. Byapari’s *Ittibritte Chandal Jibon* also accuses the then Left front government of giving better camp lives to hundreds of caste Hindu Bengalee refugees in southern parts of Calcutta-something that did not allow any entry of lower caste refugees. According to these Dalit autobiographical narratives, this differential

⁶⁸ For a longer historical context of caste and partition on the eastern side of the sub-continent see Joya Chatterjee, *Bengal Divided*. Also, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, “Partition of Bengal: Revisiting the Caste Question, 1946-47”, *Studies in History* 33 no. 2 (2017):234-261. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0257643017717897>. (accessed on 31st March, 2020)

treatment of Dalit, primarily Namasudra refugees, reached a violent apotheosis at Marichjhanpi. Most of these narratives and many 'sympathetic' non-fictional accounts suggest that the Left front leaders like Ram Chatterjee had made several visits to the refugee camps in central India and promised them space once their party would come to power in the state of West Bengal. It is on the basis of these promises and due to the challenges, they faced in those arid areas that a sizeable section of Namasudra and other Dalit refugees returned to West Bengal and eventually found the otherwise inhabitable island of Marichjhanpi in the Sunderban archipelago as a safer place to survive. The island is in the remote cyclone prone part of the Sundarbans archipelago. The 'amphibious' nature of the island is not conducive enough for agriculture and the salty water cannot be used as drinking water. Despite such odds and the fear of Sunderban's wildlife, these Dalit refugees made several attempts to survive by means of collecting and selling fish, honey and forest wood. Most narratives suggest that they had built many small boats, had constructed colonies like Netaji Nagar colony and had established organized neighbourhoods with basic amenities like primary schools and health centres. As Annu Jalaias suggests, they did so without any substantial help from the state. But, contrary to their hope for a relatively stable life in Marichjhanpi and other neighbouring islands, Namasudra refugees were informed by the Left front government representatives that they had settled in a restricted area. Marichjhanpi island, along with a large quantum of adjacent landmass, falls in the category of 'protected/restricted area' under the Forest Act mentioned before. Annu Jalais narrates this phase of refugee resettlement in her book

Forest of Tigers:

From them (her acquaintances from Sunderban), and my father and his colleagues who were involved in building cyclone shelters in the Sunderbans, I heard about the island of

Morichjhanpi and how the East Bengali refugees who had gone to settle there had been ruthlessly evicted on the grounds that they were contravening the Forest Acts.⁶⁹

The then Chief Minister of West Bengal Mr. Jyoti Basu, in one of his open letters to the inhabitants of Marichjhanpi, informed them that, sooner or later, they were supposed to leave this island and go back to their respective PL camps in Malkangiri or Dandakaranya. In his State Legislative Assembly speech delivered on 9th February, 1979, Basu said:

Last year, in the first couple of months, a handful of petty self-interested people made countless false promises to those hundreds and thousands of refugees from Dandakaranya and other such areas and brought them back to West Bengal in order to serve their parochial political and other interests. Their so-called leaders did not have prior conversations with either the state government or the central government before instigating these refugees to come to this state after deserting whatever land and properties they were given there.⁷⁰

Nirmalkanti Dhali, one of the Dalit refugees from Marichjhanpi, in his testimonial narrative “Swadhinotar Swad” (“Taste of Freedom”), summarized this ‘official’ narrative of the state articulated by the Chief Minister in his speech in the state assembly. According to Dhali, Bose and his government went into some standard conspiracy theories to justify their claims and declared these Dalit refugees as ‘illegal immigrants’ who were engaged in anti-state activities. Dhali prepares a convenient inventory of such narratives propagated by the state government:

In the legislative assembly he (Mr. Basu) informed everyone:

- 1) They have conspired with some foreign countries to establish a new governmental regime in Marichjhanpi.
- 2) They are getting trained in arms and weapons
- 3) They are illegally selling off national resources
- 4) They are challenging the legitimacy of the government
- 5) They are destroying the reserved forestry of Sunderban.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Annu Jalais, *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics & Environment in the Sunderbans*, (New Delhi: Routledge, 2019), 13.

⁷⁰ This is a quotation from Jyoti Basu’s speech at the West Bengal Legislative Assembly that he delivered on 9th February, 1979. See Jyoti Basu, “Bidhan Sabhai Bibriti” in *Marichjhapi: Chinno Desh Chinno Itihas*, ed. Madhumay Pal (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2009), 77.

⁷¹ Nirmalkanti Dhali, “Swadhinotar Swad”, in *Marichjhapi: Nijer Kathai*, ed. Madhumay Pal (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2011), 32.

According to Annu Jalais, this fifth narrative that was based on an apparently ecological argument that put more emphasis on tiger and the forest reserve and the region's ecological resources than the human inhabitants in the region had some precedents in most of the colonial narratives on the region. Jalais argues that most inhabitants of the Gosaba sub-division (Marichjhanpi falls in this administrative jurisdiction) who reside in the upper regions of the archipelago often accuse the inhabitants of the lower islands of destroying the ecological balance of Sunderbans and their articulations were echoed in Bose's assertions in the assembly and can also be traced back to the colonial observations. Most colonial narratives on the region, Jalais observes, focused on the rich ecological resources, tigers and other such 'exotic' 'natural' life forms more than they spoke about the precarious lives of the local people. This, in her estimation, created a lopsided romanticized, exoticized view of the Sunderbans and thus legitimized any deployment of violence by the state on the people who tried to settle there:

The Sunderbans forest has always been a source of endless fascination. W.W. Hunter, writing in 1875, devotes an entire book to the Sunderbans where, after writing at great length about the forest and wild animals, he only mentions the people in passing, referring to a 'few wandering gangs' and classifying them after long lists of wild animals and plants. Greenough identifies Hunter as inaugurating a tradition that continues to this day. The Sunderbans thus has two parallel but segregated histories, one relatively well-endowed relating to wildlife; the other, rather sparse, concerning the region's human inhabitants and their transformation of a forested landscape into a cultivated one. Present-day studies of the Sunderbans follow the lopsided structure of their nineteenth century precedents very closely: fascination with the natural aspects of the Sunderbans but an unsettling silence on the social and human facets of the region.⁷²

When one juxtaposes Jalais' observations on W.W. Hunter with the statements of Jyoti Basu, one finds a direct connection with how, at a discursive level, 'people of Sunderban' have been perceived historically as less important than its 'fascinating', 'exotic' natural abundance. In his recent collection of the oral histories of 'Marichjhanpi massacre', Deep

⁷² Annu Jalais, *Forest of Tigers*, 5.

Halder shows how these views that put less emphasis on the human inhabitants of the Sunderban took different incarnations among the ‘official’ narratives of the representatives of the state. While most members of the Basu cabinet, Deep Halder informs, declined to speak to him on this issue, Kanti Ganguly, an important minister in Basu’s cabinet of that time, did agree. But, like that of Basu, Ganguly’s narrative underplays the importance of what happened in 1979. According to Ganguly, this incident has been presented out of its actual proportions and the number of deaths according to Dalit refugees and narratives that are sympathetic to them have far exceeded the actual number of deaths. As per Ganguly’s estimate, the death toll did not even cross ten. Amiya Samanta, the police officer who was assigned the responsibility of evacuating the Marichjhanpi Island, did not even respond to Halder’s repeated requests to speak to him. But, in another Bengali collection of testimonies on Marichjhanpi- *Marichjhanpi: Chinno Desh Chinno Itihas*, edited by Madhumoy Pal, Amiya Smanta’s first person account of Marichjhanpi is recorded. Samanta’s account also follows the narratives of the Left Front government’s representatives and ministers who either claim that there was no violence in 1979 or report few casualties when compared to the Dalit narratives. But Samanta, the then Superintendent of Police of 24 Parganas district, is more explicit and unequivocal on his emphasis on statist versions of history. Moreover, his narrative, despite its complete dismissal of several personal narratives of Namasudra/ Dalit refugees and scholarship on Marichjhanpi, concurs with the fact that many of these refugees were promised a place to live in West Bengal by the Left Front leaders once they come to power. But it is Samanta’s repeated emphasis on police records, eye witness narratives, ‘scientific data and evidence’ that is of more importance in our present context. Samanta begins his narrative by reiterating most of the ‘official’ narratives on Marichjhanpi- Marichjhanpi had foreign ‘elements’ who were running a ‘parallel government’; they were engaged in illegal

activities like usurpation of forest wood, *bheri* fishing and even extortion of token money from local small businessmen and they were illegally settling there by violating the Forest Act of 1927 etc. But he also bothers to diligently engage with some of the narratives that unanimously emphasize on the ‘colossal’ violence in Marichjhanpi Massacre. Samanta begins by referring to Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* that, in his estimation, has brought almost an international popular focus on this long-forgotten episode in his career. He then goes on to extensively cite and contest the observations of one of the first academic works on Marichjhanpi that was exploited by Ghosh to build his *The Hungry Tide* narrative- Ross Mullick’s *Journal of Asian Studies* article ““Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhanpi Massacre”, published in 1999.⁷³ The reasons for Samanta’s dismissal of these narratives of Mullick or Amitav Ghosh’s novel or his complete negation of a Dalit refugee’s self-writing on Marichjhanpi (Raiharan Baroi’s narrative) are premised upon his general disdain for the lack of ‘scientificity’ in these ‘pseudo-historical’ accounts. After annoyingly pointing out the fact that Ghosh did not have any access to ‘*protyokkhkho proman*’, roughly translated as ‘direct first-hand evidence’ about *what actually happened* in Marichjhanpi, he says:

In his novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004), written in the backdrop of the Sunderbans, Amitav Ghosh has used the efforts of the refugees to settle in the island of Marichjhanpi and their eventual failure to do so, for building the plot of his narrative. Artists and writers usually enjoy a great deal of freedom in their exercise of *creative imagination*. There is no responsibility to *truth (satyonistha)* in such an exercise. But the historian and the non-fiction essayist who write on the basis of some facts, do not enjoy such freedom of imagination. They have to rely on government documents and archival evidences to decide what is *true* and what is false. This is why events narrated in stories and novels do not enjoy the privileged status of historical truth (‘*oitihashik sotya r maryada*’). But even in a story or a novel, such distortion of facts of a recent important event or a historically significant event, should not happen.⁷⁴

⁷³ Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (Penguin/Viking: New Delhi, 2008).

Ross Mullick, “Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhanpi Massacre”, *Journal of Asian Studies* 58, No. 1 (Feb., 1999):104-125. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2658391>. (accessed on 31st March, 2020)

⁷⁴ Amiya Samanta, “Marichjhanpi”, in *Marichjhanpi: Chinno Desh, Chinno Itihas*, ed. Madhumoy Pal (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2009), 242.

Samanta's insistence on the scientific nature of historical truth, his reliance on government documents, his obsessive and repetitive desire to portray the Namasudra refugees as 'illegal immigrants' or 'illegal foreigners' or his reference to their settlements in Marichjhanpi as an exercise in 'parallel government' are all loaded with a disdain for the human inhabitants and an explicit fascination for the flora and fauna of the Sunderbans. While these utterances reinforce Annu Jalais' observations in her *Forest of Tigers* or inadvertently substantiates much of what Ross Mullick says on the entanglement of the caste question with the Marichjhanpi episode, they also offer us a great deal of insights on how overly imaginative literary narratives often put statist official narratives in crisis. It is this crisis to which I will return in the subsequent paragraphs of this chapter. Before I juxtapose these narratives from the representatives of the state with the autobiographical writings of Namasudra refugees, I must note in passing that there is one autobiographical narrative that does not entirely belong to any of these groups. This is the autobiographical narrative of the Left Front government's minister Kanti Biswas - *Amar Jibon: Kichu Katha*. While Biswas, a Namasudra refugee himself, does inform us about the caste-based prejudice that was rampant among his party members and documents his own humiliations as a 'Chandal' education minister, remains completely silent on the 'Marichjhanpi Massacre of 1979'. In his 'rags to riches' tale, that elaborately documents his enormous intellectual, academic and later ministerial achievements, there is not even a single distinct reference to Marichjhanpi. As I engage with the philosophical questions on the different methods of Dalit autobiographical narratives in engaging with individual and communitarian pasts, it will be worth our while to briefly focus on Biswas' 'exceptional' Dalit autobiography as I do in the last section of this chapter.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Kanti Biswas, *Amar Jibon: Kichu Katha* (Kolkata: Ekush Shatak, 2014).

2.5 From Sukhchand to Subol: Post-Partition Refugees and the ‘Unforgivable State Violence’ of Marichjhanpi in *Sukhchand* and *Khoma Nei*

While an excerpt from the same narrative appears right at the beginning of Deep Halder’s recently published collection of oral histories on Marichjhanpi -*Blood Island* (2019), Jyotirmoy Mondal’s autobiographical novel *Sukhchand* made its first appearance in 1983 (1389 of the Bangla Calendar year). In the preface to his book, Mondal states that this narrative tells the tale of his parents’ migration from eastern Bengal (East Pakistan in the narrative and now Bangladesh) to post-partition West Bengal:

[As I dedicate this book to my readers] I am reminded of my father Jagatbandhu Mondal, the hero of my tale and Promila Mondal, my mother and his constant companion in his silent sufferings.⁷⁶

Mondal’s autobiographical narrative, dedicated to those billions of east Bengalee refugees who lost their lives during partition, captures the trajectory of his uprooted family from Barishal to West Bengal and thereafter to Dandakaranya and eventually reaches a narrative apotheosis when this constantly uprooted family leaves Dandakaranya and moves to Marichjhanpi island in the Sunderbans to find shelter, only to get their desperate efforts violently thwarted during those ‘miserable’ days of ‘Marichjhanpi Massacre’ in 1979. Like hundreds and thousands of refugee families, Mondal’s family experienced the frustrations of migration during their constantly shifting lives of precarity in the Jogweswar Dihi Transit Camp near Burdwan or during their stay in the Dandakaranya Project in Madhyapradesh. While *Sukhchand* resembles other such Dalit autobiographical or semi-autobiographical fictional narratives in its vivid descriptions of everyday plights these Dalit refugees had to endure, it becomes a significant narrative because of its focus on recuperating the ‘whole truths’ of refugees’ lives and its search for what happened in

⁷⁶ Jyotirmoy Mondal, *Sukhchand* (Kolkata: Dana, 1983), 5.

Marichjhanpi. While Amiya Samanta puts emphasis on archival evidences, government records and geographical situations to contest truth claims of Dalit/Namasudra narratives, including academic works like those of Ross Mullick, Mondal's *Sukhchand*, he claims, arrives at the 'complete truth' of their lives by experiencing, remembering these experiences and by narrating these remembered and lived experiences retrospectively. The source of narrative legitimacy is located, according to Mondal, in memory and not in the archives Samanta mentions in his account. Mondal, in his prefatory note, says:

For three decades, West Bengal had forgotten Marichjhanpi. But now, in course of an uncertain evolution of history, Marichjhanpi has again started finding its place in newspaper headlines. It is because of this unanticipated return of history that I have been compelled to make Sukhchand surface again in order to narrate this otherwise insignificant but truthful life [of Sukhchand] within the context of the complete truth of the 'island of the dead'-Marichjhanpi.⁷⁷

While Monoranjan Byapari's autobiographical tale *Ittibritte Chandal Jibon* adopts the direct first person narrative mode of standard autobiography to narrate his experiences in Central India's Permanent Liability camps and in the refugee habitations in Bengal, Mondal's fictionalized account in *Sukhchand* offers, what Ethan Kleinberg calls, an 'overly imaginative' exploration of memory to retell a 'forgotten' episode.⁷⁸ While Byapari has no hesitation in admitting the murky, uncertain and highly selective, contingent nature of memory in an autobiographical tale, Mondal thinks that fictionalization of a directly autobiographical tale makes past more 'completely truthful'. Memory and its imaginative deployment in a fictional account are important for Mondal because of the way he perceives the inextricable relationship between memory and history:

There are only memory narratives (*smritikatha*) in this personal tale of Sukhchand's refugee life. Here, there are memories of happiness just as there are memories of sorrow and sufferings. *Behind every account of history there is some hidden memory narrative or*

⁷⁷ Mondal, *Sukhchand*, 7.

⁷⁸ Ethan Kleinberg, *Haunting History: Deconstructive Approaches to the Past* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017).

smritikatha. I am publishing this second edition of *Sukhchand* in order to bring the *brutal historical truth* in the lives of Bengali refugees to the public domain.⁷⁹

In this imaginative exercise in memory to get to the ‘brutal historical truth’ of Bengali refugees’ lives or to reconstruct the ‘historically true’ account of Marichjhanpi by exploiting *smritikatha* in order to bring this episode in the public domain, Mondal finds a parallel in the example of Russian Nobel Laureate Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*.⁸⁰ The parallelism between the two texts go beyond the apparent ‘similarity’ of narrative settings of the two texts- the free labour camps in the Gulag archipelago in Solzhenitsyn’s autobiographical tale and the ‘island of the dead’ – Marichjhanpi in the Sunderban archipelago. Mondal’s reference to Solzhenitsyn’s text has two more explicit reasons: a) Just as Solzhenitsyn’s work was not published in the Soviet Russia for a long time due to Stalin’s censorship, Mondal imagines, his text could not be brought into the public domain due to the long censorship imposed on any narrative on Marichjhanpi by the then Left Front government and b) Like Solzhenitsyn, Mondal feels compelled to tell his tale, despite many warnings from his friends and well-wishers who tell him to refrain from looking into the past and endangering his life. It is important to see how Mondal places a lot of importance on knowing the truth about this event in the past i.e., Marichjhanpi. Mondal recalls Solzhenitsyn’s words about the importance of narrating a past that is not easily available to many by remembering Solzhenitsyn’s reply to those who thought he would lose an eye if he looks into the past: “If you lose your past, you lose both the eyes.” It is this tendency to look into the past, reconstruct it by exploring personal memory in order to take an imaginative flight into the long forgotten or hidden past that make *Sukhchand* an interesting example of historicist thought. But Mondal’s apparent emphasis

⁷⁹ Mondal, *Sukhchand*, 7.

⁸⁰ Although Solzhenitsyn has written other major works of literature and has won the Nobel Prize for Literature, *The Gulag Archipelago* remains his best-known work till date.

on recuperating the past and to tell it in a non-statist mode is a significant departure from the modern philosophies of history where rational thinking and statist narratives become the mainstays of historiography. This non-statist nature is not only prevalent in his tremendous emphasis on lived experience and memory's recuperation of those experiences but in his disdain for all the statist norms of writing history that are otherwise valued by Amiya Samantas or Jyoti Basus. These apparent claims and declarations of Mondal in the prefatory note to *Sukhchand* is then substantiated by his countless references to everyday struggles and sporadic moments of happiness that Sukhchand, Ranga Bou, Aynamoti, Sachin, Gayali, Rupchand experience in their precarious quotidian everyday lives. Rupchand's *bhatiali* songs, hagiographic songs dedicated to Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, numerous references to the absolutely 'unnecessary' independence or its 'price' i.e. Indian sub-continental partition, Sachin's death, Sukhchand's nostalgia for his lost home in Barishal, police brutalities in the Jogeswar Dihi Transit camp, their experiences of being 'chotolok refugees', their everyday 'conflictual co-existence' with the tribal communities in Dandakaranya P.L. camp and their final struggle for life in the Marichjhanpi island – are all focused on a realization of past that privilege experience as the mainstay of knowing the past. But we must also remember here that 'experience', although a powerful contender for the older modes of historiographies where facts are emphasized can also become only another 'privileged' trope within historicist thought.⁸¹ But, as I argue more extensively in the concluding sections of this chapter, it is the mediation of those precarious 'lived experiences' that becomes the mainstay for realizing a moment in the past or for making it come to the fore as if narrating Marichjhanpi offers us not 'exactly what happened there' but offers us an *unheimlich* or uncanny moment.⁸²

⁸¹ Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience", *Critical Inquiry* 17, No. 4 (Summer, 1991): 773-797. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343743> (accessed on 1st April, 2020).

⁸² Here I use the phrase 'lived experience' in the way philosopher Sundar Sarukkai delineates it to distinguish such caste based lived experiences from other experiences that can be simulated in the lives of others (e.g., non-

Marichjhanpi, buried into the abysmal oblivion for decades, suddenly comes to the fore as a moment of rupture that puts other available ‘official’ narratives in crisis. In *Sukhchand*, the characters often engage in conversations that are profoundly dismissive about all scientific truth claims made by the modern political institutions like the state or contest official definitions of citizenship, refugee etc. In a conversation between Sukhchand and his students at the Jogeswar Dihi transit camp school headed by him, one of the students reminds us of how they were treated as ‘refugees’ and not as human beings and how this innocent, unselfconscious reflection of this boy makes the United Nations’ definition of a ‘refugee’ look banal:

---Mastermoshai, may I ask something?

---Yes, go ahead. Why won’t you?

---what is a ‘refugee’?

---why? Why are you asking this? Ok then listen. By legal definition that may be borrowed from the United Nations 1951 convention, ‘a refugee is a person compelled to leave his country of nationality as he feels insecure and is afraid of persecution of his life, belief and opinions in his native land’. You guys won’t understand this English sentence. This is the legal definition of a refugee. In reality, the word ‘refugee’ is an English term. Its Bengali meaning is ‘bastuhara’ or homeless. Those who roam around and have rootless lives after losing their homes. Like us. Have you seen those Baida/ Bede people? Those people who are snake charmers. They are also like us –rootless refugees. Like us, they also do not have their homes and their country.⁸³

The narrative of *Sukhchand* reaches its apotheosis as the family, like many such Namasudra/Matua/ Dalit families, is forced to return to the Sunderbans in a desperate attempt to find shelter. In this final section, more than the other parts of the novel, Sukhchand and other characters start taking momentary solace from Matua songs and poems. In many of these songs, Sukhchand or his friend Sanatan invariably critique the

Dalits). See Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian debate on Experience and Theory* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 33-37.

⁸³ Mondal, *Sukhchand*, 66-67.

very rationale of the sub-continent's partition. A prose paraphrase of one such song goes somewhat like this:

For this independence, east Bengalee refugees lost everything and forced to live in fasting. To provide these refugees shelter, they are forced to stay exiled in Assam, Bihar, Dandak forest in the name of refugee rehabilitation.⁸⁴

In a telling speech during the police brutalities in the Marichjhanpi island, Sukhchand, the fictionalized persona of Mondal's father, makes a scathing comment on the utterly unnecessary nature of the Indian partition and how these Dalit refugees were forced to leave their homes in Eastern Bengal in utter desperation and against their will. When police try to force them to return to the rehabilitation camps of central India (Dandakaranya or Malkangiri), Sukhchand retorts:

Surely, we can go back. We can go back. But you know where we can return? [Not to the rehabilitation camps, but] To our birthplaces, ancestral homes. Can you take us back there? Can you? Not only me or some of us, but all of us will go back. All of us. You attained your independence at the cost of our lives, isn't it? Why are you all worried if we want to get back to our own country? Tell us that first.⁸⁵

Such critiques of the nation state or a statist explanation of Indian independence or a criticism of seeing the Indian partition as an inevitable by-product of its political freedom, also find recurrent articulations in many utterances of different characters in Nokul Mallick's *Khoma Nei*. According the introductory note by Dr. Dilip Halder, a former professor of economics at Jadavpur University, Nokul Mallick's *Khoma Nei* was first published in 1979 in an abbreviated short story narrative in a little magazine called *Sangsaptok* edited by Halder. By drawing a parallel between the police brutalities during Singur Nandigram movement and those of Marichjhanpi, Halder's introduction to

⁸⁴ Mondal, *Sukhchand*, 118.

⁸⁵ Mondal, *Sukhchand*, 120.

Mullick's narrative declares the historical authenticity of *Khoma Nei*. Summarizing the plights of Dalit refugees in the Marichjhanpi island, Halder says:

Before the Left front came to acquire political power in this state, in 1977, many of the Left front leaders, including some their present ministers, had promised these dalit refugees that they would be brought back to West Bengal from the Mana camp upon their seizure of power in the state. But they shifted one eighty degrees after they came to power. Forget about bringing them back to the state, the Left front government's police and the left supporters brutally erased those lives who had come to the state after patiently waiting for a long time and tried to find shelter without any state help. A lively refugee settlement was turned into a crematory ground on 15th May, 1979. Indiscriminate police firing, lathi charging, boycotting, torching of their houses, killing and raping drew a violent closure to the Marichjhanpi episode. Almost all of those who lost their lives and lost everything were Namasudras from the eastern Bengal. These are the people who have provided for our food across almost the entire Bengal. The impotent and sporadic protests of a few leading persons of the society could not defend these poor lives. The central government run by the Janata Party had political support from the Left and thus they played the role of silent spectators in this entire matter; just as the present central government run by the Congress is a silent and passive spectator of the violent events of Singur and Nandigram.⁸⁶

It is this 'real' and 'true' history of the Marichjhanpi Massacre that, according to Halder, is depicted in this novel. If *Sukhchand* traces the lives of Namasudra refugees from Bakargunj to Jogweswar Dihi to Dandakarnya camp and then ends with the 1979 Marichjhanpi massacre, *Khoma Nei* depicts the violent incidents that happened in the island from January to May, 1979. To that extent, the narrative of *Khoma Nei* begins where *Sukhchand* comes to an end. But, for Halder, somewhat like Mondal, this is not simply a story of the precarious life of Subol and Mala-Dalit refugee protagonists who dream of establishing a stable life in the island and how their dreams, like many of their neighbours, are thwarted. This is, in Halder's estimation, more real a story of 'Marichjhanpi massacre' than proper non-fictional historical accounts:

This novel by Nakul Mullick seemed to me quite different from other such narratives of protest. This is because these novels are usually more focused on the story line and there is apparently no attention to truth as far as the historical contexts of the narratives are concerned. This is not the case here [with *Khoma Nei*]. The factual details of the Marichjhanpi incident are so intricately woven into the narrative of the novel that there has

⁸⁶ Nakul Mallick, *Khoma Nei* (Kolkata: Choturtha Duniya, 2014), 8.

not been any distortion of the historical context. It is, as if, the fabric of the story has only safeguarded the flow of events as they really happened.⁸⁷

Indeed, as Halder suggests, *Khoma Nei* follows the developments of Marichjhanpi of 1979 quite closely. In the narrative of the novel, most of the important characters, excluding the protagonists-Subol and Mala, were prominent faces in the Marichjhanpi movement. The novel is set in the island of Marichjhanpi where these Namasudra refugees have gradually built a settlement under the umbrella of Netaji Nagar Refugee colony. This refugee resettlement program is led by their leader Satish Chandra Mondal. Other important leaders like Raiharan Baroi, Nirmal Kanti Dhali, Arabindo Mistri, Rangolal Goldar are all real-life leaders of this movement. The novel also depicts several political leaders like Ram Chatterjee from the Left front to Kashikanta Maitra of the Praja Socialist Party and Kiranmoy Nanda. It offers detailed narration of important events that occurred in the island between January to May, 1979- the alleged police brutalities, references to assembly speeches made by leaders like Jyoti Basu and Kashikanta Maitra, visits of civil society members to the islands etc. While the primary narrative consists of these historically factual incidents and personalities, the intersected subterranean story of Subol and Mala also occupies a pivotal space in the novel.

What I find particularly significant here is not so much the claim made by Halder that this novel is the ‘true representation’ of these factual details, but how these facts are represented in the mode of a tragic love story between Subol and Mala. In other words, what could have been conveniently depicted as a non-fictional narrative like those of Nirmal Kanti Dhali, Raiharan Baroi or those testimonies from Deep Halder’s *Blood Island*, has been movingly narrated in the form of a novel on the ‘Marichjhanpi Massacre’. It is within this more fictive and imaginative dimension that we can locate some of the non-

⁸⁷ Mullick, *Khoma Nei*, 9.

statist utterances of imaginary characters of the novel. Interestingly, it is through these utterances that we come across some of the most emotionally charged critiques of the Indian partition that underscore caste as a significant category through which a refracted vision of post-partition refugee resettlement can be best perceived. Like, Monoranjan Byapari's autobiographical story, some of these characters persuasively insert the caste question in our estimations of the otherwise undifferentiated image of the 'precarious refugee'. While Subol's mother sees no merit in the Indian partition or finds Indian independence as completely irrelevant to her life, Madhab's mother loses herself in the thoughts of their life trajectories before and after the partition. As Madhab's aged mother keeps pensively looking at the roads in front of her post-partition shelter, those lost pre-partition days in the past appear like photographs in front of her eyes. She has been a witness to so many experiences in her life. Those lost days of blissful childhood and youth are all gone. She is reminded of their lives of contentment, if not of plenty. They never had affluent lives. But, in their riverine eastern Bengal, they certainly had enough rice and vegetables in their fields and fishes in their ponds and canals to sustain themselves. The different religious festivals across the Bengali calendar year and their many folk cultural practices would always make them happy. They used to celebrate *jatrapala*, *kobi gaan*, *kirton* and would often sing Matua poet Bijoy Sarkar's *bhatilai* songs. But that life of completeness, in the pensive recollections of Madhab's mother, has now been rendered rootless, fragmented and tormented:

But Madhab's mother couldn't understand how this country got divided and she suddenly heard two names of the two halves of this divided landmass- Hindustan and Pakistan. Her motherland, her birthplace was now captivated under a Muslim dominated country and as a result, communal tensions and conflicts got tense. Most of upper caste Hindu minorities took the sudden decision of leaving this country. But Madhab's father did not want to leave his birthplace and the crops that they had harvested. Moreover, they were also determined to stay back as they had the assurance of Jogendranath Mondal, their leader, who had become a minister (in Jinnah's cabinet). But the day even Mr. Mondal was forced to leave this country, they had no other option but to leave this country. Yet, they felt reluctance to leave behind their birthplace. But it had become unbearable. In '64, there

were new instances of communal riots and large- scale brutalities on the east Pakistani minorities. They had to leave their country with their bags and baggage. Madhab was a little kid back then. They were all exhausted after shifting from one camp to another in those arid areas far from Bengal. Their lives were under the threat of extinction due to poverty and ill health. They could not sustain themselves on the arid soil of the Mana camp and due to excessive toil, Madhab's father started suffering from a grave disease. There was no proper treatment and he had an untimely death. Then, after overcoming a lot of obstacles and dangers, their lives came to a full cycle in Marichjhanpi.⁸⁸

These remembered experiences of Madhab's mother poignantly captures almost the entire trajectory of the Dalit refugees after the partition of the Indian subcontinent. While many of their experiences of nostalgia for a lost homeland and innumerable everyday struggles as refugees are also present in many caste Hindu narratives that depict similarly uprooted lives, the precarity of their Dalit predicament is too large to ignore. Later in Mullick's autobiographical novella, we come across other perturbing utterances by Santosh Mullick and Satish Mondal that put their Namasudra 'untouchable' caste identity at the center-stage of refugee life. Santosh Mullick, addressing Ranjit Kumar Sikdar says:

Ranjit babu, these people are not responsible for the partition. They did not get shelter in their homeland. To escape from regular torture and to save the honour of their mothers and sisters they came here in West Bengal. But they did not get any shelter here and were thrown into the arid areas of Dandakaranya. They could not survive there either and had to come back to the marshy forests of West Bengal (Sunderbans). But there will be no space for them here. After India's independence this community will only be kicked and tossed like this and our great nationalist leaders will continue to play chess with them. Ranjit babu, you know what the truth is? These people are not Indian, nor are they Bengali or refugees. They are just sudras and untouchables. That is why they will never get justice. If they had been Muslims, they would have got the support of Islamic countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Arab, Israel, Egypt; if they had been Christians, they would have been sheltered by Britain, Germany, France, Italy and other Christian political forces. Even if they had been Buddhists, they would have got the support of China, Japan, Thailand, Korea, Sinhal (Sri Lanka), Brahmadesh (Burma). But these people are untouchables, they are orphans.⁸⁹

Later in the text, Satish Mondal reiterates this observation:

Have I done something wrong by bringing these poor people to this marshy land? Don't these homeless sudra and untouchable people have their rights to live? In eastern Bengal, they are religious minorities, in West Bengal they are untouchables and beyond Bengal,

⁸⁸ Mullick, *Khoma Nei*, 13-14.

⁸⁹ Mullick, *Khoma Nei*, 55.

they are just Bengalee people. Because of these threefold cursed identities, they have nowhere to go.⁹⁰

It is evident in these quotations that caste certainly played a significant role in shaping and determining the otherwise undifferentiated ‘refugee’ status as a monolithic figure of precarious life. But it is also important to notice how, through these remembrances and recollections-that think through individual and collective pasts- the Namasudra autobiographical narratives or these aforementioned semi-autobiographical fictional narratives, one comes across patterns of ‘thinking of the past’ that are not necessarily tied to a modern philosophy of history. Unlike, Samanta’s insistence on direct evidence or archival data and evidence, or in other words a Hegelian statist model of thinking of the past, we come across either a mythical or non-modern way of recollecting one’s past through the ‘untrustworthy’ tool of memory.⁹¹ These are narratives that are based on an individual’s experiences. But these are, one must notice, remembered and narrativized experiences. At an apparent level, these narratives put statist, official narratives of instance like Marichjhanpi in crisis. To that extent, these are narratives that broaden the domain of history by urging it and compelling it through democratizing it. Such processes of democratization are not entirely unprecedented in the tradition of modern historiography. In the last few decades of the last century, this focus on democratizing history as a discipline has happened through interventions like Hayden White’s *Metahistory* or E.H. Carr’s *What is History?* In the context of South Asian literatures and cultures, this scientific and statist truth claims of mainstream history have been questioned by historians of the Subaltern School- Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gyanendra Pandey, Partha

⁹⁰ Mallick, *Khoma Nei*, 70.

⁹¹ Here I have in mind the centrality of the state in G.W.F Hegel’s idea of history and world history. State occupies not just a central space in his philosophy of history but also in his entire philosophical framework. I am here echoing the criticism of Hegelian statist history (“no state, no history”) that is available in Ranajit Guha’s work. See Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). For a more extended discussion of this see the fifth chapter of this dissertation.

Chatterjee and others. But my concern here is not simply restricted to how these Dalit/Namasudra autobiographical tales or their semi-fictional or fictionalized avatars simply offer us an 'alternative' history through which we suddenly make ourselves aware of a history of the Indian partition seen through the prism of caste based lived experiences. This is certainly the case. But, for a tentative project of Dalit historiography, as I have emphasized elsewhere, it is important for us to recognize that these are narratives that are, b and large, non-statist and in that sense, do not fall under any philosophy of history produced by European Enlightenment's teleological models or templates. Moreover, one must also seek to engage with questions of narrativization, especially narrativization of experience. Since, lived experience plays a pivotal role in shaping the Dalit consciousness and Dalit *chetana* or Dalit consciousness is at the heart of the claims of canon formation of Dalit literature, one must engage with its relationship with the question of thinking of the past or thinking history. Thus, one gets an opportunity to see if the relationship between history and autobiography is simply about narrating lived experiences and we might encounter questions like: how far do these autobiographical tales go in order to make truth claims? Are these truth claims about one's own past or his/her community's caste ridden past more reliable than the official fact-based historical narratives? What is it that constitutes the reliability or truth values of these narratives?

2.6 Dalit Self-writings and a *hauntological* historiography:

It is evident from the last section of this chapter that Bengali Namasudra/Dalit autobiographical narratives defy either the template that Bandyopadhyay and Pandey see as defining the genre- liminality and subalternity (in terms of the paradoxes created out of their complex negotiations with modernity). This comes to the fore when we take into consideration the political and ideological shifts in the way many of these Namasudra autobiographies re-narrate the Namasudra myths of their community' origin. In other

words, that these narratives do not offer us any ahistorical, static template of ambiguous existence of Dalits that can be contained in the ideas offered by Pandey or Bandyopadhyay, is evident through the shift from Srinivas' 'Sanskritization' model to Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd's 'Dalitisation' model. My engagements with the contesting and irreconcilable truth claims about the Marichjhanpi Massacre, a common reference point in many of these Namasudra autobiographical narratives and my extrapolations from *Sukhchand* or *Khoma Nei* exhibit how these Dalit narratives do not necessarily follow statist paths. This second set of references from *Sukhchand* or *Khoma Nei* and how they contest Samanta's or Basu's 'official' narratives on Marichjhanpi prove Pandey's thesis on Dalit autobiography to be incomplete. As I have already pointed out, Pandey thinks that these Dalit narratives are often standard examples of our general and shared belief in modernity's ability to bring about equalitarianism as socio-political reality. Since, this promise of modernity, as Pandey rightly observes, often end up in frustration and a hyphenated assimilation of the Dalit professional, this produces a sense of ambiguity in the Dalit existential predicament. But my references to these Namasudra autobiographical narratives like Bala's or Bypari's or the semi-autobiographical fictional narratives like those of Nakul Mullick or Jyotirmoy Mandal, clearly show how they, at any given point in narrative time, express a faith in the promise of modernity or what Pandey call's our 'universal prejudice' and firm belief in the 'common sense of the modern'. As I have shown in an essay on the popular reception of Byapari's autobiography *Ittlibritte Chandal Jibon*, this common sense of the modern is more dominant in the ways his life narrative is presented as a 'rags to riches tale'. On the contrary, the Dalit texts, after a close reading, often exhibit a complete contestation of such 'universal prejudice'. This, however, does not easily imply, Pandey's thesis is completely unfounded and there is no Namasudra autobiographical narrative that follows his analytical schema. A perfect example of

Pandey's model of analysis is Kanti Biswas' autobiography *Amar Jibon: Kichu Katha*. As I have already mentioned, this narrative almost completely follows the pattern of a 'rags to riches' tale that Pandey has observed in many other Dalit narratives from different parts of the country. Biswas's narrative begins with a detailed description of how, despite enormous hardships, he became an extremely successful student with many accomplishments and after the partition, due to his extreme efforts, he succeeded to not only become an equally accomplished teacher, but became a very successful minister of education of the Government of West Bengal under Mr. Jyoti Basu's leadership. This sense of achievement and success, however, is punctuated by many experiences of humiliation. For instance, upon his appointment as the state education minister, Biswas tells us, many Left Front leaders and party comrades wrote letters to their leader Promod Dasgupta not to appoint a Chandal as the state's education minister. He also grudgingly informs us of how Basu himself had kept him in waiting as a 'minister without portfolio' for a considerable period of time. Therefore, his belief in modern education as an enabling experience was not completely successful to provide him with an unquestionably 'bhadralok' status that he had otherwise earned and deserved. What these observations imply is that there is no single mode of reading through which one can read these autobiographical narratives. Just as there are examples like Biswas's that justify Pandey's thesis, there are plenty of other Namasudra/Dalit narratives that do not fit into his analytical framework.

However, these narratives certainly provide us with enough insights to conclude that Dalit narratives and the ways they contest caste blind or caste neutral histories of partition, certainly deserve its due recognition. But these observations that I have documented in this chapter, leave us with two other significant concerns, especially in terms of how these insights help us think of a tentative model of historiography: a) the

‘historical’ truth claims these narratives make and b) the question of ‘experience’ that is used as an evidence for doing history. We need to ask: how far does ‘autobiography’ as a genre qualify as history, even if we accept those insights that tell us how history’s facts are also perspectival and standpoint specific? What is the basis upon which these narratives feel more trustworthy than facts-based histories? Is it ‘experience’ that constitutes the verisimilitude or truth values of these narratives? Is there anything more than the mere ‘evidence of experience’ that historians like Dipesh Chakrabarty or Joan Scott are weary of?⁹² In other words, should we simply assume ‘experience’ as the ‘evidence’ of history even if it falls within the normative structures of history as a discipline? These questions, as I show in this concluding section, push us into the direction of what Ethan Kleinberg calls ‘hauntological view of history’. In other words, I am suggesting that it is possible to think of a tentative project of Dalit historiography as essentially a ‘hauntological historiography’. But before I explain what I mean by ‘hauntological historiography’ let me briefly engage with the twin problems of ‘truth claims’ of history in the medium of autobiography and the question of ‘experience’ (as evidence).

Udaya Kumar, in his work on Malayali *atmakatha* tradition, speaks of the contested notion of truth value in autobiographical narratives in this manner:

The evidentiary value of personal narratives has always been, in positivist terms, highly unreliable. The fallibility of individual memory is not the sole issue here; problems of verifiability and the interests at play in self-articulation- both conscious and unconscious- make truthfulness in autobiographies a vexed issue. Ironically, the very features that make self-narratives unreliable witnesses to events in the real world can also make them interesting for the social or intellectual historian.⁹³

Indeed, the status of autobiographical narratives as a historical document is almost always already questionable. While, sympathetic literary scholars like Kumar might find that

⁹² Joan Scott, “Evidence of Experience”.

⁹³ Udaya Kumar, “Autobiography as a Way of Writing History”, 422.

very ‘handicap’ as an ‘interesting’ exercise for the social or intellectual historian, many, like Amiya Samanta, would dismiss them as only some interesting footnotes to the otherwise fact-based historical narratives. Self-articulation or its truthfulness, as Kumar rightly suggests, is always a vexed issue. This is perhaps why, despite the sympathies and love that Subaltern Studies historians have had for literary narratives in doing history, Dipesh Chakrabarty, as the editor of Subaltern Studies volume IX, was not sure of the ‘historical worth’ of an experience-based ‘quasi-historical’ or ‘pseudo-historical’ autobiographical narrative of Dalit-Bahujan thinkers like Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd. Chakrabarty and Shahid Amin, his co-editor of the volume, were not sure of the historical status of Shepherd’s sole contribution to the Subaltern Studies collective’s volume IX- “Productive Labour, Consciousness and History: The Dalit Bahujan Alternative”. Recollecting his editorial experience as a professional historian, Chakrabarty later wrote:

Dalit historians have not always cared for “evidence” in the way that we might expect them to if they were our colleagues or students in universities. Ilaiah, for instance, writes with a clear and explicit intention to eschew the use of “sources” and “evidence” and to base his history on “experience” alone (and of course does not see himself as producing mere testimony, either). In the essay he wrote for *Subaltern Studies*, Ilaiah, a university trained political scientist, deliberately set aside all academic procedures in order to claim for the *dalit-bahujan* peoples a past that would not look to academics for vindication. Ilaiah’s radical claim was that the existing archives and ways of reading them — the discipline of history, to be precise — had to be rejected if *dalit-bahujans* were to find pasts that helped them in their present struggles. He would much rather write out of his personal and *dalit* groups’ experience of oppression. In his words: “The methodology and epistemology that I use in this essay being what they are, the discussion might appear ‘unbelievable,’ ‘unacceptable,’ or ‘untruthful’ to those ‘scholars and thinkers’ who are born and brought up in Hindu families. Further, I deliberately do not want to take precautions, qualify my statements, footnote my material, nuance my claims, for the simple reason that my statements are not meant to be nuanced in the first place. They are meant to raise Dalitbahujan consciousness.” I still remember the debate among the editorial members of *Subaltern Studies* that preceded our decision to publish this essay that deliberately — and as a political gesture — flouted all the disciplinary protocols of history and yet claimed to represent the past in a series that was, after all, an academic enterprise.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Public Life of History: An Argument out of India”, *Public Culture* 20:1 (2007): 143-168. doi 10.1215/08992363-2007-020. (accessed on 1st April, 2020)

Chakrabarty's reference to Ilaiah's 'essentialisms', reflected in his contribution to the Subaltern Studies volume IX, has several important insights-both for the politics of identity apropos of caste and for the nature of historical knowledge itself. Chakrabarty places Hindu majoritarian worldviews alongside Dalit/anti-caste 'perspectivism' as he thinks these two in Indian socio-political context represent two increasingly assertive and analogous forms of historical claims that are directly connected to the 'dirty' electoral politics and the street life/public life of history. Second, echoing Joan Scott, Chakrabarty expresses his weariness about the indefinite demands and processes of history's democratization based on, often irreconcilable, standpoints and their particular experiences, often 'lived experiences'. Hence, his reservations about the easy binaries (read conflicting perspectives)-lower castes versus upper castes, blacks versus whites, women versus men etc. In the end, Chakrabarty thinks that general historical knowledge, despite our fairly justifiable and valued reservations for positivist conceptions of such a universal category, must continue to serve as a template for doing history (he imagines a species history as possible category in this trajectory) and this can be a good antidote to such 'experience fetishism' we see in instances like Dalit history or Australian Aboriginal history. I am not sure if we can conveniently place Hindu right wing's majoritarian 'Indian' worldview alongside Dalit re-telling of the past of this region as analogous categories. I say this for the simple reason that Hindu majoritarian view does not simply create a 'mythical' and imaginary Indian past without an aggressive assertion of Hindu nationalism and nation-statism. Despite the instances of politicisation of Dalit imaginations of the past, this, as my primary texts have amply shown, often set themselves at the limits of such nation-statism. That is to say, these are not simply different in terms of their conflicting historical and hence political articulations, they are also different in terms of their structural formations. In many cases, such as Byapari's autobiographical

narrative, there is no simple demand for an assimilation into the folds of Indian democratic nation-statism. Rather, many of these narratives are often placed at the limits of such political imaginations loved by the Hindu Right. I fail to see how exactly these are similar or comparable instances of ‘experience’ based ‘historical’ articulations. But, my reservations about Chakrabarty’s blanket statements about Dalit history and his complete indifference to Dalit autobiographies as an important site for thinking of the past (individual and community’s) have two other reasons. These are reasons that are located in the conjoined ideas of what I call ‘affective reliability’ of these ‘overtly imaginative’ and ‘literary’ narratives of the past. The second proposition comes as a response to both Joan Scott and Chakrabarty who have expressed reservations about making ‘experience’ foundational in doing history. In my reading, Chakrabarty rightly thinks that merely substituting facts based Hegelian template of doing history with ‘experience’ based perspectivism does not have any radical transformation or bearing upon the very discourse of ‘historical knowledge’. Here, I propose a conceptualization of what call ‘burden of experience’. It is through these two entangled registers that I start to imagine, following Kleinberg, a ‘hauntological approach to history.

It is through my engagements with the conflicting perspectives on Marichjhanpi that I come to what I call ‘affective reliability’. Affective reliability, in its fundamental operative axiom is not simply based on raw experience but it, once narrativized and mediated through memory’s uncertain yet emotionally charged terrains, achieves a reliability that contests history’s statist scientific facticity and its claimed objective certainty. Dalit lived experience, if that is the very basis of the canon formation of the so-called Dalit literature, supplies these autobiographical narratives with a sense of reliability that does not get either articulated or registered within the discursive space of rational history but gets traced, in its intractability, in those interstitial spaces where Dalit life experiences and their emotionally charged

representations lay bare the certainties of a Hegelian model of history. These narratives do not construct their verisimilitude by narrating Marichjhanpi as if it is a thing of the past nor does it read the episode as if it is to be remembered solely or primarily in terms of its relevance for the present time or its electoral politics- or a historicist presentism. What these tales do instead is that they narrate this episode as if it is immediate and thus renders it one among many such possible imaginations of the past event. Therefore, when these narratives claim to be based on true incidents and truer than the government's data and archives, they do so on the related and simultaneous construction of verisimilitude of affective reliability and narrative representation that mediate lived experiences. What is worrying here is an implied sense of celebration of experience as the dominant mode of history. This, as Chakrabarty suggests becomes a politically violent terrain. In an analogous manner, even the right-wing ideologies might make similar truth claims and justify whatever they narrate as true on the basis of similar tools and methods. However, we must notice that such right-wing narratives and their majoritarian truth claims might apparently challenge statist rational narratives. But, as I have suggested already, in reality they seek to become overarching metanarratives that seek to falsify other narratives by merging themselves with occupying state power. We do not have to unquestionably accept either the Hegelian spirit with which a Jadunath Sarkar did history nor do we have to fetishize experience to the extent that everything looks justifiable from that point of view. What we can do, instead, is to look at how experience can create spaces to contest the first (statist narratives) and also realize that in turn, cannot become a metanarrative precisely because it is quotidian and phenomenological, experiential and emotive, intuitive and contingent, uncertain and fallible. Marichjhanpi, for me, is an episode that is forever lost to all of us. All the narratives that I have engaged with have tried to make sense of it, that is, to construct a meaning of it on the cemented and dogmatic assumption that it is knowable as truth is knowable or on the basis of an assumption that this past can be

sharply differentiated from the present or the future. But, in essence, Marichjhanpi, like an aberration, a ghost is both a thing/event of the past that makes an untimely presence in the present. It haunts us in an uncanny way. It has lied buried into 'oblivion' (remember Jyotirmoy Mondal's reference to this 'long forgotten' incident or Debjani Sengupta's reference to 'long silence') only to resurface and disrupt standard narratives of Amiya Samantas and Jyoti Basus. Notwithstanding the apparent truth claims that are made by Dalit activists on the basis of their lived experiences, like Kancha Ilaiah's 'evidence of experience' (to borrow Joan Scott's phrase), one needs to understand these Dalit autobiographical narratives in terms of their *hauntological* values, that is, how these narratives make 'return of the repressed' happen. In other words, it is not so important to consider experience as the ultimate challenger of fact-based history. But experience, past experience in particular, once recollected and narrativized or mediated through linguistic articulations in literary texts or in articulations with overly imaginative ethos, can make way for 'possible pasts' to emerge. Thus, it can make space for letting the buried make an appearance not to pretend that the ghost is not the ghost but the only ultimate reality. But the ghost appears only to put cemented and certain articulations of an event in turmoil. In other words, ghosts appear as ghosts. There is a rupture, an interruption. Ethan Kleinberg puts it succinctly in his book

Haunting History:

On these [haunted] grounds the ghost or specter *begins by coming back*, as did the ghost of Hamlet. "Looks it not like the king?", asks Bernardo, to which Horatio replies, "Most like it: it harrows me with fear and wonder" (1.1). Indeed, Derrida might characterize the inhabitants of Sleepy Hollow as "attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead" in an effort to tame the haunting past. This is, in any event, what I think most conventional historians do, ontologize the remains of the past to make them present by assigning them to a specific location in space and time that is, in principle, observable and as such, fixed and immutable. No ghosts here. No dead fathers on the ramparts or headless horsemen. No hauntology or latent ontology: just the facts. On such a reading- and as we have seen, this is the conventional historian's reading-time is never out of joint, and assuming one has the right methodological tools, one can master the past and recount it in the form of a realist narrative.

But such a narrative cannot account for the latent ontology of the past or the ways that past possibilities condition our possible pasts. What I mean by this is that our knowledge of

the past is conditioned by what presents itself to us both in terms of its remains and in terms of our reception. The limits of what we are willing to accept as “past possibles” conditions what we are willing to accept as possible pasts. That which lies beyond this realm appears to us as simply impossible insofar it is a remainder of a different time and place, and its untimely presence disturbs us. *The latent past is not the impossible; it was possible, and it did happen, though perhaps it has not been rendered inconceivable or unimaginable and thus exiled beyond the realm of what now appears possible. And when what lies latent appears, returns, history is haunted and we are confronted with the possibility that our understanding of the past is polysemic and contradictory. It is not what we tell it to be. Any partial past may be one possible past to be sure but been suppressed, effaced, lost, or forgotten, and these are the ghosts and specters that haunt us in the present.*⁹⁵

The project of Dalit historiography, if any, is not to be *only* embedded in its apparent historicist claims that focus on knowing an otherwise irretrievable past for engendering the identitarian politics of /in the present. It must, I argue, be traced in how it enables a spectral experience of the past or how it makes ghosts of pasts appear untimely in the present. These Dalit autobiographical accounts might be making truth claims of their own. But they essentially expose how certain ‘possible pasts’ have been buried for long or have been effaced.

These notes on spectral pasts or possible but buried pasts and the affective reliability that Dalit narratives bring about in us as readers of these texts, lead me to make my second proposition on the ‘burden of experience’ one comes across in these tales. In contradistinction with Joan Scott’s emphasis on ‘the evidence of experience’, I propose the ‘burden of experience’ as the mainstay of Dalit or other such minoritized autobiographical narratives. At times these are articulations by ‘amateur historians’ who think of the past as a repository of sensible causes and possible explanations for explaining away the plights of the present. To that extent these are, in essence, articulations within the larger Enlightenment modernity’s insistence on knowing and having one’s history as a marker of civilizational advancement. The only difference, however, is that these are more ontological concerns than civilizational worries. In case of Dalit / Namasudra autobiographies, there is a certain felt compulsion on

⁹⁵ Kleinberg, *Haunting History*, 137-138. Emphasis mine.

the Dalit autobiographer to correct the standardized and dominant historical narratives that concern their lives at personal or communitarian levels. Thus, in this process, the hegemonic claims of such narratives are rendered merely dominant and therefore, contestable. But we must make efforts to understand these narratives beyond these correctives, revisionist and therefore historicist efforts in order to take note of what I call the 'burden of experience'. At apparent levels, as Joan Scott suggests and Kancha Ilaiah's contribution to Subaltern Studies substantiates, these articulations imply that experience is endowed with an evidentiary value. But there is also a sense of burden and compulsion that a Dalit autobiographer feels forced to narrate-as if, experiences of humiliation, discrimination and suffering and the retrospective remembrances are all that they are left with. It is this 'burden of experience' and not so much the evidentiary dimension of experience that is often the source of these narratives' truth claims, if any. It is in this sense that the ghosts like Marichjhanpi emerge to put 'past possibles' back to the domain of contestation of standardized historical narratives in order to render the apparitions of caste traceable. But, taking Scott's apprehensions about putting the category of 'experience' at the pedestal of historiography's foundation seriously, one must understand 'Dalit experience' as an intersectional and entangled construction. The 'Dalit autobiographical narratives' with which I engage here do make apparent ideological claims based on a presumed homogeneous idea of 'experience' as something that not only democratizes the discursive domain of historiography by destabilizing its rationalist foundations but also provides us with direct, immediate and hence, unmediated access to truth. Indeed, in my numerous field trips to different parts of West Bengal during this doctoral research and my informal conversations with Dalit activists have often come up with assertions that claim unalloyed truth that emerges directly out of experiences. Thus, these claims, while contesting the Hegelian impulses of historical thought, have, in turn, put 'experience' at a foundational level. Thus, simple democratization of history, for me, is only

the apparent phenomena. What perhaps lies at slightly dormant position is how experience itself is made to perform the role facts in previous 'elite' historiographies. Also, during my conversations with several fellow academics working on caste in Bengal or Dalit literature in Bengal have often made informal observations about how caste is not very prominently articulated in these so-called Dalit autobiographies in Bangla. What we perhaps need to recognize here is the multifaceted and multifarious, intersectional ways through which caste identity or any identity is forged, constructed and thereafter mediated or articulated through writing. Caste or caste-based experiences, do not have to make themselves appear as 'prominent' or 'primary' or 'foundation' through which the otherwise intractable corridors of prejudice is to be archived in these narratives. That, as Scott succinctly puts in her essay, only offer us 'evidence of experience'. But my reference to 'burden of experience' is a reference to both the enormous compulsion that a minoritized constituency feels and thus feels the urge to 'democratize history'; but it also refers to how these caste identities are constructed- how caste is always already entangled with gender, refugee identity, class and so on. There is no 'privileged' experiential category, the moment one is 'immersed' in the narratives. Therefore, I have often realized a discrepancy between the apparent canon formation articulations and related truth claims about Dalit experience that are made on the cover pages and blurbs of these books and what we actually encounter as we get ourselves immersed in these narratives. It is this non-foundationalist position with which we need to understand caste. If these narratives do offer us any knowledge of historiography, it is not in the assertions on truth claims to be teased out of 'experience' but to be recognize these gaps and interruptions, the ghostly absent presences of caste, this entanglement of caste with other kinds of identities. In short, I propose a model that Scott, beyond her reservations about 'experience as the foundation of these new historiographies', has so brilliantly captured. It is in this light that I

have made my aforementioned observations and articulations that privilege the 'literary' and lets it assume an integral or even irreducible status of its own:

The question then becomes how to analyze language, and here historians often (though not always and not necessarily) confront the limits of a discipline that has typically constructed itself in opposition to literature. (These are not the same limits Spivak points to; her contrast is about the different kinds of knowledge produced by history and literature, mine is about different ways of reading and the different understandings of the relationship between words and things implicit in those readings. In neither case are the limits obligatory for historians; indeed, recognition of them makes it possible for us to get beyond them.) The kind of reading I have in mind would not assume a direct correspondence between words and things, nor confine itself to single meanings, nor aim for the resolution of contradiction. It would not render process as linear, nor rest explanation on simple correlations or single variables. Rather it would grant to "the literary" an integral, even irreducible, status of its own. To grant such status is not to make "the literary" foundational, but to open new possibilities for analyzing discursive productions of social and political reality as complex, contradictory processes.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Joan Scott, "Evidence of Experience", 797.

Chapter II

Contesting Colonialist and Nationalist Histories: Bauri Constructions of History in West Bengal

“[...]it is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space. (Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias, Michel Foucault)

3.1 Going beyond the Namasudra narratives in Bengal's Caste discourse

It is important to note that most of the familiar discourses on caste in Bengal, especially since the time of colonial enumeration processes and census exercises started, has been largely focused on the numerically stronger Namasudra / Chandal caste of undivided Bengal Presidency. As I have tried to point out in the previous chapter, the precarious status of this large, mostly landless, agricultural ‘lower’ caste group in post-Partition Bengal/ India has received more focused attention of caste based social science and humanities research on this region. Works of literary criticism on Bangla Dalit writings or organisations like Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha have not been exceptions to this prominence of Namasudra and/or Matua community. Indeed, my focus on the resurfaced, re-memorised ‘present history’ of the Marichjhapi massacre during the Left front government regime, post-partition trauma induced by dislocation, pillage and rape or their extremely frustrated post-partition refugee settlement in the Western Bengal- all demonstrate how the caste question, vis-à-vis Namasudras, invariably overlap with the partition of the sub-continent. But the focus on this large Dalit caste group or their predicament as ‘refugee’ has been stated so much so that several other Scheduled Caste groups who embrace the signifier ‘Dalit’ as an ideologically loaded self-descriptive term and their related cultural politics have often received less or almost no attention in recent scholarships on the caste question of Bengal. Focusing on some of these caste groups can be counter-intuitively illuminating at least in two immediate ways- (a) we can attempt to envisage the caste question without immediately thinking of the Indian

partition (as is the case with most Namasudra Dalit narratives of the previous chapter) and (b) also notice how the Dalit predicament, in case of these descent-based communities, is fundamentally earmarked with another history of the term ‘caste’ that is inextricably linked with the colonial notion of ‘tribe’. My reference to the Bauris in this chapter is a case in point that illustrates these two primary points of departure from the existing literatures on caste in Bengal. However, beyond these preliminary points of discussion, my primary emphasis here is to look into a wide range of ways through which Bauris often negotiated with different knowledge claims of colonial social anthropology and colonial modernity’s construction of this constituency as ‘pre-modern’ and a ‘community without history’. In the first section of the chapter, I attempt to delineate how they negotiated with such claims of colonial modernity by offering narratives in history that share an ambivalent relationship with modernity and a conception of a collective ‘Bauri’ past that puts several anthropogenic conceptualizations of past in crisis. In the second section, I shift my focus onto the spatial conception of Bauriland which again compels us to think beyond our usual comprehension of utopian spatial imagination and its interactions with modernity or its clock time and homogenized spatial arrangements. In the first section, where I examine how Bauris respond to the historicist and civilizational indictments of the colonial discourse and negotiate with them, there is certainly no explicit engagement with a utopian vision *as such*-something that concerns me more centrally in the second part of this chapter. But, this colonialist emphasis on history as a marker of a community’s civilizational progress certainly served as a prerequisite- a component for a universal imagination or template of ‘good life’ or ‘more civilized’ way of being in this world. To that extent, in those partly historicist and partly ‘deep historical’ responses from the Bauris that I explore in the first few sections in this

chapter, there is a complex conversation between two imaginations-colonialist and Bauri.⁹⁷ In the second section, such conflicting, interacting visions also intersect with visions of nationalist utopias i.e., imagined empty spatiality and homogeneous times of the Nation-states.

3.2 Bauris- ‘semi-Hinduised Tribe’ or a Dalit/ Scheduled Caste group?

Some of the quintessential examples of the colonial government’s obsession with the anthropological knowledge of the people it governed are the District Gazette Reports it used to publish across the three principal presidencies of the British Raj in India. The Victorian (often racial) fetish for population studies usually resulted in detailed descriptions of the food habits, agricultural patterns, languages, kinship models of these colonized communities. In one such report- The Bengal District Gazetteers, Burdwan Report – we come across a small but significant entry on the Bauri people who had been inhabiting the large landmass of the Chotonagpur Plateau, widely known for its minerals and other natural resources. The Burdwan District Gazetteers report, first published in 1910, was prepared by J.C. K. Paterson who borrowed heavily from a pamphlet written by another colonial civil servant Mr. W. B. Oldham- “Historical and Ethnical Aspects of the Burdwan District”. In this document as well as in the Gazetteers, Bauris are described as a ‘low caste’ group:

The Bauris are a *low aboriginal caste* who work as cultivators, agricultural labourers and palki-bearers. Traces of totemism still survive in their reverence for the red-backed heron and the dog, and perhaps in their strong objection to touching horse-dung. The heron is looked upon as the emblem of the tribe and may not be killed or molested on pain of expulsion from the caste.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ The term ‘deep history’ is borrowed from Daniel Lord Smail’s book *On Deep History and the Brain*. Smail’s phrase is used in order to designate those narratives in history that focus more on planetary history and often try to get back to the roots of human appearance on this planet. Here I draw upon Dipesh Chakrabarty’s reading of Smail’s idea, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses, *The Crises of Civilization: Exploring Global and Planetary Histories* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018):161-190. Also see, Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

⁹⁸ J.C.K. Paterson, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Burdwan* (New Delhi: Logos Press, 2012).

It is interesting to note that the term ‘aboriginal’, mostly used to designate the ‘tribes’ is applied to the Bauris who are widely known now as a Scheduled Caste or Dalit community in post-colonial India. In the quotation above the assigning of totemism to this community or the easy blurring of lines that differentiate tribes from castes are instances of how Bauris are often perceived as a ‘semi-Hinduised tribe’. In most of the instances where colonial knowledge machine commented on these people, one notices this characteristic almost persistently. The Bauri writer Sunil Das, about whose writings I will elaborately comment later in this chapter, quotes extensively from Oldham’s 1889 document that describes the community primarily in terms of a narrative of transition from a nomadic, food collecting tribe to a semi-Hinduised tribe that eventually received a low ritual rank within the Hindu fold:

The Burdwan district has undergone so many changes of Jurisdiction, and suffered so many successive curtailments since it first became a British possession in 1760.... The largest section of the population in the west of the district are the Baoris, *a caste or tribe*.⁹⁹

A little later Oldham is quoted by Das:

The other great stratum (apart from the Bagdis in the region) is the Baori caste. But the Baoris, though semi-Hinduised and calling themselves Hindu, and so called by their low-caste neighbors, are not admitted to be Hindu by the Hindu Aryans, but are pronounced by them to be unmitigated *chuars*.¹⁰⁰

As Sunil Kumar Das informs, a similar perception of the community is reiterated in other influential colonial documents like W.W. Hunter’s “A Statistical Account of Bengal (Midnapore)”. Hunter’s document derived its knowledge from the 1872 census report:

Mr. C.E. Magraths district Census Compilation for Midnapur thus classifies the ethnical division of the people. The list of Hindu castes will be reproduced as a subsequent page, but arranged in a different order from that given here, according to the rank in which they are held social esteem:

⁹⁹ Sunil Kumar Das, *Bauriland: A Research Work on the Bauriland* (Asansol: Bauriland Publication, 2006) 6. (emphasis added)

¹⁰⁰ Das, *Bauriland*, 6.

- 1: Aboriginal tribes: Bhar, Bhumji, Gond, Kharia, Kharwar, Kat, Nat, Puraon, Sabar, Santal, Oraon.
2. Semi Hinduized Aboriginal: Bagdi, Bahalia, Bauri, Bediya.¹⁰¹

By summarizing these descriptions of the Bauri community in the colonial documents one discerns several significant features of this community:

- a) Bauris were originally a 'tribal' community,
- b) in course of time they have been partly assimilated within the so-called Hindu fold
- c) and, like many such cases, Bauris, after getting themselves semi-Hinduised or semi-Aryanised, were given a low ritual rank or a 'lower caste' status.

However, beyond this 'once tribal, now Dalit' linear narrative of Bauri identity, what strikes us more is the colonial emphasis on the community's 'uncivilized' and 'brutish' status or the colonial focus on their lack of a sense of their past or history. Here we must remember that Oldham's statement on the Bauris' lack of historical sense was not an isolated racial comment of a colonial civil servant. Although the discipline of history came into being only in the first few decades of the twentieth century, its tale of origin, as Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests, started around 1917 when the colonial government slowly realized the importance of forming the Indian Historical Materials Commission in order to make important governmental policy documents and other such papers open to public access, especially to 'historians'.¹⁰² Chakrabarty's account of this early stage of 'Indian History' as an academic discipline as well as the tale of the establishment of 'history' or historical research in India does tell us about the resistance to such initiatives from various quarters of the British Indian government. According to most India based British colonial officers, many in the colonial

¹⁰¹ Das, *Bauriland*, 27.

¹⁰² Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Calling of History: Sir Jadunath Sarkar and His Empire of Truth* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015) 44-51.

establishment were reluctant to give Indians access to these documents in the way England, the colonial metropolitan centre, had opened up its documents for further academic inquiries and interpretations. They were reluctant primarily because many of them thought that Indians lacked ‘a sense of historical investigation’. Interestingly enough, even many Indians as well as colonial bureaucrats who were interested to open up these avenues of research and facilitate these academic inquiries were also not sure of the ability of Indians in conducting ‘historical research’. Chakrabarty’s account includes many such instances out of which I will cite only one for reasons of space and to avoid redundancy. In the early correspondences on the establishment of the Indian Historical Records Commission, politician Ramsay Muir was an important consultant. His advices were sought in order to frame the path through which this archival exercise would be undertaken. Like the native colonial officer J.M. Mitra, Muir also believed that historical research was in its nascent form even in 1917. He thought that the first baby steps of historical research in India, including the formation of the Indian Historical Materials Commission, should be guided by the British historians who can subsequently train some Indian scholars, researchers in the methods of historical inquiry. This ‘imperial liberalism’ or top-down approach that we see in Oldham’s insistence on the Bauris’ lack of historical sense is thus a part of the standardized and normative approaches that most colonial officers and policy makers had even in the first few decades of the twentieth century. However, it is important for us to notice how the Bauri community and its voices like that of Sunil Das respond or react to such indictments of their colonial rulers. While Das extensively quotes from these colonial documents as he explores the ‘history of his Bauri community’, he expresses complete disagreement with such colonial indictments on the civilizational status of the Bauris. In his accounts, Oldham’s insistence that this is a community without history becomes a completely contestable proposition. Das believes that Bauris are not only the original inhabitants /Mulnibasis of the Jungle Mahals or the Chotonagpur Plateau, but also

the earliest traces of the human civilization on this planet. In his narratives on the origin of his community, Das vehemently disagrees with colonial descriptive phrases such as ‘unmitigated chuars’ used by W.B. Oldham. Later we shall see how Das alters the meaning of the term ‘chuar’, often used as a derogatory term or cuss word signifying uncouth and uncivilized behaviour, by rewriting the history of the ‘Chuar Rebellion’. While Bauri authors like Sunil Das or Raju Das find it important to explore the origins and evolutionary trajectories or socio-cultural traits of their community as part of a general historicist formula (i.e., to know about one’s own community’s history helps in making sense of the problems of the present) and they often deploy various colonial documents and narratives to reconstruct the history of their land and their community, they almost always end up creating complex narratives of constructing their pasts that do not conveniently fall under either the categories of colonial philosophies of history or the usual nationalist or anti-colonial reactionary responses to such colonial philosophies. These multifaceted imaginations in historical thinking are reflected in instances like this one from Das’ book *Bauriland*:

Mr. W.B. Oldham has written extensive and detailed histories of the ancient Bauri community and their own landmass of Bauriland. He has mostly written it correctly. However, I was shocked at some of W.B. Oldham’s words- “No past, no present and no future.... They [Bauris] have no tradition of king or leaders or gods”- implying that we Bauris have no sense of our past, or present or future. In their oral traditions there is no heritage of kings, rulers or gods. W.B. Oldham was a knowledgeable man. He has mentioned Megasthenes in his accounts of the Bauris and has written the histories of the great Bauri community and Bauriland. Yet, why did he write these sarcastic and dismissive words about the Bauris? He wrote these words on 22nd April, 1889. These disparaging remarks were made so many years ago and yet, they feel like the words on our present predicament. It is time for the members of this ancient Bauri community to contemplate over and deeply think through these dismissive comments. That is how Bauris will be emancipated or else, they won’t. It is great news for the Bauris that some books on the pasts or histories of the Bauri clan have been published and some stories about their present state have come out through some of my writings. It is on the basis of their knowledge of the past and the present that the Bauri community will move ahead in constructing their future.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Das, *Bauriland*, 3-4.

While this quotation looks like a classic reactionary response on the part of a colonized native group to the civilizational indictment of the colonial discourse, my subsequent references to Das' works will exhibit many more facets in this generally 'historicist' project of writing the communitarian history that Sunil Das has undertaken in many of his books. In the following accounts, I will try to show how Bauri author Sunil Das assumes the role of an 'amateur historian' of his community to reconstruct the past of his community through all his major works like *Rarh er Adim Bauri Janogosthi ebong Tader Prachin Bauddha Tantra Dhamma* (*The Primitive Bauri Community of Rarh and Their Ancient Bauddha Tantra Dhamma*), *Rarh er Oitihāsik Choar Bidroho* (*The Historical Choar Rebellion of Rarh*), *Bauriland*, *Rarh Sobhyota o Bauriland* (*Rarh Civilisation and Bauriland*). In many ways most of the historical narratives of his community that emerge out of these books are partly local histories as they engage with several important books of local histories on Midnapur, Burdwan and Bankura.

3.3 Bauri History

The Bauri histories that we come across in the aforementioned books by the Bauri 'community historian' Sunil Das, share certain common historical trajectories. All his books on the presence of the Bauri community in the red soil areas of the South-Western West Bengal or the Rarh region revolve around the same point of beginning. Most of these books do not begin with what can be called either a history of the Bauri community or even a general history of the entire human race. Das' speculations on Bauri history, in this sense, do not begin either with a focus on colonial history and the position of Bauris within its overall schema in the Indian context or with the universal history of human beings. In these exercises in highly speculative and tellingly imaginative modes of history of his community, Das usually begins with a history of the planet earth. This turn to the planetary history certainly paves the way for his accounts of human history and his idea of the Bauri history at later temporal stages and as the lengthy quotation narrated above clearly exhibits, he stays

within the modern normative conception of historical time as linear and jointed. But this beginning of his narrative that spends a lot of investigative and imaginative energy on narrating a brief geological, planetary and in some loose sense, ‘deep history’ of the planet, calls for some attention. While most Hindu nationalist imaginations always hark back to a glorious past of an imagined national/nationalist community or what Gayatri C. Spivak calls ‘golden ageism’, Bauri imagination of the community’s past is overshadowed, at least in the beginning, by a focus on the planet’s history as a geological existence. Like the Marathi social reformer Jyotirao Phule, Das was certainly influenced by a significant number of colonial governmental documents and narratives. But, unlike Phule, his responses are not simply focused on demystifying the Hindu/Aryan myths by exploiting the Orientalist conception of Aryavarta or a Max Muller like ancient point of civilisational origin from which Asian and European Aryans all emerged. Unlike most Hindu nationalist narratives that tried to construct the glorious past theories and the subsequent degeneration of those glorious pasts into the subsequent tormented presents, Das’ account here does not restrict itself to either the Orientalist or the colonial and anti-colonial notions of their past. Like Phule’s exploitation of missionary narratives such as John Wilson’s *India Three Thousand Years Ago*, he was also drawing heavily from colonial narratives like those of Oldham and Hunter. But, interestingly enough, Das finds it more worthwhile to get a quick picture of the geological changes that created the planet earth. In his books like *Rarh Sobhyota o Bauriland* or *Bauriland*, Das begins by narrating how the ancient Tethys sea got transformed into the great Himalayas because of the tectonic movements of the Gondwanaland and the collision between the Indian and the Eurasian plates. This reference to a geological history or natural history of the planet then seamlessly paves the way for subsequent changes in not just the planetary history but also how the planet earth starts nurturing different life forms. Eventually, in Das’ account, this planet overcame many changes in the Ice age and gave birth

to various life forms and animals and eventually also to the anthropoid apes. These apes and their subsequent stages like *Dryopithecus*, Das reminds us, were the precursors of the *homo sapiens* or human beings as we know them now. Among the ancient *homo sapiens*, Cro-Magnons survived and eventually gave birth to some major human races like the Caucasoid, Mongoloid and Negroid groups. This part planetary and part-evolutionary story of human race on the planet then concludes that the present tribal communities in the Chotonagpur plateau like Kol, Bhil or Munda tribes are the present-day descendants of the proto-Australoid or Negroid human beings. In Das' estimation, it is out of the Munda tribe that the modern day Bauri community emerged. This brief narration of the plate tectonic theory derived from disciplines like geography and the geological sciences or these references to the Ice Age or Stone Age or the first presence of life forms on this earth at the beginning of each of Das' books on the origin of his community are striking not because Das shows some mark of knowing the deep history of the planet earth for our concerns in the age of the Anthropocene. As I have already pointed out, he is certainly not denouncing the primary formulas of modern historical thinking wherein the journey from the past to the lived present to a possible future is made to look inevitable and obvious. He is also operating within the boundaries of modern historicist thought in the sense that knowing one's community's past is important to march forward in the journeys of civilisation. What is striking here, however, is his tendency to think of our human histories or the history of his community or the history of Bengal's Rarh region in terms of various socio-political or religious conflicts that are somehow not completely separated from the planetary or natural histories. In Das' imagination, just as there is no tendency to conjure a glorious past that can retrospectively claim the origins of modern social or political institutions (as it happens in most of nationalist histories), there is no representation natural history as separate from human history. Human beings- Bauris or their racial predecessors- are all traced back to the ancient species like

Dryopithecus or apes and thus, they are located within the larger history of the planet or the larger and much longer histories of the animal world or the world of other living organisms on this earth. In his essay “The Climate of History”, Dipesh Chakrabarty identifies the separation between natural history from what we have come to know as human history or history *as such*, as the point of origin of our resistance in accepting the modern histories of globalization and global climate change as intertwined trajectories. Chakrabarty complains that the separation of our human history from the natural history of the planet and perceptions about the planet as a mere backdrop of human history or the elevation of human history as the privileged source of historical knowledge characterize our anthropocentrism. Chakrabarty traces this tradition back to Giambattista Vico, Benedetto Croce and R.G. Collingwood and somewhat ruefully says:

Philosophers and students of history have often displayed a conscious tendency to separate human history-or the story of human affairs, as R.G. Collingwood put it- from natural history, sometimes proceeding even to deny that nature could ever have history quite in the same way humans have it.¹⁰⁴

Compared to Das’ more exhaustive and detailed accounts of human histories (e.g., the ancient Adi Dharma Tantra Bauris used to practice before they embraced Buddhism, his refusal to identify the Bauris as semi-Hinduised tribes and his insistence on identifying them as Buddhists, his reclaiming of Shiva as a non-Aryan Bauri god and other claims of autochthony), his references to the planet earth are not cursory comments. Unlike Joseph Stalin’s famous 1938 pamphlet *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* that Chakrabarty criticizes, Das’ account of the planet is not simply a passive and gradually changing background of a more fast changing and hence more significant human history i.e., histories of a subordinated caste community (Bauri), stories of their resistance, their ideological and political claims etc. He does not exactly follow the models of Fernand Braudel who thought

¹⁰⁴ Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History”, 166.

of a more active natural history that has serious repercussions on human history. Das' references simply underscore the fact that the planet has had its own existence for millions of years and inadvertently implies that it has existed without any human presence and has eventually undergone changes over long spans of time to give rise to the conditions of human existence. His fundamental suggestion, however, is that the changes that led to the emergence of the Himalayas eventually created what he now calls Bauriland and the community of Bauri people can also be traced back to one of the earliest specimens of human race on earth. Thus, his anthropogenic thrust is certainly underwritten throughout these planetary references. But these references have a feeling that this deep history is seamlessly connected with human history or in his context, his Bauri past. Thus, the separation between the categories of 'human history' and 'natural history' that Chakrabarty rightly recognizes in the modern Viconian-Hobbesian conceptions of history or in Croce's or Collingwood's writings, is not to be found in any easy manner in Das' partly autobiographical and partly amateur historian's accounts on the origins of the Bauri community. Despite its ideological allegiances to the modern notions of history or human history or his reactionary responses to Oldham's racist and colonialist civilizational claims, this intertwinement of human and natural/planetary histories demands its due recognition as an important feature of such Dalit historiographic imagination. Das' account is neither consciously written from the contemporary concerns of anthropogenic climate crisis nor is this entirely free from the ideological underpinnings of modern historicist thinking. But reading Sunil Das' references to the Gondwanaland or the Tethys sea and his effortless and almost unselfconscious references to these intertwined histories that combine human history with the natural history certainly departs from some of Chakrabarty's concerns. For example, Chakrabarty, in his "Climate of History", is suggesting that most narratives of human freedom, notwithstanding their particularized socio-historical contexts, come at the cost of consuming fossil fuel. In other words, human histories might not

be bothered about natural histories but their histories are directly or indirectly predicated upon a consumption of natural resources like fossil fuels. On other hand, the history of the planet or planetary justice is indifferent to our concerns in human justice. Natural calamities hardly make any difference when they occur to different types of human beings belonging to different races and castes. It is in this sense that Chakrabarty thinks that our concerns in human justice and planetary justice or human history and planetary history are almost mutually exclusive territories. Ironically, it is our anthropocentric historical perspective that does not allow us to recon with this reality and thus makes us blind to the apocalyptic possibilities of the Anthropocene. To this extent, his essay is not just about the climate crisis or the evolution of these anthropogenic issues, but it is fundamentally about what climate crisis posits in terms of a problem in historiographic imagination. When we consider Das' writings, there is certainly a fight against social exclusion that his community faces and his books are fundamentally an exercise in recuperating a seemingly lost history of his community to fight for social justice and freedom. Yet, his books are not simply about making claims on the nation-state (as we shall see in the last section of this chapter on Bauriland) nor are these simply claims that are strictly confined within modern historicism. Reading these Bauri accounts make us feel how concerns for social justice or freedom might also take routes that do not vehemently follow the paths determined by modernity, as Chakrabarty seems to be suggesting.¹⁰⁵ Rather, there are contingent factors and crucial

¹⁰⁵ It must be noted that Dipesh Chakrabarty has revised many of these earlier positions in some of his more recent pieces. In his recent works Chakrabarty suggests that these modern quests for freedom embedded in humanist traditions and political articulations can productively coexist with non-anthropocentric views of the planet earth and its non-human inhabitants (including microbial organisms) in the space of what he describes as the 'Dalit Body'. Drawing upon animality studies, paleontology, climate crisis discourse, caste studies, and Frantz Fanon's idea of 'Black Body', Chakrabarty finds such juxtapositions in instances like anti-caste activist Rohit Vemula's suicide note. Vemula's insistence on a quest for freedom, Chakrabarty speculates, can and does exist alongside his references to Carl Sagan's insights encapsulated in Rohit's description of human beings as 'a glorious thing made up of star dust'. My suggestions on Sunil Das' historiographic imagination of Bauri past echoes some of these latest revised observations of Chakrabarty on the Dalit body. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Dalit Body: A Reading for the Anthropocene", *The Empire of Disgust: Prejudice, Discrimination, and Policy in India and the US*, ed. Zoya Hasan, Aziz Z. Huq, Martha C. Nussbaum and Vidhu Verma (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018).

ambivalences that make these accounts tellingly heterogeneous and inconclusive. One must also think of two other related notes in this context. As Mukul Sharma points out, India's natural historians have been, by and large, eulogizing and romanticizing India's pre-colonial past in order to satirise the machine-driven modern capitalist structures. In so doing, most of these natural historians like Madhav Gadgil, Sunita Narain or Anil Agarwal have all perceived India's pre-colonial and pre-modern village societies as an ideal antidote to the vagaries of modernity and its corollaries like capitalism and its exploitation of nature.¹⁰⁶ Such thoughts often perceived caste as something that makes these village societies less competitive and less mechanical and caste societies, in these narratives, often work as efficient and eco-friendly managements of natural resources. This, as I have suggested in my comments on 'caste vis-à-vis modernity' template in the introductory chapter, is often the hallmark of not just postcolonial discomfort in dealing with caste in terms of the tradition/modernity debates but also a common feature of such Indian postcolonial environmentalism. This is the same pattern of thought that conveniently concludes that Ambedkar is quintessentially a man who promoted modernity, machine and other attributes of modern capitalism and statism that bring about greater anthropogenic exploitation of the earth. These perceptions have persistently celebrated Gandhian views on the self-sufficient Indian village system or Ram Rajya while they have been either silent on or dismissive about Ambedkar's critique of the Indian system as a 'republic of the Touchables'. Many significant scholarly investigations like that of Mukul Sharma's *Caste and Nature*, however, have presented a radically different Ambedkar whose concerns for ecology, environment and nature have been systematically undermined amidst his wholesale projection as modernity's poster boy. In chapter 5th chapter of this dissertation, I have elaborately discussed why such

¹⁰⁶ Mukul Sharma, *Caste and Nature: Dalits and Indian Environmental Politics* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017).

conclusions on Ambedkar are hasty and simplistic as his ideological influences and intellectual inheritances were far more widespread and complex to simply conclude that he was an ‘unalloyed modernist’. Sharma’s work makes somewhat similar arguments in the context of Dalits’ relationship with nature and Ambedkar’s thoughts on the environment. Sharma’s close reading of several texts of Ambedkar quite convincingly portray that Ambedkar, despite his support for using machines as a path to democracy, often showed remarkable sensitivity towards nature which is not dissimilar to our concerns over climate crisis. The geological references to planetary history in Sunil Das’ writings or concerns for the nature in Ambedkar, therefore, offer us other insights on how Dalit imaginations of the past or their quests for social freedom do not always follow the familiar and predictable paths that are ideologically embedded within modernity or Enlightenment thought or modernity’s philosophies of history. If these small yet significant insights on Dalit historiographic thoughts are overlooked, we will have a convenient but unimaginably incomplete picture of their predicaments. These ideological insights however, are not simply restricted to those introductory pages on the planet’s geological history in Das’ writings. These are also often reflected in how he chooses his sources and how he reads them and deploys these readings to construct the past of the Bauri community.

3.4 Textual Sources of Sunil Das and his methods of interpretations

Making a rough and ready list of the wide range of texts that Sunil Das deploys in his imaginative and speculative conceptualization of Bauri past, can be quite a difficult task. It is difficult for the simple reason that these are often arbitrarily chosen and the passages he quotes are randomly extrapolated. Moreover, the range of these references is a remarkably wide one. Many of these texts, as I have already suggested, are governmental documents of colonial times e.g., district gazette reports, official correspondences between colonial officers etc. or in some cases, his sources are local myths and proverbs or books on local histories.

This is why he often extensively quotes from different ‘small histories’ like Maniklal Sinha’s *Subarnekhya Hoite Mayurakshee* and *Paschim Rarh Tatha Bankura Sangskriti*, Asansol er *Ittibritto* (edited by Nandadulal Acharya), Jogweswar Choudhury’s *Bardhaman: Itihas o Sangskriti*, Dhirendranath Baskey’s *Santal Gano Sangram er Itihas* etc. Alongside his many references to the colonial documents and gazettes prepared by colonial bureaucrat-scholars like H.H. Risley, W.W. Hunter, W.B. Oldham, J.C.K. Peterson or L.S.S. O’Malley, Das also reads a number of texts on the history of ancient Bengal e.g., Atul Sur’s *Bangla or Bangalir Biborton* and *Bangla Samajik Itihas*, Paresh Chandra Dasgupta’s *Pragoitihashik Bangla*, Nihar Ranjan Ray’s *Bangalir Itihas* etc. In his books like *Rarh er Adim Bauri Janogosthi ebong Tader Prachin Baudhdha Tantra Dhamma*, Das also uses a large number of Buddhist and Jain texts like *Majjhima Nikaya* and *Acharanga Sutra*, alongside writings by Rahul Sankrityayan and other books on Buddhism, to reconstruct the Buddhist non-Aryan, non-Brahminical past of the Barui community. Interestingly enough, in this book, many of his readings on Buddhism are directly taken from or derived from many of Ambedkar’s innovative interpretations of Buddhism in texts like *Buddha and His Dhamma*. There is considerable exercise of creative imagination though which he connects Ambedkar’s interpretation of Buddhism (popularly known as Navayana Buddhism) with his own readings of the Buddhist texts like *Majjhima Nikaya* or Shanti Kusum Dasgupta’s *Buddha, Bouddha Dharma ebong Prachin Bouddha Samaj*, Haraprasad Shashtri’s *Bouddha Gaan o Doha*, Dharmapal Bhikshu’s *Jataka Nidan*, Surendranath Biswas’ *Gautam Buddher Sankhipto Jiboni* etc. Sunil Das, in most of his books on the origins of the Bauri community, uses the anthropological insights developed by Lewis Henry Morgan. Morgan’s *Ancient Society* serves as a template for Das in the reconstruction of human civilizational history that eventually led to the emergence of the Bauri civilization. Das uses Morgan’s framework of staging human civilization in order to construct his historical imagination. Morgan’s linear

time of civilizational evolution is divided, as per Das' reading of Morgan, into three main phases: a) Savagery, b) Barbarism, c) Civilization. His account of the Bauri past is not just reclaimed in Morgan's 'Civilization' phase, but is also traced back to the first two stages. According to Das, several archaeological excavations conducted in the Chotonagpur plateau and the Damodar valley region convincingly establish the fact that this region is part of the ancient Gondwanaland and had been in existence for ages even before Morgan's third phase got initiated. This line of argument helps Das establish his larger claim about the antiquity of this region and also simultaneously helps him in claiming that the Bauris are not just a community with history but a community almost as old as the first signs of 'civilisation' in this ancient region. This further establishes my earlier claims in this chapter that his references to planetary history, despite its historicist framework, is inextricably intertwined with the history of the humans in general and his community's history in particular. In this account of Das, therefore, there is not an explicit claim of constructing a glorious past that is only a few thousand years old (e.g., Vedic age etc.). But there is a different claim that tries to establish how his community has been participant and witness to various planetary, natural and human civilizational changes for ages. He also makes his truth claims about this Bauri past more convincing by creatively and imaginatively deploying several methods of reading a wide range of sources and texts. He effortlessly connects his everyday encounters with local deities, customs and his community's socio-cultural or religious traditions with academic disciplines like archaeology, history, geology, linguistics, anthropology etc. His reconstruction of the Bauri past is generally based on some of the following methods that he deploys simultaneously: a) his references to and readings of local histories, b) his references to the geological and geographical observations and discoveries, c) his interpretations of available archaeological evidences gathered in this region, d) development of several linguistic connections to help restore the missing links in his reconstruction of his

community's past and e) his references to the well-known historical and anthropological sources and their exploitation to creatively read his community's past (two such examples from these two academic disciplines would be Niharranjan Ray's *Bangalir Itihas* and Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society*). While establishing his claims of antiquity of this region, Das often takes resort to geological, geographical insights derived from, for example, plate tectonic theory. But his subsequent references to the ancient Bauri existence on this *prachin* or ancient land depends largely on an imaginative reinterpretation of Morgan's anthropological ideas that try to offer a stagiest view of the human civilizational evolution. This is evident from the aforementioned references to different stages of civilization Das borrows from Morgan's *Ancient Society*- a book that attempts to read the anthropological traits and characteristics of the Native American communities. But these references are immediately supported by his exploitation of many relatively recent archaeological explorations in the Rarh region that is otherwise rich with minerals and fossils. How he deploys these methods simultaneously and imaginatively can be better understood through some examples we come across in his books. In *Rarh er Adim Bauri Janogosthi o Tader Prachin Bauddha Tantra Dhamma*, Das refers to one such excavation after giving us his imaginatively loaded Bauri past based on his readings of Morgan:

In a news article titled "The Cave found in Hazaribag is Fifty Thousand Years Old", published on 28th September, 1993 in the *Ranchi Express*, Dr. Prakash Ch. Prasad of the Bihar archaeological department has said that the six caves found in Sapta Pahar's Prastar Asroysthal in the Damodar Valley's Koila Tethangi region, have been in existence since Middle Stone age. According to the archaeologists, these caves are more than fifty thousand years old. These valuable specimens from antiquity have been found near the Central Coal field region of the Damodar Valley- a place known for its pre-historic Megalithic origins. During the excavations in the coal fields of Tandoa area in Hazaribag this awe-inspiring specimens were discovered. It is in that time frame (when these caves came into being) that the cave people of the 'Savage state' (in Morgan's time frame) started using fire and learnt to use bow and arrows. This usage of bows and arrows that is the hallmark of those hunting lives of ancient people can still be found in present day celebrations like Sikarjatra that the local

adivasis and Bauri people celebrate during Poush Sankranti. Their Sikarjatra celebration is a sign of their ancient roots. We call that age Stone Age.¹⁰⁷

While he effortlessly moves from his ‘evidences’ from the ancient Jain text *Acharanga Sutra* to the plate tectonic theories about the emergence of Gondwanaland, he also uses many sources that emerged during the colonial era of late nineteenth century. Most of his books on either the Rarh civilization or on the origins of the Bauri community have several references to Megasthenes’ famous text *Indica*. But these references to Megasthenes or his text *Indica* and his deductions on the presence of the Bauris and their Bauriland at that time, are inferred from colonial educator and philologist John Watson McCrindle’s (1825-1913) work *Ancient India as Described by Megasthenes and Arrian* (1877). Despite his discomfort with the colonial civil servant W.B. Oldham’s perception of the Bauris as a ‘community without history’, Das often uses Oldham’s interpretations of many older texts on the Rarh region or the Bauri community. In many of his other instances, Das directly borrows from texts such as J.W. McCrindle’s work on Megasthenes. McCrindle, in his book *Ancient India as Described by Megasthenes and Arrian*, concludes that the region Megasthenes described as Gangrides is the present day “Lower Bengal that consisted of several indigenous tribes, which in the course of time became more or less Aryanized”.¹⁰⁸ Magasthenes also mentions several communities that have been the traditional inhabitants of this land and according to McCrindle’s note in *Ancient India*, the principal community in the region called Uberae is variously known as Bors or Bhors, Bhowris, Burries and Bharhiyas, Bureyas, Baoris, Bharais etc. McCrindle adds that ‘this race though formerly powerful, is now one of the lowest classes of the population’.¹⁰⁹ Das, drawing upon these observations from McCrindle, infers that Uberaes are the present day Bauri people. But his references to McCrindle’s book on

¹⁰⁷ Sunil Das, *Rarh er Adim Bauri Janogosthi ebong Tader Prachin Bouddha Tantra Dhamma* (Kolkata: Choturtha Duniya, 2000), 12.

¹⁰⁸ As quoted in Sunil Das, *Rarh Sabhyota o Bauriland* (Kolkata: Choturtha Duniya, 2008), 23.

¹⁰⁹ Das, *Rarh Sabhyota*, 24.

Megasthenes' *Indica* are coupled with several other references to some everyday habits and customs or practices of the Bauri people or in some cases with the local micro histories of various places in the region. In his book *Bauriland*, Das juxtaposes extrapolations from Oldham's references to McGrindle or quotations directly taken from McCrindle's book on Megasthenes' *Indica* with his own imaginative and almost intuitive reconstruction of the local histories of the red soil areas of this south western part of West Bengal:

Seleucus was the representative of Alexander. Megasthenes was Seleucus' messenger. In Megasthenes' *Indica*, we find important observations and historical information about the Rarh region (Rarh Desh) or Gangarides. Gangarides implies Gangetic Rarh or Rarh Desh. Uberae refers to Bauris. Megasthenes writes- 'The Uberae with a handsome town of same name'. This implies that there has been a beautiful city named after the Bauris. Megasthenes had written this line in 302 B.C. But this is historical fact. It means that this historical information is a fact that remains true even in 2006. There is a village called Bagri in Paschim Medinipur (West Midnapur). Most Bauris in that village have 'Duley' for a surname. The Bauris are primarily concentrated in three neighborhoods in that village. On the eastern side of the village there is a railway station called Bagri Road. On the railway track one has to cross Bankura, Bhediashol, Onda, Ram Sayer, Bishnupur, Piar Doba, Garhbeta and Shalboni in order to reach Midnapur rail station.

In ancient times, Bagri was a large state. The word 'Bagri' comes from the name of the Bagri or Bauri community. This has come from the clan of Bog or Bok people. The place where Bog or Bok people used to stay was called Bog-Ara (Bogra/Bagra) or Bargri. The word 'Ara' implies house or home. Thus Bog-Ara > Bogra/Bagra > Bagri > Bauri.¹¹⁰

While the first part of this paragraph from *Bauriland* is derived from Das' readings from Megasthenes or McCrindle's notes on Megasthenes or Oldham's interpretation of these sources, the next two parts i.e., his references to the existence of Bagri village of Garhbeta in Midnapur and his obsession with a linguistic exploration of his own roots as well as the origins of his community – are significant points of departure from the framework of rational history that modernity has given birth to. There are significant truth claims e.g., the claims on an imagined antiquity without concomitant claims on 'being civilized', claims originating from the disdainful remarks of colonizers like Oldham or claims of facticity based on the readings of ancient texts. But these truth claims or historical truth claims are also

¹¹⁰ Das, *Bauriland*, 24.

simultaneously imaginative and to use a phrase used by Debjani Ganguly, mythographical'.¹¹¹ These, like his concerns about the geological trajectory of the planet earth I have already mentioned, reflect his ambivalent attitudes towards his past or his community's past. In the fifth chapter of this dissertation, I explore how one can discern Ambedkar's intellectual inheritances as only ambivalently modern. Contesting Partha Chatterjee's claims about Ambedkar as a thinker of some nebulous 'unalloyed modernity', I suggest that we read Ambedkar's inheritances like American Pragmatist philosophy or Buddhism as convincingly implying his complex and ambivalent relationship with modernity. Here, in the context of Das's ambivalence towards modern historiography's truth claims and the usual methods adopted to make those claims, one can recall Ambedkar's own approach towards historical truth. In his significant thesis on the origins of untouchability- *The Untouchables: Who Were They and How They Became Untouchables*, Ambedkar tries his best to make truth claims on the basis of various textual readings of India's ancient past and yet, finds it almost impossible to construct his history of untouchability without a heavy dose of imagination. Given Das' habit of constantly seeking inspiration from Ambedkar's texts like *Buddha and His Dhamma* or his ambivalence towards modern methods of historical investigation or his use of his imagination in reconstructing his community's past, one can justifiably recall Ambedkar's suggestive words on the exercise of imagination in constructing pasts that are not so readily available. Contesting German thinker Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's insistence on a legal perception of facts and evidence based rational and objective history, Ambedkar asserts the need for imagination and intuition in dealing with what he calls 'the missing links of history'¹¹². Thus, neither Ambedkar's views on history, nor Das'

¹¹¹ Debjani Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity: Notes on a Postcolonial Hermeneutics of Caste* (London: Routledge, 2005)

¹¹² For a more elaborate discussion on Ambedkar's views on history, see the fifth chapter of this dissertation on Ambedkar's intellectual inheritances and what they imply for Dalit historiography's concerns within the debates on their postcolonial predicament.

methods of Dalit historiography to re-construct the past of his community follow the known and predictable paths of rational history that the so-called European modernity has tried to posit as the norm. However, this does not mean a complete surrender to myth or its corollaries like imagination. Neither Sunil Das nor his ideological inspiration Ambedkar completely relies on the flimsy grounds constructed on the whims of fancy. Their contemplations of Dalit past or Dalit history are overwhelmingly contingent and heterogeneous. Like some of the forefathers of Indian history as a disciplinary existence or discourse – Sir Jadunath Sarkar in Calcutta, S Krishnasamy Iyenger in Madras or Govindrao Sardesai in Pune, Das or Ambedkar too are ‘amateur’ historians. Echoing Dipesh Chakrabarty’s recently published book on Sir Jadunath Sarar, I do not use the word ‘amateur’ either to dismiss the ‘truth claims’ they are making or to undermine their intellectual efforts. I refer to such possible comparisons between Sarkar and Sardesai on one hand and Ambedkar and Das on the other, primarily to imply that there are many similarities between their projects. Das or Ambedkar were certainly not engaged in giving some ‘amateur’ exercises in Indian historiography a more academic research-based shape. Their projects are more localized and needless to say, charged with political will. But the methods Ambedkar and Das deploy to excavate or reconstruct their ‘untouchable’ or Dalit pasts are, like those of Sardesai or Sarkar, driven by commitments to truths. Unlike Sarkar or Iyenger, there is certainly no overtly ‘Indian’ or later day anti-colonial ideological orientations in the exercises of Das or Ambedkar. But, despite the strong presence of imagination and intuition in Das or Ambedkar’s confident insistence on the limitations in Goethe’s philosophy of history, there is certainly a quest for truth or a commitment to truth. This is evident in their efforts to read ancient and often obscure texts as diligently as possible or in their efforts in reading whatever primary or secondary sources they could lay their hands on. In Das, we have already seen the expanse of this ‘empire of truth’. To once again echo some of the references to the intricate

relationships between experience and historical truth I explored in the previous chapter on Namasudra autobiographies and their post-partition ‘historical truths’, I reiterate the fact that Dalit historiographical imagination is neither completely driven by the norms of modernity’s conceptions of objective history that is obsessed with ‘ascertainable and unassailable facts’ nor is it completely driven by a complete submission to the mythical reconstructions of past. As I explore some of the recent protest literatures of the Dom community in Jhargram district in the next chapter and contest some of Ranajit Guha’s assumptions about their myth-based resistance to caste Hindu dominance, it becomes clear how difficult it is to conveniently bracket the intellectual exercises of Das or Ambedkar with an incident like Ayodhya Ram Mandir controversy or Hindu majoritarian reframing of India’s past. In such imaginations of our hyper-nationalist past, there is hardly any concerted effort to read ancient texts or cite different sources, exploit archaeological evidences or examining local proverbs and myths. These are, by and large, devices that professional historians try to deploy in constructing their narratives of the past. Neither Das nor Ambedkar was trained in such exercises. One can justifiably argue that the ‘unprofessional’ methods or heavy juxtaposition of several methods to create such narratives of their Dalit pasts, are results of such lack of academic training. But this is hardly a ground to declare, as Chakrabarty does, that Dalit historical imagination, like Australian aboriginal history or Maori histories of New Zealand, is almost completely ‘mythical’. Commenting on the evolutions in historiographical debates in the 1980s and 1990s on the importance on memory in doing history and drawing upon the apparent similarities between aboriginal histories in Australia and New Zealand and Dalit histories in India, Chakrabarty says:

[...] the outcomes of particular debates in history in the 1980s and the 1990s- the value of “memory”, for instance, or that of “myth” over that of history-were decided, in many national or regional contexts, not by what historians said in specialist books and in learned and specialized conferences but by the pressure that the realms of public disputations about the past brought to bear on the discipline of history and vice versa. Thus, debates about whether or not Aboriginal myths, songs, poetry, and dance forms constituted history could not be

decided in the Australia I lived in by the strictures of the discipline alone. Instead, the discipline was under pressure to find room to accommodate forms of the past that it tended usually to rule out as invalid. New Zealand scholars have had to experiment with telling the same historical story twice, once in the White or Pakeha way, and again in the Maori way. Or consider the importance of undocumented “historical” characters like Jhalkari Bai and of myth-history in Dalit struggles for recognition in Uttar Pradesh, as demonstrated in the work of Badri Narayan, Ramnarayan Rawat, and others. Myth-history has loomed large in Dalit politics of the past in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.¹¹³

In other words, I argue that the kind of narratives of his community’s past that Das constructs, despite their interesting uses of imagination, continue search for the ‘truth’ of ‘Bauri’ past. Thus, these are neither mere exercises in what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the ‘public life of history’ that is often driven by politically charged questions and the demands of identity politics nor do they fall into the domain of professional history or to borrow Chakrabarty’s phrase, ‘the cloistered life’ of history as a university discipline. These writings of Sunil Das would perhaps fall into some interstitial space between the ‘cloistered life’ and ‘public life’ of history wherein both these domains intersect and intertwine to offer us only a tentative model of Dalit historiography that neither gets subsumed in the historicist reactionary articulations of a colonized ‘lower caste’ social group nor does it get completely restricted within the counter-mythical articulations without making any ‘rational’, hence ‘historical’, truth claims. In the next two sections of this chapter, I elucidate these thematic notes by exploring two related registers wherein Sunil Das and his Bauri people imagine their community’s pasts: a) Their ‘discovery’ of a Buddhist past and b) their revisionist account of a political protest that is otherwise known as simply a localized anti-colonial movement- the Chuar Rebellion of late nineteenth century.

3.5 Reimagining a Buddhist Past for the Bauris

While the Marathi social reformer Jyotirao Phule insisted on rewriting what he called ‘Brahminical myths’ and often interpreted Puranic mythological tales from what can be

¹¹³ Chakrabarty, *The Calling of History*, 10.

called ‘a lower caste’ anti-caste perspective, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar relied more on reinterpreting India’s post-Vedic, especially Buddhist past as a tool to contest the dominance of many nationalist reinterpretations of a similar time frame. Ambedkar did most of his ‘sacro-political’¹¹⁴ readings of ‘sacred’ texts like the *Bhagabad Gita* in order to construct a past that is neither mythical (in the way Phule’s mythical interpretations were) nor purely based on the various overlapping and corresponding notions of ‘rational’ historical research. I have already elucidated it earlier in this chapter and I discuss it again when I explore his intellectual inheritances like Buddhism and American Pragmatism in the fifth chapter of this dissertation. However, in the context of how Sunil Das and other Bauri community members construct their Buddhist communitarian past, it is important to invoke Ambedkar’s framework of historical interpretations of India’s past for Ambedkar is unquestionably a sustained source of inspiration for Das’ exercise in writing Bauri history. Ambedkar did not exploit the Aryan invasion myth to Phule’s extent to counter dominant ‘Hindu’ myths. In fact, in Ambedkar we discern a contestation of such racialised view of caste that is based on the Aryan invasion myth.¹¹⁵ His path was more focused on a somewhat systematic and close reading of the ancient texts in order to make plausible inferences on Indian history. Ambedkar’s model of textual reading certainly followed the modern codes of historical research which led to the postcolonial characterization of Ambedkar as a quintessential man of ‘unalloyed modernity’. But, Ambedkar, opposing Goethe, also used his imagination and intuition in order to construct those ‘possible pasts’ or as he put it, to fill up the gaps or ‘missing links of history’. This model of rethinking the Indian past is exhibited in many of Ambedkar’s writings like

¹¹⁴ I am borrowing this term as well as the concept of Ambedkar’s ‘sacropolitics’ (and his reading of sacred scriptures like the *Bhagabadgita*) from Jimmy Casa Klausen, “Sacropolitics: How to Disobey Sacred Scripture (on Ambedkar’s *Bhagabadgita*)”, *Disobedience: Concept and Practice*, ed. Elena Loizidou (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2013) 60-82.

¹¹⁵ Anand Sharma, “Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on the Aryan Invasion and the Emergence of the Caste System in India”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 3 (2005): 843-870, accessed December 6, 2020, doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfi081.

Revolution and Counter-revolution or *Who were the Untouchables and How they became untouchables* or *Who were the Sudras and How they became Sudras*. His theory of the unacknowledged intellectual debt of Hinduism to Buddhism is quite clearly elucidated in essays like “Krishna and His Gita”.¹¹⁶ Many of these readings do have the imprint of many of his contemporary scholarships. For example, Ambedkar’s reading of the Indian past in terms of a conflict between Brahminism and Buddhism is also present in an essay published before Ambedkar wrote his texts- Rajendralal Mitra’s “Beef in Ancient India”.¹¹⁷ While he may or may not have been influenced by such scholarships in Indology, his imaginative reconstruction of the Indian past in terms of such contestations between Brahminism and Buddhism had its own innovations like the theory of ‘broken men’- people whose ritual status as untouchables is directly linked to their customary habit of eating dead animals, especially cows.

In many ways, Sunil Das follows these structures of thought, albeit with his own variations and according to his more localised priorities. In the previous chapter, I tried to argue that many recent Namasudra retellings of their myths of origin unmistakably have an Ambedkarite imprint. Byapari’s or Bala’s tendencies to reconstruct those myths often try to take their communitarian identity away from ‘Hindu’ socio-religious templates and push their Dalit/Namasudra identity closer to a Buddhist past. In those Namasudra narratives of the last few decades, we are often taken back to the Pala dynasty (as opposed to the Sena dynasty that

¹¹⁶ This discussion of debt of Hinduism to Buddhism has already been mentioned in the previous chapter. See my reference in the previous chapter to Soumyabrata Choudhury, “The Ambiguous Debt of Counter revolution to Revolution: Reply to a Vigilant Melancholic”, *Cultural Critique* 98 (Winter 2018), 293-319, doi: 10.5749/culturalcritique.98.2018.0293.

¹¹⁷ For a discussion on Rajendralal Mitra’s essay see Kalyan Das, “To eat or not to eat Beef: Spectres of Food on Bengal’s Politics of Identity”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 50 no. 44 (October, 2015), 105-114, doi: <https://www.epw.in/journal/2015/44/special-articles/eat-or-not-eat-beef.htm>. For more on this see B. R. Ambedkar, *Beef, Brahmins and Broken Men: An Annotated Critical Edition from The Untouchables: Who were they and how they became untouchables* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2019) and D.N. Jha, *Myth of the Holy Cow* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2010)

was ‘Brahminical’ in nature) in Bengal to construct that Ambedkarite Buddhist past. Sunil Das also follows the same ideologically charged retelling, albeit with his own innovations especially in his ‘methods of historical research’. Unlike Byapari and Bala, there is no similar myth of origin that he attempts to reconstruct. Thus, he starts to imagine a Bauri Buddhist past through avenues other than reframing an already existing myth of origin.

In these reconstructions of the Bauri Buddhist past, Das deploys his method of hybrid historical tools. This wide range of methods, evidences or tools start from the textual readings of various ancient Buddhist, Jain and Brahmanical texts, archaeological evidences, local myths and folk narratives, colonial documents, local proverbs and appropriation or reclamation of various commonly known ‘Hindu’ gods like Shiva as Bauri aboriginal gods of a tradition of religiosity he describes as the ‘ancient Tantra Dharma’. Since I have already added a somewhat detailed note on the profoundly interesting hybridity of his historical methods in the previous section of this chapter, I will quickly shift the attention to the basic thread of this process of historical reconstruction of Bauri past that Das is engaged with in his books like *Rarh Er Adim Bauri Janogosthi ebong Tader Prachin Bauddha Tantra Dhamma*. If we see his repetitive claims on such Buddhist roots of the Bauri community, we see a certain historical trajectory that Das ‘imagines, ‘discovers’, reconstructs, builds or claims. According to his historical reconstruction, there was a time when the Bauri community had their own gods and deities. These were neither Buddhist figures nor deities of the so-called ‘Hindu’ or ‘Brahminical’ pantheon of gods. This is a phase that he roughly categorizes as an ‘ancient tantric dhrama’ or everyday ritualistic religiosity. Then came, in this imaginatively loaded periodization, a phase when some Bauri indigenous deities got appropriated by various Brahminical forces and got transformed into Hindu gods and goddesses. Lord Shiva is one such indigenous God who, according to Das, got assimilated within the Hindu pantheon. Thereafter, comes his retrospective reconfiguration of this second phase as a

historically significant moment of contestation between Buddhism and Brahminism. Here, I must quickly add that he often departs from a strict Ambedkarite path of such retrospective historical reconstruction. For instance, he often seems to believe in the Aryan invasion theory that many Indology scholars and lower caste social reformers like Jyotiba Phule espoused. At any rate, the aforementioned historical trajectory, in the retrospective historical estimation of Sunil Das, eventually led the Bauris into a socio-religious group that followed the amalgamated and hybridized Buddhist religious life originated out of the interactions between their ‘prachin tantra dhamma’ and the Buddhist socio-religious discourse. But Das also raises some questions that might put his ‘thesis’ into doubts and contestations. For example, how do we reconcile his reading of the Bauri Buddhist past with the claims of many colonial rulers like Oldham who firmly believed in the ‘Hindu’ (albeit ‘semi-Hindu’) socio-religious status of the Bauris or for that matter, the present-day overwhelming consensus, both in governmental policy assumptions on affirmative action and popular perceptions, that Bauris are Hindus, albeit ‘lower caste’ Hindus. One might ask- on what evidence does he construct this notion of a Bauri Buddhist past. His immediate response to these questions is to follow what I have loosely described as an Ambedkarite model of historiography i.e., to read ancient texts to make a claim or assumption about the past. In this, he draws from his own readings of Buddhist texts and Jain texts like *Acharanga Sutra* and tries to prove that the Bauris have been in existence even before the Aryan or Brahminical values got their firm foothold in this part of the sub-continent. But this also raises further questions: If Bauris existed as a community in those ancient Jain or Buddhist texts, how is it that there is no reference to their community name in most of the important texts in the Hindu / Brahminical tradition? Das refers the *Brihadharma Puran* which, despite being an ancient text that enlists various *jatis*, does not mention the Bauri community. Das says that the *Brihadharma Puran* was a text that was written during the Sena dynasty’s rule in Bengal region from 1179 A.D.

to 1207 A.D. While many more ancient Buddhist and Jain texts suggest the existence of the Bauris hundreds of years before that time frame, Das suggests, the absence of the Bauri community from the list of *jatis* we come across in *Brihadharma Puran* needs some persuasive explanation. Das' highly speculative history on the Buddhist roots of his community suggests that this exclusion can be best explained by considering the fact that the Bauris, despite being a prominent community, never really emerged as a *jati* along the lines of those other *jatis* mentioned in *Brihadhrama Puran*. Das opines that this can only be explained by recognizing the absence of *jati* or caste in the ancient Buddhist communes. Since, Das believes, Bauris were all included within the 'caste-less' Buddhist communes, they could not have been identified as a *jati* within a Brahminical social order. Therefore, Sunil Das concludes, there was no reason for the Hindu law-givers or social custodians to include Bauris as one of the many *jatis* that emerged in the Bengali society that was set to be Brahminised during the Sena dynasty. In order to solidify his claims, Das now shifts from textual studies to his imaginative readings of many local proverbs that, Das believes, suggest the non-Hindu socio-religious status of the Bauris. Referring to how Bauris have been popularly perceived as a non-Hindu (hence, first aboriginal and then a Buddhist) socio-religious group by many local Hindus of the region. According to Das, one such proverb that proves the anti-Vedic and anti-Aryan nature of this social group is: "Ved Bidhi Chara/ Jais Bauri Para". A rough translation of this proverb suggests: going to the Bauri neighbourhoods implies that one has gone against the Vedic ways of living. In other words, this proves that Bauris were never a Veda abiding Hindu *jati* group in the Brahminical social order.

These references are then followed by many citations and quotations from Megasthenes' *Indica*. We have already seen that these references are possibly not taken directly from *Indica* and most possibly insights derived from various notes of Mr. McCrindle on *Indica*. The presence of the Bauri community that he attempts to establish from various

excerpts from *Indica* is then juxtaposed with references to some documents prepared by colonial administrator-scholars like W.W. Hunter. His Ambedkarite readings of the Bauri past as a Non-Hindu one is also simultaneously based on texts like W.W. Hunter's *Annals of Rural Bengal* and yet these readings contest many colonial assumptions. For example, Oldham's insistence that the Bauris have been a semi-Hinduised aboriginal group that got assimilated within the Hindu fold as a lower caste group of low ritual status is directly contradicted in the very claim that the Bauris have never been Hindus. This second claim of Das is based on his readings of Hunter's *Annals*:

[...]in his 1868 research work *Annals of Rural Bengal*, British scholar William Wilson Hunter said- "The legends of the ancient Sarnath distinctly preserve the struggle between the two religions. First the seat of Aboriginal or Siva worship, then converted to Buddhism by the king of Lower Bengal, finally re-conquered to Hinduism by the Conouj Brahman". The ancient Bauri community had long been following their own ancient Tantra Dhamma and much later they embraced Buddhism, alongside practicing their own Tantra dhamma. Bauri people never accepted or embraced the Hindu or Aryan religion. This is because the Aryan religion has always made distinctions between the higher and lower caste groups and has never talked of social equality- "The religion of the earlier Aryan invaders was a positive one, favouring social inequalities, and interfering with the practical life of the people: the Buddhist religion was a negative one, declaring equality between man and man, and secluding itself as much as possible from practical life. Buddhism, therefore, was a great gain to the semi-aboriginal masses of Lower Bengal." This semi-aboriginal group is a reference to the Bauri people: "The Bauris are a Low Aboriginal group". When the Bauris did not become Hindus or did not accept the Aryan religion during the Aryan invasion in the Rarh region these Bauris, their gods and goddesses got appropriated as Hindu deities and were included within the Puranic texts. Since our deities got transformed into Hindu gods, we too think that these people are Hindus. But a deeper probe will reveal this apparent mystery.¹¹⁸

As I move on to some of these 'deeper probes' he undertakes to prove the Buddhist roots of the Bauri community, Das focuses on some local 'micro' histories and narratives of common belief or folk narratives and rumour tales to substantiate his claims. In such explorations, echoing Hunter, Lord Shiva plays a pivotal role as the quintessential non-Aryan, non-Hindu aboriginal god whose Aryan/Hindu appropriation helps Das explain the mysteries behind the colonial identification (as well as contemporary) of his community as either a Hindu or a

¹¹⁸ Sunil Das, *Rarh er Adim Bauri Janogosthi*, 38.

‘semi-Hinduised’ lower caste group. Here, Das gives us localized representations of Shiva as a non-Hindu God by imaginatively exploring many local histories of Purulia, Burdwan, Bankura and Medinipur. Before elucidating his own exegesis of Buddhism by exploring various Buddhist texts or regional vernacular literatures on Buddhism in the Bengal region and Ambedkar’s *Buddha and His Dhamma*, Das resorts to such local histories to explain and establish his thesis on his community’s history—a Buddhist and non-Hindu history. He describes many Shiv temples of the region as sites of former Buddhist presence in Bauriland. For example, he describes the Manikeshwar temple near Jhunut village in Valadi of the Damodar valley area as one such instance of a Buddhist temple. He describes a local ritual called *sida* wherein village women offer various food items to Lord Manikeshwar. In Das’ estimation this term *sida* is derived from the Buddhist notion of *Siddha*:

The village of Jhunut is on the western side of Valadi. Many Bauris live there. The famous Manikeshwar temple is situated on the bank of the Damodar river in the western part of the village. Local Bauri women offer rice, various cereals, vegetables to Manikeshwar during marriage ceremonies. In the local language this is known as *sida*. This word *sida* is a Buddhist term: *sida* > *sidda* > *siddho* > *siddha*. Only the Buddhists were known as *siddhas*. One can conclusively assume that this *sida* custom has come from a Buddhist tradition. Buddhists used to gain *siddha* (*siddhilabh*) and live lives as *Bhikshus*.

Manikeshwar is a modern name. It is possible that there was a human being called Manik in this region. He was a Buddhist. He achieved *siddha* or *nirvana*. Since his death he is getting worshipped as a local God. It is only later that this got transformed into a Shiv mandir. This is also known as Manikeshwar Dham.¹¹⁹

He finds similar instances in Baidyanath Dham and Baba Chandrachur Mandir near Asansol town. According to Das, there was a famous Buddhist named Baidyanath Jadab. He was a local follower of the Buddha. After his death he has been worshipped as a god. It is obvious that these statements cannot be conclusively taken as unquestionable or unassailable ‘historical facts’. But these articulations are firmly stated by Das as he goes on imagining a Buddhist past of his community. In such imaginative histories based on local temples, local

¹¹⁹ Das, *Rarh er Adim Bauri*, 81.

proverbs and customs as well as textual evidences, Das presents many ‘Hindu’ gods and goddesses as Buddhist and tantric deities e.g., Chunda, Basuli, Mangalchandi, Chinnamasta etc. While some of these statements on his community’s Buddhist past are derived from local histories like Pradip Kumar Singha’s *Rarh Er Bouddha Tantra Bikasher Dhara*, Das also goes on to extrapolate from several Buddhist texts as well as available Bengali biographies of the Buddha and Ambedkar’s *Buddha and His Dhamma* to give his readers some knowledge about the Buddhist tantra Dhamma he thinks his community has been following. To this extent, his book *Rarh er Adim Bauri Janogosthi Ebong Tader Prachin Boddha Tantra Dhamma* can be perceived as divided into two halves. In the first part he tries to argue how his community had a Buddhist past and engages himself in some retellings like the aforementioned instances. In the second part of the book, Das is more concerned with delineating the basic tenets of his notion of the Buddhist Dhamma that he thinks Bauris used to follow. In doing this, Das deploys several methods that have telling similarities with how Ambedkar interprets Buddhism. In the chapter titled “Bouddha Dhamma”, Das describes Buddha’s teachings and presents the Buddha as a philosopher who believed in democracy, equality and fraternity. Although he draws parallelisms between the French revolution and the Buddhist revolutionary ideas that apparently contested the Brahminical darshans, he follows Ambedkar in using the sub-continental terms like *maitri*, *mudita*, *ahimsa* etc. His interpretations of some Buddhist ideas and concepts share considerable similarity with those of Ambedkar. Das echoes Ambedkar’s insistence on the Buddhist teaching of *anatta* and Buddha’s insistence on the negation of a foundationalist notion of the *atman* in a section called “Buddha r Shiksha” (“Buddha’s Teachings”). Although he does not bother to link this teaching of the Buddha on the negation of *atman* with the question of rebirth in the way Ambedkar does in his *Buddha and His Dhamma*, Das certainly follows the Ambedkarite path

in denouncing the idea of *atma*.¹²⁰ In the chapters titled “Buddha” and “Bouddha Dhmma”, Das moves beyond his usual exercises in imaginative local history in order to provide us with an unmistakably Ambedkarite ideological and philosophical template to construct a Buddhist past of the Bauri community. One finds similar exercises operating in some of his other attempts to reimagine a more recent past of his community that is chronologically coeval with the nationalist histories. Here again, one comes across methodologies that deploy imagination, intuition, speculation in order to contest the anti-colonial and nationalist historiographic projections of his community. Let me illustrate these by discussing how he reconfigures an important nationalist narrative of the ‘Chuar Bidroho’ or ‘Chuar Uprising’ that occurred in the early colonial presence in the Rarh region. I do this by exploring how he uses his available nationalist and colonial narratives and documents as well as through his efforts to render a fictionalized anti-nationalist, anti-colonial narrative in the form of a play.

3.6 Contestations of colonialist history and nationalist history through a re- imagination of “Chuar Rebellion”

The time period of ‘Chuar Rebellion’ that occurred across a large landmass in the south western part of the Bengal Presidency is somewhat debated. However, according to Sunil Das as well as other commentators on the rebellion, this happened over a long period of time from the initial phases of the British colonial presence in the Indian sub-continent in mid eighteenth century till the beginning of the nineteenth century. Abhijit Guha’s article summarises this:

One of the earliest peasant rebellions in India, the ‘Chuar Bidroha’, was against the highly exploitative land revenue policy of the British (Roy, 1966). It was the struggle of the downtrodden, toiling masses of the countryside who were exploited, oppressed and finally

¹²⁰ Ambedkar expresses his concerns about the notion of rebirth and *karma* as these concepts are often used by the Hindus to validate varna/caste. He finds it contradictory to see some practices in Buddhism that also believe/d in these ideas even though, he wonders, Buddha never believed in the notion of indestructible *atman*. In his reading of Buddhism, thus, he seeks to resolve this contradiction. For a fuller discussion of this, see the fifth chapter of this dissertation. Also, see B.R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, ed. Aakash Singh Rathore and Ajay Verma (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011) xxxi.

brutally crushed by the colonial rulers. The movement came alive during the second half of the 18th century (1760-1799) across large swathes of forests of southwestern Bengal and today's Jharkhand area, and became a nuisance to the British administrators. Interestingly, the rebellion had its epicentre at an old temple in Karnagarh, situated 8 km from Medinipur town and 129 km from Kolkata.¹²¹

During the early days of the British rule in India, many peasant and 'tribal' revolts occurred primarily due to their rapid pauperization as a result of mismanaged revenue policies of the Britishers. Although Lord Cornwallis' Permanent Settlement and the resultant land tenurial system was soon introduced in the end of the eighteenth century, a large mass primarily consisting of peasants, tribal groups and 'lower castes' had started revolting against the foreign rulers. Permanent Settlement, a complex result of early colonial governmental financial policy and the French physiocratic thought, did not improve the situation of these demographic constituencies. Instead, in many cases, as historian Ranajit Guha explains, this led to various sub-tenurial systems and led to the emergence of a new landed middle class that had very little sympathy for the impoverished rural and agricultural poor. Most of these peasant revolts that emerged during the second half of the eighteenth century were led by those impoverished groups who were desperately fighting against not just the colonial rulers but also their own native elites like the zamindars and money lenders. Indeed, Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* that studied the peasant uprisings and 'tribal' rebellions like Titu Mir's Barasat Rebellion or Sidhu Kanhu and Birsa Munda led Santhal Uprisings, has repeatedly underscored how the landless agricultural laborers of the Bengal Presidency's rural areas were fighting against the local representatives of the colonial establishment, local zamindars as well as the *sahukars* or money lenders. Guha says:

[...] the hitherto discrete powers of the landlord, the moneylender and the official came to form, under colonial rule, a composite apparatus of dominance over the peasant. His

¹²¹ Abhijit Guha, "An early freedom struggle that is still not free from the 'Chuar' label?", *Forward Press* July 10, 2018. <https://www.forwardpress.in/2018/07/an-early-freedom-struggle-that-is-still-not-free-of-the-chuar-label/>.

subjection to this triumvirate-sarkari, sahkari and zamindari- was primarily political in character, economic exploitation being only one, albeit the most obvious, of its several instances.¹²²

Although ‘Chuar Bidroho’ or ‘Chuar Rebellion’ was one of these significant peasant rebellions, Sunil Das complains, this has not been given adequate attention in most of the historical accounts of the period. Guha’s book, despite its several minor references to the Bauri community, does not pay much attention to either the caste question or the Bauri participation in the Chuar Rebellion. In his book *Rarh er Oitihashik Chuar Bidroho: 1753-1816* [The Historic Chuar Rebellion of Rarh (1753-1816)] Das reconstructs this Chuar Rebellion as one of the first struggles against the colonial establishment led by the Bauris. Although most available historical records assign the leadership of the Chuar Rebellion to local rulers like Rani Siromoni, the second wife of the Dewan of Midnapore’s Karnogarh area- Ajit Singh or her ally Maharaja Trilochon Khan of Narajole, Sunil Das considers this ‘Chuar protest’ as an act of rebellion against these local landlords and rulers as well as the colonial establishment led by his community and thus, assigns its leadership to the Dalits who participated in it, especially the Bauris. He goes on to explain his thesis by firstly pointing out the geographical location of the rebellion. Since it is already established that this rebellion occurred in places like Midnapore, Narajole, Singhbhum, Manbhum and other such areas in Rarh region, he clubs them under his broader cartographic imagination of Bauriland and thinks that there was an overwhelming presence of the Bauri people in these revolts. He starts his thesis of establishing how Chuar Rebellion was predominantly an act of revolt led by his community by underscoring the fact that there is no such constituency called ‘Chuar’. The only earlier usage tied to any such social identity that he could think of is the familiar description of his community in this region- ‘Bauri Chuar’. Echoing some of the earlier

¹²² Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999) 8.

mentioned methods that Das often deploys in reconstructing his community's past, Das argues that the name 'Chuar' originally came from the phrase 'Bauri Chuar'. Das thinks that the original phrase was a reference to the presence of small sized Buddhist *stupas* known as 'Chaitya' in most Bauri households or 'ara'. The etymological root of the word 'chuar', in his estimation comes from the word 'Choiar', an evolution or distortion of the amalgamated term 'Choiar' or 'chaitya+ara=Choiara'. While this reference to a Buddhist past of the Bauris continues with his other explorations into the community's past as well as an Ambedkarite ideological template, this particular socio-linguistic analysis provides him with a 'proof' to establish the Chuar Rebellion as essentially a 'Bauri Rebellion'. This work of historical imagination cannot be meticulously established even though it operates as an 'evidence'. However, Sunil Das makes several extrapolations from various colonial documents to 'corroborate' his analysis. Das quotes from many such sources and texts prepared by W. B. Oldham, W.W. Hunter and L.S.S. O'Malley. His most immediate of these colonial sources is Oldham's reference to the Bauris as 'unmitigated Chuars' that I have already mentioned earlier in this chapter. But he also exploits other sources like the District Gazette Report of Midnapore prepared by a colonial civil servant L.S.S. O'Malley. He quotes from O'Malley's document:

The first persistent disturbers of the peace, however, were the Chuars. This term signifies in Bengali "an outlandish fellow" and was applied in Midnapore to the wild tribes who inhabited the Jungle Mahals and the tracts beyond them. The following parganas, all of which are situated in the west or north-west of the district were included in the Jungle Mahals: Brahmanbhum, Bagri, Bhanjabhum, Bahadurpur, Dharinda, Diparoi, Chiara, Nayabasan, Baliabera, Jhargram, Jambani, Kalyanpur, Silda or Jhatibani, Rohini-Mabhandar, Dipa, Kiarchand, Lalgah, or Sankakulia and Ramgarh. ¹²³

What is striking in these two colonial descriptions about the Chuars is not simply the connections that can be roughly made between the words 'chuar' and 'Bauri' but their

¹²³ Sunil Das, *Rarher Oitihashik Choar Bidroho: Bharatbarshe Sarboprothom Swadhinata Sangram* (Kolkata: Choturtha Duniya, 2009) 33.

constant perception of the chuars or Bauris as ‘unmitigated, outlandish’ people without any sense of history and hence a sense of civilization. It is this assertion of G.W.F. Hegel’s philosophy of history (i.e., ‘no history’ implies ‘no civilization’) in the colonial documents and the Bauri responses to such colonial perceptions that become extremely important in my engagements with their Dalit historiographic imagination. Although Das enunciates the term ‘chuar’ and traces its Buddhist roots in his ‘socio-linguistic’ study, he is compelled to respond to this term used in a derogatory sense even in modern contemporary colloquial Bangla. While Das uses these colonial documents to get an outline of his community’s revolutionary past and their imagined or real participation in the Chuar Rebellion, his discomfort with such civilizational and historicist terms is of extreme significance here. Das, in his response to this dismissive and derogatory tone in the colonial documents, assigns such association of his community with the stigma of being ‘chuar’ in these texts to the colonial dependency on native elites to form their knowledge about the ‘lower’ sections of the population. Das thinks that this perception of his community as ‘unmitigated’ and ‘outlandish’ happened primarily because the caste Hindus have traditionally seen them as such and the colonial establishment relied heavily on such casteist perceptions. What we see here is a schema of the Bauri historical imagination wherein the native elite is shown as the close collaborators and agents of the colonial rule. This is not just the view of community-historians like Sunil Das but also suggested by researchers on this insurgency. The deputy director of the West Bengal State Archives writes along this line of argument in an essay on the Chuar Rebellion published in the *Ethnic Studies Review*:

What is commonly known as the Chuar rebellion was mainly a revolt of the Paiks and Chuars. The Adivasis living in the jungle mahal were commonly called Chuars since the medieval period as Sri Chaitanya, the Vaishnava apostle of Bengal, passing through the area in 1509, described these tribal communities as "pirates gathered on the rivers, and robbers on the land." A similar perception was found in Kalketu Upakhyān, as Kavikānkan Mukundaram Chakraborty called them Chooars. Jogesh Chandra Basu took the Chuar to mean "outlandish fellow," and the name was applied in Midnapore to the wild tribes who inhabited the jungle mehal and the tracts beyond them. The ethnic groups of South-West Bengal, according to the

narratives of District Gazetteer, were mainly aborigines composed of Kurmi, Santal, Bhumij, Bauri, Kora, Mahli and Munda and other communities.¹²⁴

While Das' exact descriptions are partly textual and partly amateurish and might be perceived with a dismissive eye by a pedantic professional historian, this broader arc of historical argument is not entirely absent in the scholarly works on peasant insurgencies in colonial Bengal. Guha's monumental work *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* explains how most of these peasant insurgencies were not only attacking the colonial representatives and their offices but were also burning and destroying the properties of the local zamindars and money lenders. Das's reconstruction of the Chuar rebellion as a Bauri rebellion is thus coeval with the descriptions of similar rebellions that we come across in Guha's book. In his historical reconfiguration of this period of Bauri history, Das shows us how local rulers like Rani Siromoni or her ally Trilochon Khan were the ones who sided with the colonial rulers to exploit large rural masses to the point of extinction and famine. Das' book *Rarh er Oitiharik Choar Bidroho* (1753-1816) articulates his vision of the Bauri uprising as a lesser known and yet an important anti-colonial peasant uprising. It is described neither as an instance of the mobilisations in the nationalist movement nor in terms of a pro-colonizer perspective of an oppressed group in the native society i.e., Bauris:

The leaders or *sardars* of the Chuar Rebellion fought guerrilla warfare in different parts of Midnapore, Bankura, Manbhum, Barabhum and Singhbhum. Their leader in Midnapore region was Gobardhan Bauri. He defeated Rani Bhabani and Rani Siromoni in 1753. Later, Raja Trilochon Khan of Narajole fought against the Chuars on behalf of Rani Siromoni and recaptured Karnagarh after defeating them in 1756. The Chuar Rebellion of Manbhum was being led by Gobinda Mana Bauri. Dhalbhum's local ruler was Jagannath Dhula Bauri. Britishers took away his small-scale zamindari and land rights by force. Therefore, the Chuar rebellion of Dhalbhum was led by Jagannath Dhula Bauri. Singhbhum's Lakshman Digar Bauri led the rebellion in his area [...] Thousands of Bauris sacrificed their lives in this Chuar Rebellion that went on for more than sixty-three years. These Bauris fought to get back the lands that have traditionally belonged to them. Agriculture was their only livelihood. Most people of the Bauri community have always been farmers. Their ancestors cleaned up these

¹²⁴ While Bhattacharya's usage of the term 'tribal' is not without problems, his references to precolonial use of the term 'chuar' as implying 'uncouth' or 'outlandish' behavior is certainly of significance to corroborate the claims made by Das. See Ananda Bhattacharya, "Tribal-Led Peoples' Resistance in Transition: 1765-1800, *Ethnic Studies Review*.

forest areas and tilled them to convert them into agricultural lands. It was these lands that the local zamindars as well as the Britishers forcefully confiscated from them. They also imposed extreme levels of taxation and revenue systems. This is why the Chuar Rebellion happened. This was not a fight of one Badshah against another or one king against another. This was a people's uprising against both the zamindars and the British rulers.¹²⁵

This history is re-imagined by both a non-fictional account like the aforementioned book and through an instance of what we can call 'Bangla Dalit Natok' or Bangla Dalit drama- *Choar Bidroho: Bharatbarsher Prothom Swadhinata Sangram*. Das describes it as 'Oitihashik Jatra Natok' or as a 'A Historical Jatra Play'. In this play published in 2009, Das extends this anti-colonial and anti-nationalist imagination of his community's past through the lens of caste. Most popular narratives of the Karnagar region of Midnapore describe the Chuar Rebellion as Rani Shiromoni's anti-colonial protest against the British East India Company in the initial days of its existence in the 1760s. This popular narrative is not just symbolically represented in the form of the passenger train called Rani Shiromoni Express that runs from Kolkata to Midnapore but finds its presence in various history books. In her book *Participation and Position of Women of 1857: Redefinition of Social Status Then and Now*, Dr. Kirti Narain describes the queen as the leader of the Chuar uprising.¹²⁶ A review article on the book summarises the spirit in which Rani Shiromoni is described by Narain in her book:

In the Midnapore district of West Bengal Rani Shiromani, queen of the chuar or tribal farmers led the first revolt of tribal farmers against the British in 1798. The Rani refused to pay revenue to the British East India Company and proclaimed that whoever dared to come to ask for money from them would not leave the village alive.¹²⁷

But the play by Das disagrees with this thesis. His play's narrative time begins with the first Bauri-Chuar uprising in 1753 against the Karnagar estate of Ajit Singh and Rani Shiromoni

¹²⁵ Das, *Rarh er Oitihashik Chuar Bidroho*, 34.

¹²⁶ Kirti Narain, *Participation and Position of Women of 1857: Redefinition of Social Status Then and Now* (Mumbai: Himalaya Publishing House, 2017).

¹²⁷ Mehru Jaffer, "Women of Courage who Challenged the British", *The Citizen*, 1st December, 2016. <https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/9/9315/Women-of-Courage-Who-Challenged-the-British>.

and then moves through its evolution only to culminate in a fight against the British regimes in 1799. The last scene of this one-act play however brings the readers back to 2007 with descriptions of a gathering of Bauri community people who do not want to see their fight vanishing in the pages of history and decide to remember the Chuar Uprising by commemorating it every year on 15th January as the “Chuar Dibash” or “Chaur Day”. The first scene of the play opens in the palace of Karnagarh where Raja Ajit Singh and Rani Shiromoni discuss how the Bauri-Chuars are disobeying their rule and refusing to pay their revenue. In the statements of the protagonist of the play and the leader of the Bauri-Chuars, Gobardhan Dikpoti, Rani Shiromoni is certainly not shown as the leader of the Chuars as the local colonial rulers often mistakenly assumed. On the contrary, Gobardhan Dikpoti and his men consider her as their arch enemy at least in the initial years of their uprisings in the 1750s. Although the Bauris register an initial victory against the Karnagarh estate, in the next few scenes we witness a reversal of the situation in favour of Rani Shiromoni. Shiromoni, with the help of the neighbouring ruler Triolochon Khan of Narajole ultimately defeats the Bauris led by Gobardhan Dikpoti. The subsequent scenes of the play describe how Dikpoti and his followers hide in different parts of the Rarh region and try to consolidate themselves for another attack. During this phase, we get glimpses of the British atrocities on the local Bauri population and how they coerce them into submission with the active help of local upper caste people. Most scenes of this middle part of the play underscore such collaborations between the native elite and the colonial establishment. In a conversation between Lord Clive and his local agent and upper caste ‘go-between’ Mr. Kali Banerjee, Clive mocks Banerjee for not knowing enough of the history of the region or the Bauri people. Here one not only sees the reflection of Mr. Oldham’s comments on the Bauri community as a *jati* without any knowledge of history but also recognize the centrality of history or historical knowledge of the colonized people in the colonial discourse. Most of

these scenes document how the Bauri people were simultaneously exploited by the local zamindars, money-lenders and the early colonial establishment. In the next pivotal point in the narrative set in Midnapore of 1766, the Bauri leader Gobardhan Dikpoti and his men undertake a fierce attack on the oppressive ruler of the region Shatrughna Choudhury. Although this attack is successful and Choudhury and his son are forced to escape from their zamindari, it ends in a fiercely fought battle between the Bauri-Chuars and the Britishers. The narrative time then shifts to 1799. At a place near the Biharinath hill, Dikpoti and his followers assemble to surmount a large- scale attack on the British establishment. It is through his conversations with his people that we get to know the Buddhist past of the Biharinath region as well as various critiques of the colonial revenue policies. In one such conversation, Dikpoti informs:

Malinda: Got to hear that the British government is now taking away our lands under the permanent settlement policy. Is that right?

Gobardhan: Yes, you have heard it right. English East India company comes up with new policies every now and then. In 1786, Lord Cornwallis assumed the role of the Governor General. He came up with a stable system of revenue collection. Previously, it was a system called *panchshala*. But Lord Hastings changed it to annual revenue collection method. In 1790, the revenue collection system got changed into *dash shala*. Now, with the Permanent Settlement policy, zamindari has become hereditary. Zamindars will now appoint their own people for revenue collection. Poor farmers like us will be forced by the paiks, barkandajs and lathials to pay more taxes. According to Cornwallis' rule, local zamindars can now confiscate and forfeit our land rights on the pretext that we are not paying them adequate revenue.¹²⁸

This point in the narrative time of the play set in 1799 culminates into the largest uprising of the Bauris under the leadership of Gobardhan Dikpoti. He assembles other leaders of the Bauri-Chuars from the neighbouring regions of Dholbhum and Manbhum and attempts his best attack on the British establishment of the region. This leads to a fierce fight in which all the Bauri leaders including Gobardhan Dikpoti die. This last part ends not only with the unfortunate and fatal defeat of Dikpoti and his men, but also includes colonial assertions that

¹²⁸ Sunil Das, *Chuar Bidroho: Bharatbarshe Sarboprothom Swadhinata Sangram Oitihashik Natok (Oitihashik Jattrar Natok)* (Kolkata: Chaturtha Duniya, 2009) 81.

underscore the liaison between caste Hindus and the Britishers. In one such statements, Lord Wellesley, the then Govern General, boastfully states:

I will not spare these Bauri-Chuars. Are they showing patriotism or what? What kind of weapons do these lower castes have to fight our military prowess? Do you know the kind of weapons we have? We have some of the most modern weapons like pistols, guns and canons. All the upper castes are also with us. We have made them the zamindars. We have given them jobs in our offices. They are our stooges now. We get all the information from them. It is those upper caste fellows of your country who are describing these uprisings of such lowly people as 'Bauri-Chuars rebellion'. Sepoy, ask the collector to come and meet me right now.

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Thus Das' imagination of the Bauri past involves a simultaneous debunking of many nationalist representations of episodes like the Chuar Rebellion and a contestation of the colonialist framework through which Bauri-Chuars are seen as 'uncivilised' people. It will be hasty to simply identify such articulations of imagined pasts either in terms of their wholesale subscription to the civilisational templates of the colonial historiography or an elitist nationalist historiography seeking to accommodate and assimilate these narratives. Thus, despite many historicist assumptions through which Das articulates his visions of a Buddhist, anti-Brahminical, anti-caste past of his community, these fictionalised accounts of local histories of the Rarh region do not offer convenient templates of historiography. These Bauri imaginations of past occur as responses to colonial and nationalist historiographic projections of his community. But his Ambedkarite anti-caste politics as well as his different methods of such historical imagination lead us to a historiographic framework beyond the convenient identification of such thoughts as either mythical/non-modern or excessively statist or 'modern'. As I move on to the next section wherein the Bauri idea of an imagined spatial and cartographical notion of what Das calls 'Bauriland', these ambivalences continue to unfold.

¹²⁹ Das, *Chuar Bidroho*, 90.

3.7 Bauriland movement¹³⁰

In 2008, the anti-caste publishing house Navayana published a book titled *Seeking Begumpura* by Gail Omvedt, a noted writer on caste, Ambedkar and the socio-political history of Buddhism in India. This book, in Omvedt's own words, is a critical analysis of the anti-caste utopian visions of traditionally 'lower caste' anti-Brahminic 'organic intellectuals' emerging from the Dalit-Bahujan masses over a period of roughly five centuries. In this long list, the readers are persuaded to start a journey of familiarizing themselves with utopian visions of Bhakti radicals like Kabir, Ravidas' utopia – Begumpura or 'a city without sorrows', Kartabhajas of Bengal, Periyar's, Phule's and Ambedkar's visions of a caste-less, class-less society. While she does this, she positions these Dalit/Bahujan utopias in opposition to other forms of utopian imagination in Indian society. She asserts that these subaltern (in her language 'caste subalterns') visionaries were creating a utopian discourse that was radically different from the utopian visions like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's Hindutva utopia of Bharatbarsha or Gandhi's Hindu utopian society of Ram Rajya. In other words, Omvedt's polemical comparativism instigates us to think of the subaltern utopian visions in India as not just different from Thomas Moore's *Utopia* but also as spatial imaginations radically different from such utopian visions of Gandhi or Savarkar. According to Omvedt, these utopian political imaginations of Gandhi or Savarkar are loaded with Brahminical Hinduism. To push such propositions further, we might say that we have utopian visions of traditionally 'lower caste' organic intellectuals formed on the basis of coveted ideals like liberty, equality and fraternity and on the other hand, Omvedt argues, we have a similarly long list of Brahminical utopias based on a romantic eulogization of traditional

¹³⁰ An earlier version of this part of the chapter was first presented at an international conference "Contemporary Approaches to the Analysis of Dalit Literature" organized by the Nottingham Trent University, UK on 24th June, 2014.

Indian rural life. In two contiguous paragraphs in the introduction to this book, Omvedt describes these two sides. To illustrate, let me quote her *in extenso*:

In fact, the first formulation of an *Indian* version of utopia comes not from elite literature, but from one of the anticaste intellectuals with a mass following. The Bhakti radical, Sant Ravidas (c.1450-1520), was the first to formulate an Indian version of utopia in his song “Beg[h]ampura”. Begumpura, the ‘city without sorrow’, is a casteless, classless society; a *modern* society, one without a mention of temples; an *urban society* contrasted with Gandhi’s *village utopia* of Ram Rajya.¹³¹

She continues:

Elite intellectuals sought to absorb challenges from the class-caste subalterns, developing their vision of India, which took multiple forms: the ‘hard hindutva’ of Savarkar, which saw India as basically a Hindu nation, the ‘soft hindutva’ of Gandhi which looked to an idealized Ram Rajya as a goal, the mild socialism of Nehru, and the harder leftism of communists.¹³²

In this section of this chapter, I would like to draw attention to such methodological and ideological binaries by using Omvedt’s book as a symptomatic site of contemporary pedagogical, epistemological notions on caste and the Dalit struggle. My point of intervention to do so would be to exploit an apparently utopian vision of the Bauri community in contemporary West Bengal. This site of intervention, based on my critical engagements with the cultural, social and religious lives of Bauris, inevitably draws attention to certain contradictions in contemporary academic engagements with caste and subalternity. But before I initiate such a project, I need to stay a little more with Omvedt. Omvedt, in the introduction to this book, engages with loaded terms like ‘modernity’, ‘Enlightenment discourse’ and so on. I call such terms ‘loaded’ not to re-establish or reaffirm the long tradition of such notions and ideas but to point out how these ideas are situated in Omvedt’s monograph and the persistent critique of them done by the Subaltern Studies school of thought. My reference to Subaltern Studies can be thought of as speaking for itself if we look at Omvedt’s interesting utterances related to the Subaltern Studies luminaries like Partha

¹³¹ Gail Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anti-Caste Intellectuals* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2016), 7.

¹³² Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura*, 7-8.

Chatterjee or Dipesh Chakrabarty. It is well known that Chakrabarty, Chatterjee and Pandey have criticized the discourses of nationalism, modernity and the long, towering presence of the European Enlightenment thought in the narratives of India's post-colonial modernity and nationalism. It seems that Omvedt considers such critiques as a practice of a regressive romanticism in the garb of post-modernism as she quotes Vasant Kaiwar's criticism of Dipesh Chakrabarty:

As Vasant Kaiwar points out, in an analysis of one of the well-known Indian postmodernists, "All [of Dipesh Chakrabarty's] stock critiques of historicism and metanarratives, of Marx's myopia about difference, the advocacy of fragments, different ways of being-in-the-world are so many codes for rejecting the Utopian imagination and transformative praxis". Postmodernism in fact harks back to premodern romanticism in that it locates whatever ecstasy is possible in the present, banning the future and *efforts to move forward* to it as oppressive grand narratives, making 'Enlightenment reason' into a curse.¹³³

Indeed, Gail Omvedt seems to be quite right when we listen to Dipesh Chakrabarty's lecture delivered at the University of Rhode Island in 2009.¹³⁴ In this lecture Chakrabarty sarcastically criticizes the Dalits for being obsessed with the urban life and aspiring to make a presence in urban India. It is needless to say that such utterances are unimaginably superficial when one looks at the 'absence' of the Dalits in the Indian urban space. To portray Ambedkar as 'an unalloyed modernist' or to think of the Dalit struggle as the primary, the strongest and most assertive location of urbanity, modernity and the 'common sense of the modern' (to borrow Gyandra Pandey's phrase) is to commit some sort of an epistemic violence. Thus, I do not intend to dismiss Omvedt's statement by classifying it either as an angry polemic or as an ideal example of *philippikos*. But we need to take notice of some of the contradictions in her own narrative. For me, such contradictions can only strengthen the 'stock critiques' of the Subaltern Studies scholars and might prove her arguments to be self-defeating. But more significantly, such contradictions can never entirely take cognizance of the highly

¹³³ Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura*, 14.

¹³⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Indian Modernity: Once Local, Now Global", YouTube video lecture, September 30, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ABmMC6zC8I>.

heterogeneous aspects of such collective community acts of imagination. The word ‘heterogeneous’ might prove to be more useful as I move ahead in my argument. This signifier, in its constant interactions with the ‘homogenous empty time’ of the nation-state might confuse and frustrate our existing perceptions about the collective, transformative praxis of utopian imagination.

In the first quotation from Omvedt’s introduction that I have invoked includes certain key words for us. As she describes her arguments, intention, methodologies, she mentions phrases and words like ‘Indian version of utopia’, ‘modern society’ and ‘urban society’ or ‘efforts to move forward to modern society’. She uses all of these words/ phrases with their multi-layered connotations by associating them with the Dalit utopian visions as her illustrative examples. In a sub-heading in the same chapter- “Contradictions of Modernity”- she briefly but firmly discusses the ‘contradictions’ as inevitable characteristics of modernity. But, unlike the Subaltern studies historians, Omvedt does not find anything wrong with the overall logic of the Enlightenment reason itself. She begins by dissecting and showing the blatant lie- “India shining proclaim its fans”. It is followed by an important caveat: “Modernity is riven with contradictions”. Then comes a statement that can only remind us of the civilisational indictment of the discourse of colonialism as something that has been embedded in the metanarratives of the Enlightenment thought: “Every country experiences such contradictions, yet India, as it takes its place in the third millennia modern era, seems to have more than its share.”¹³⁵ Evidently, such statement, if pushed to its logical conclusion, implies that caste/patriarchy/ ethnic clashes are socio-political anachronisms that forces India’s forward march to be slowed down. India’s burden, she believes, is heavier than the politically and socially ‘advanced’ nation-states. Such a teleological utterance can only satisfy the collective ego of Subaltern studies intellectuals. For me, such statements like that

¹³⁵ Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura*, 9.

of Omvedt or such sweeping generalizations of the Subaltern historiography are puzzling and quite misleading tropes to understand Dalit histories as I keep grappling with my interactions with various notions of ‘time’ and ‘space’ in this part of this chapter. While utopian visions inevitably remind us of ‘space’, I contest, it is also an imperative to link it with the notion of ‘time’ and how various subaltern constituencies imagine ‘time’ or ‘history’ as a constitutive element of their assumed utopias.

My interpretation of the term might imply that ‘Bauriland’, like many such ethnic-political movements, is a term that has been coined by the local inhabitants of a certain ethnic or linguistic identity (Bauris in this case) in order to claim a separate state. Similar examples like Kamtapuri or Gorkhaland movements can be found in the present history of Bengal’s politics. Such a preconceived notion must be kept aside by asserting a disclaimer in order to take notice of its colonial origin. As I go along, this disclaimer will prove to be a telling one. Our observations should also be punctuated by another fact that this idea of the ‘Bauriland’, till date, remains more or less a discursive construction. Unlike Kamtapuri or Gorkhaland movements, it seems Bauris are not obsessed with the idea of a separate state or a sub-nationalist claim. As I proceed, this issue might also prove to be quite a loaded once it is observed through the looking glass of a ‘heterotopian’ perspective. Here, as I explain it later, I use the term ‘heterotopia’ in the way Michel Foucault has described it in his essay “Of Other Spaces”. The idea of Bauriland, as the qualifier ‘idea’ suggests, is an act of collective imagination of the Bauris. Even though the idea was initially produced by the colonial ethnography on this region, it has been reformulated or re-imagined and reinvented by this subaltern social constituency. But a crucial difference that separates it from other such imagined utopian spatial arrangements by the Dalits in other parts of India, is how it has actual geographical and cartographical referential space in the map of West Bengal. This one has got its ‘real’ existence in the sense that Bauris think of this as a land that consists of a

large part of the South-Western districts like Midnapur, Bankura, Burdwan, Purulia and parts of the present-day Bihar and Orissa. It is obvious that such imagined geographical space cannot be found in the political or economic maps drawn by the government/state sponsored cartographers. Such collective imagination, therefore, exploits colonial constructions and distorts the given/ assumed legitimacy or normalcy of post-colonial governmentality. To recognize this is to initiate a possibility of a heterotopian perspective to look at such imagination. If Foucault's quasi-structuralist perspective conceptualizes heterotopias as spaces that are both real and virtual, then the idea of Bauriland can be thought of as an 'other space' and not essentially a 'no-where' utopian spatial arrangement as Omvedt might persuade us to believe. However, such possibilities should also be informed by the elements of 'discontinuity', 'changeability' and 'ensemble of relations' that populate such 'heterogeneous space'. This becomes more self-evident once I take up the notion of 'time' and 'history' as conceived by the Bauris.

The idea of 'Bauriland' was first conceived by the colonial ethnographer W.B. Oldham. According to Sunil Das, this word was first used by Oldham in 1889. We must remember that Oldham was a colonial officer- a collector-magistrate and his opinions about the Bauris are loaded with an imperialist bias. In the colonial Bengal District Gazetteers Report of Burdwan (1889), Oldham describes the Bauris as a community with 'no past, no present and no future'. In his book, *Bauriland*, Sunil Das expresses his profound discomfort with such a sweeping comment on his community by a British colonial administrator and anthropologist. It is interesting to notice that such colonial construction of a geographical territory 'infested' and not simply 'inhabited' by a 'backward' community (a community without history/civilisation) is being reproduced with an apparently different connotation and its changed dynamics of power relations. Therefore, it would be a dangerous simplification to assume that the concept of Bauriland is a simple utopian construction of a marginalized social

constituency. The trajectory of this evolution of the signifier 'Bauriland' should be taken into account. However, such project should always take cognizance of how human identity is both ambivalent and contingent and consequently the cultural, literary retelling of the 'history' of this region by the members of the community should not be looked at in terms of a linear progression of time that can then be easily translated into an imaginable 'utopian' space.

In books like *Bauriland*, *Bauri Janogosthir Bibartaner Itihas (The History of the Evolution of Bauri Community)*, *Rarh Sobhyota o Bauriland (Rarh Civilisation and Bauriland)*, Bauri writer Sunil Das tries to create a narrative that aspires to provide them with a concrete knowledge of their past or in other words, these books try to inform his Bauri brethren about their past so that they can critically analyse their present degradation and seek to work against it to have a better future. As we go through these texts, however, such a projection of linear time gets severely disrupted. In their efforts to look for the history or origin of the Bauri community, Das and other writers and activists from the Bauri community claim that their origin goes back to the ancient times when the great Himalaya was created out of the Tethys sea. In such exploitations of the plate tectonic theory, Das declares that after the birth of Himalaya, the earlier Gondwana plate became the repository where pebbles, stones, sediments of different kinds carried by the rivers got deposited and this eventually formed the arid, red soil of the present day south-western West Bengal. As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, according to Das, their ancestral origin can be traced back to the Negroid or Proto-Australoid people. If we believe his curious hybrid narrative of anthropology, geography and history, then the Bauris belong to the Munda/ Mundari community of the region. Such a reference to a 'pre-historic' past creates the ground for further elaborations. Das informs us that this community's peaceful life got disturbed because of the later invasion of the Aryan race. Earlier traditions of religious rituals, as per Das's account had nothing Brahminical about it. During the advent of Buddhism, Bauris also

embraced Buddhism and thus engendered their Buddha Tantra Dhamma. Later, during the Sena dynasty in Bengal many of them were forced to be semi-Hinduised and lost their social status because of the lower ritual status where they were placed by the new Kulin Brahminical ideology patronized by the Sena kings. Therefore, during the colonial era, Bauris found themselves sandwiched between the two different systems of exploitation- British colonial and native elites who also worked as what Frantz Fanon calls the colonial ‘go-betweens’. Thus, their present degradation is a result of such violent episodes in the history of the Bauri community. Such a narrative might be called ‘inauthentic’, purposely created, politically motivated distorted construction of the past. But, for our present concern, this ‘why’ is less important than ‘how’. How does he create such a narrative? This should be the question that we must ask. Das proceeds to argue that it is through this knowledge of their past that they will fully realize their present degradation and aspire to have a better future. Let me twist this narrative a little and it sounds like this- “We had a prosperous past but our present is horrible. If we can make ourselves aware, we can have a similar or more prosperous future.” Nivedita Menon, in her critical introduction to a collection of essays written by Partha Chatterjee- *Empire and Nation*, points out that unlike the nationalist conception of time, for most of the subaltern constituencies, their past was something that they were happy to leave behind.¹³⁶ For them their past meant oppression, inequality, exploitation and subjugation. Menon, while commenting upon Chatterjee’s writings on modernity, asks an important question- “Whose modernity is this?” Her reference to a female Dalit student in Savitribai Phule’s school can be cited as an example of such perception of time. Indeed, for most Dalits, colonial modernity brought a unique opportunity to leave behind their degraded past. Even those pre-colonial Dalit visions that Omvedt narrates think of time as a linear trajectory that started with a ruined past and a promise of a new future or a

¹³⁶ Partha Chatterjee, *Empire and Nation: Selected Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

new beginning. But the Bauris are more inclined to build the narrative of their pre-colonial and pre-Brahminic past – a past that is more or less unalloyed. This narrative conceptualizes time in a way that departs from the dominant Brahminical notion of cyclical time. It is not the cyclical time of *Satya*, *Treta*, *Dwapar* and *Kali* that can be recycled *ad infinitum*. But this notion of time is, at least seemingly, like the nationalist conception of time that seeks to invoke a romantic, idyllic past that got disrupted due to the external intervention or invasion of ‘foreign’ elements. Yet it is also not compatible with that notion of time in the sense that the nationalist time (or at least a particular variation of it) looks at the non-modern social ‘curses’ or internal ‘problems’ in order to constitute their extremely ambivalent and deeply contradictory notion of time and nationalist modernity. Here, my intention is not to show the limitations of any discursive comparativism; rather I intend to focus on a particular aspect identifiable in such acts of collective imagination as Bauriland. The crucial word for us is ‘simultaneity’. In his 1967 lecture on ‘Other Spaces’, Michel Foucault puts an emphasis on simultaneity in the formation of any idea of spatial arrangement and concomitant heterochronic perceptions of time and interestingly Foucault links it with ‘history’:

The Great obsession of nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis, and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men and menacing glaciations of the world.... We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed.¹³⁷

The Bauriland movement is an idea or, as I describe it – a discursive heterotopia- that asserts it’s claim by utilizing an originally colonial signifier loaded with the imperialist generalization and colonial racism. The Bauris twist it and appropriate it to constitute a discursive arrangement of spatiality that is also anti-Brahminical in both its ideological sense and in the perception of ‘time’ (unlike the Brahminical notion of cyclical time). It looks

¹³⁷ Michel Foucault, “Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias”, last modified November 19, 2020, . <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>.

somewhat similar to the nationalist homogenous time and yet it interrogates every homogenizing attempt of the nationalist historiography. Bauris claim that they used to practice an ancient ritualistic religion and later embraced Buddhism and yet shows many signs of being Hindu. They maintain that they are still practicing Buddhists and on other hand allow themselves to be identified either as a 'semi-Hinduised community' by the colonial government or as Hindu Dalits who can be the beneficiaries of the affirmative action policies. Bauris continue to look for their distinct cultural, religious roots and also identify themselves as Dalits on the basis of their shared history of struggle. It is this 'to and fro' nature of this conceptualization that creates a curious intersection of 'bound' and 'unbound serialities'; it creates intersections of homogenous empty time and heterogeneous 'discontinuities of time'. Bauriland might be interpreted as a utopia and yet it refuses to be a simple utopia collectively imagined by a historically marginalized community on the basis of those two important elements that Omvedt points out- 'reason' and 'ecstasy'. It is a utopia in the sense that there is no such place or there is no such geo-political entity. But it is also 'real' (in an everyday phenomenological sense of the term) because this imagination can actually be located at a particular geographical region i.e., Rarh of South-Western Bengal. However, this is also not a 'no-where place' in another sense. Let me illustrate it briefly even though I have already made a passing reference to this 'sense'.

I have already drawn attention to the fact that this idea of 'Bauriland' is quite different from other such political claims based on a 'different' identity like that of Gorkhaland or Kamtapuri movements that articulate their collective acts of imagination through a demand to have a separate state. In contradistinction with such penchants, Sunil Das and other Bauri writers, poets, activists, playwrights who constantly talk about 'Bauriland' seem to be quite lackadaisical about translating such idea into a separate state. Almost at the end of his book, *Bauriland*, Das addresses this issue unenthusiastically. Das observes:

Why have we not demanded a separate state? In reply to such a question, we can say that the idea to form a separate state did not occur to us at that time (when they initiated this act of imagining Bauriland).¹³⁸

At a time when the sub-nationalist claims of all sorts often vehemently demand to be transformed into sovereign political entities, this is worth some attention. Benedict Anderson underscores this penchant of sub-nationalist articulations to give birth to many nations that are culled out of one nation in his book *Imagined Communities*. Speaking about the continuous assertion of nationalist sentiments and its pre-eminence in the domain of world politics, Anderson says:

Almost every year the United Nations admits new members. And many 'old nations', once thought fully consolidated, find themselves challenged by 'sub'-nationalisms within their borders-nationalisms which, naturally, dream of shedding this sub-ness one happy day.¹³⁹

Given such tendencies that Anderson generalizes as the global political trends that serve as vindication of his observations on the centrality of 'nationalism' as the central trope of global politics, this reply is not followed by any future possibility or mobilization for demanding a separate state. Das, in subsequent paragraphs never makes a single reference to this issue. Yet in innumerable short stories, poems, research articles and books and plays, this 'idea' of Bauriland or Rarh Civilisation is constantly invoked, reiterated and celebrated. What kind of mass imagination is this if it does not aspire for a separate state within the geographical and geopolitical limits of the modern Indian nation-state or cull itself out of the body-politic of the Indian nation-state? It seems to be more of a culturally constructed discursive phenomenon. One can trace a Foucauldian 'double logic' that sustains the distinctness of the Bauri identity and *simultaneously* undermines the presumed 'normalcy' of the Nation-state.

¹³⁸ Sunil Das, *Bauriland*, 58. (my added note in parenthesis).

¹³⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, 2006) 3.

Foucault in the 'Fourth Principle' described in his "Of Other Spaces: Utopia and Heterotopia", discusses those heterotopic sites such as museums and libraries that indefinitely accumulate time. If Bauriland is a heterotopia it seems to be a discursive heterotopia – an imagined spatial arrangement where the political, cultural, social and religious histories (both present and past) are accumulated. In other words, this heterotopic imagination is envisioned through a 'heterochronia'. Instead of libraries and museums that require greater material resources to be built, this discursive heterotopia accumulates time for the Bauris. It is 'a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages.' Let us remind ourselves once again that it is the 'ravages of time' that such collective acts of imagination try to address.

Commenting on the problems of anti-colonial Third World utopian imagination, Ashis Nandy draws our attention to how one utopian imagination, once realized, can become tyrannical for others.¹⁴⁰ Referring to such possibilities of these 'nowhere' spaces Nandy underlines the inevitable exclusionary tendencies of utopias. In his estimation, many competing utopias can and must speak to each other and yet one utopian vision can devour and overshadow another. He cites the example of how orientalist scholars gave birth to the problematic power relations in a colonial scenario even when there were conversations between various Indian and western imaginations of ideal spaces. He juxtaposes this with another instance wherein these visions often get translated into nativist arguments, especially when it comes to the conversations between Third World (Indian) nationalist utopian imagination and the caste question. His example is that of Anand Coomaraswamy who was not ready to think of caste in terms of its oppressive dimensions. Nandy thinks that such foreclosures are common in the discourses of the utopian imaginations in our postcolonial

¹⁴⁰ Ashis Nandy, "Evaluating Utopias: Considerations for a Dialogue of Cultures and Faiths", *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992) 1-19.

contexts. Das' idea of Bauriland, to borrow from Nandy's vocabulary, is more in the domain of 'unrealised utopias' or alternatively, Foucault's heterotopia. Its reluctance to translate itself into a political articulation of 'sub-nationalist' claims that Anderson sees as an increasing tendency in world politics, draws our attention to this aspect of the 'Bauriland' imagination. It is neither a dogmatic nativism based on claims of autochthony nor is this an articulation of a purely utopian vision along Omvedt's line of thought.

Chapter III

Whose Country is this? Re-imagining history in the Dalit Writings from Jangle Mahals

4.1 Jungle Mahals and its Dalits

The name 'Jungle Mahals' refers to the British India district in the south western part of West Bengal that consists of large forest areas. Literally translated it means 'jungle estates'. In the colonial British India's district gazette reports, especially in the gazette reports on Midnapore and Bankura, we come across references to this area as 'jungle mahalas'. L.S.S. O'Malley's Bankura Gazette report that I have already referred in the last chapter on Bauri writings, also makes several references to these arid forest areas as Jungle Mahals.¹⁴¹ Although some colonial documents like L.S.S. O'Malley's district Gazetteers did mention it, the geo-political term 'Jangal Mahal'/ Jungle Mahal came into much political traction during the political rise of the Trinamool Congress Party and the slow 'demise' of the Left front political establishment in the south-western part of the state. While this term captures a new kind of electoral politics that seems to be forced to consider the political necessity and significance of the tribal and Dalit populations of the arid south western parts of the state of West Bengal (consisting of districts like Jhargram, Paschim Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia), its remoteness and distance from the political epicentre of Kolkata is also written into the cultural and electoral politics of the region. Its rising Maoist insurgent politics had been a matter of considerable political turmoil during the last phase of the Left regime. Its proximity with the neighbouring states like Jharkhand and Orissa, its Maoist-Naxalite politics, land reforms movements and its sizeable number of Dalit and tribal constituencies have not only added to its political significance but also shaped its cultural and literary narratives,

¹⁴¹ L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Bankura* (Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1908).

especially literatures seeking to bring about an anti-caste ethos. We have already got some glimpses of such complex caste/tribe equations of this region through the Bauri community's writings I have extensively explored in the last chapter. However, the autochthonous claims of being indigenous or original inhabitants of some other Dalit constituencies of the region demand separate extensive and elaborate discussions as they are more pronounced in their writings as compared to the Bauri writings of authors like Sunil Das. This chapter primarily looks into the explicitly political as well as mytho-historical writings of various Dalit and tribal constituencies under the umbrella term 'Mulnibasi' and then juxtaposes these 'counter-mythical' writings with the narratives of the Dom community, one of the most prominent Dalit communities in the Jhargram region of the Jungle Mahals. The narratives of the Dom community offer us examples of how these Dalits in the same region of Jungle Mahals do not rely on the constructions of anti-myth in the way Mulnibasi movement does in order to bring about their anti-caste articulations. This also provides me with a scope to engage with some of the observations made by historian Ranajit Guha whose writings on the Dom community rely predominantly on their exploitation of some Brahminical myths to resist their subordination. Although it is not directly in tandem with the cultural politics of the Mulnibasis, the autobiographical and various fictional writings, plays and poems of the Dom community in the region, constitute the other half of this chapter. My focus on the writings of Doms, thus, constitutes an interesting comparative point that can be juxtaposed with the Mulnibasi writings in order to understand the complex relationships between politics, history and culture of this region. Apart from the overlapping presence of Dalit and tribal activism, there is also a considerable presence and active participation of Muslims in the construction and articulation of the Mulnibasi movement. The term Mulnibasi and its appropriation of the term Dalit, also include the members of several intermediary caste groups labelled as the Other Backward Classes (O.B.C.s) according to the governmental terminology. Thus,

Mulnibasi movement includes Dalits, Muslims, tribal groups and the O.B. Cs in order to construct their statist electoral political claims and their concomitant cultural articulations. The political and cultural ‘other’ in such a politics are the ‘savarna’ upper caste Hindus who have allegedly usurped natural resources of the region and ideologically or politically enslaved the larger section of the Indian population that consists of marginalized communities like the Dalits, Muslims and O.B.C.s or the Dalit-Bahujans. In this project of identity construction, history plays a significant role. The construction of a pre-Aryan (e.g., references to Harappa-Mohenjo-Daro civilization) or Buddhist or anti-Aryan mythological past is central to such an autochthonous project. These references and characteristics clearly locate this movement as a pan-Indian politico-cultural movement. Therefore, this chapter, after contextualizing this Mulnibasi movement by focusing on its fundamental tenets, explores its more localized manifestations in Bengal or more particularly, in instances like ‘Asur Smaran’ as sites of rewriting histories and myths to articulate an anti-caste politics of the present.

Although Chuni Kotal, the de-notified Lodha girl whose death catapulted the Bengali Dalit literary movement, belonged to this region, the Dalit writings from the region have not received adequate focus from the humanities and social science scholars working on the caste question in post-partition West Bengal. The focus on the Namasudra community’s writings and their intertwinement with the traumatic histories of partition has recently received some scholarly attention. This chapter, alongside my focus on the Bauri writings in the previous chapter, is an effort to balance out this lopsided picture of caste or Dalit writings in Bengal.

4.2 Who are the Mulnibasis?

According to the *Mulnibasi Istehar* (“Mulnibasi Manifesto”) prepared by Dr. Nazrul Islam, Adivasis or tribal communities, Shudras, ‘untouchable’ castes and Muslims are the

Mulnibasis or the original inhabitants of India. They outnumber the so-called upper caste Hindus and thus, can be known as 'Bahujans'. Dr. Islam defines the term by deploying the governmental categories:

The Scheduled Tribes, the Scheduled Castes, the Other Backward Classes and all the lower caste Shudras and all those Muslims, Buddhists or Christians who had converted from their 'lower caste' status are the Mulnibasi of this land.¹⁴²

The invariable implication of this definition is that the primary three 'upper caste' groups of the Bengal region i.e., Brahmins, Baidyas and Kayasthas are clubbed under the ideologically charged broad template of 'savarna' people. The clarion call for political, socio-cultural and economic empowerment of these Mulnibasi constituencies is premised on two fundamental ideological arguments:

- a) The number of constituencies other than the three dominant caste groups is far greater than the number of 'savarna' people in Bengal (as well as in the entire country). Since, democratic structure is expected to be based on the logic of equal representation, Mulnibasi people should get the largest share in the political, administrative, economic and socio-cultural spheres. This claim for a greater share is endowed with a simultaneous representation of India's political and socio-cultural reality that has a disproportionately larger share for the dominant castes. Most of the pamphlets, books, booklets and other narratives that I gathered during my trips to the different areas of the Jungal Mahal region, speak of this lopsided reality and seek to mobilize people to debunk the Brahminical worldviews and practices in order to empower themselves.
- b) This then leads to the requirement of an ideological mobilization of the Mulnibasis. If the earlier section of the Mulnibasi ideological spectrum is more focused on

¹⁴² Dr. Nazrul Islam, *Mulnibasi Istehar* (Kolkata: Kolkata Prakashan, 2014) 13.

contemporary or present political, economic and social realities, it is this second part of the Mulnibasi narrative that focuses on the past. History is taken to task in order to articulate the politics of the present. This part of the Mulnibasi narrative does not simply attempt to gloss over internal caste, class and even religious acrimonies to come up with an ideologically imagined coherent socio-political monolith called the Mulnibasis. It does not just rely on a political mobilization of people belonging to such autochthonous community by speaking of a 'common enemy' i.e., the savarnas consisting of the three dominant caste groups of Bengal. Rather, it tries to find a stronger foothold by articulating a narrative of past wherein the savarna castes are projected as 'invaders' and 'outsiders'. The mythical/historical figure for such articulations is the racial concept of the Aryan. In such a political and cultural imagination, Mulnibasi is not just the oppressed majority in terms of votes or numbers but also the more 'legitimate' shareholders of the land as they have been the original, indigenous and native inhabitants of this land, unlike the Brahmins and other caste Hindus.

These intertwined arguments are made explicit in the *Mulnibasi Istehar* written by the famous Mulnibasi ideologue Nazrul Islam. Juxtaposing the outsiders i.e., Brahmins and other dominant castes of Bengal with the Mulnibasi Bahujans, Islam says:

These are not like those people who came from foreign lands. These are the children of the land. In terms of numbers, they are the 94 percent of this state's population. This is why they are the majority or Bahujan or Adhijan.¹⁴³

Apart from these two overlapping arguments that lay the basis of the political claims of this movement, Islam also deploys other methods in order to connect the past with the priorities of the present. The past that I am referring here is the scriptural past that Islam and other

¹⁴³ Islam, *Mulnibasi Istehar*, 13.

Mulnibasi ideologues then connects with the detailed descriptions of the precarious existence of shudras, Dalits, Muslims and other such Mulnibasi constituencies in their present situation. Islam or Mulnibasi ideologues like Swapan Kumar Biswas believe that there is a direct connection between the injunctions and ritual prescriptions of the varna system and the present plights of the ‘lower caste’ and tribal Mulnibasi populations. Islam’s manifesto thus constantly juggles between several descriptions of popular interpretations of the Shastras that legitimize and perpetuate injunctions of caste and detailed references to how the Mulnibasis, despite their numerical strength and status of being the original inhabitants, continue to suffer political and economic disempowerment in domains such as public administration, judiciary, politics, university spaces or academia and media. In short, superannuated bureaucrats and administrators like Islam or Biswas rely on their own administrative and political experiences to not only offer us disturbing realities of the constant impoverishment of Dalits, Tribal and Muslims but also link such perpetual disempowerment with the inhibitions imposed on the ‘lower castes’ by the Brahminical scriptural traditions. Such connections and juxtapositions constitute the core of this Mulnibasi politics. In a section titled “Amra Mulnibasi ra Kothai Achi” (What is our current status?) Islam’s statements succinctly summarize this pattern:

Starting from the Purushsuktas of the Rig Vedas to Kautilya’s Arthashastra, Manusanghita, Ramayana-Mahabharata, these Manubadi or Brahminical social prescriptions have pushed the majority of our people behind. Since Brahmins are the initiators as well as custodians of these prescriptions and they are the largest beneficiary varna of this system, it is called Brahminical. Since Manusanghita is the most obnoxious and loathsome of these Brahminical texts, it is also known as Manubadi system. This is why Ambedkar burnt Manusanghita as an act of symbolic public protest.

How far this Brahminical system has kept the majority of our people backward is clearly visible from the examples of the Mandal Commission report.¹⁴⁴

What follows is a detailed statistical report excerpted from the Mandal Commission report on the ‘backward castes’ that vividly portray the utterly unequal representation of the Mulnibasi

¹⁴⁴ Islam, *Mulnibasi Istehar*, 16-17.

people in the high offices of our political and economic spheres. Thus, Islam argues, we see an absolutely unacceptable continuation of the exclusionary and discriminatory social practices prescribed in the Brahminical textual traditions even in our contemporary lived political, social and economic realities. Exasperated with the false or failed promises and tokenisms of all the established political parties, Islam and Biswas want to articulate an anti-Brahminical politics and cultural ethos that will simultaneously attempt to reclaim its otherwise rightful share in the statist politics as well as undermine the uncontested and almost hegemonic status of the Brahminical cultural ideologies. But such a politics will require the emergence of the conceptual and ideological category like 'Mulnibasi' through a simultaneous procedure of undermining social conflicts between 'oppressed groups' and a tactful construction of a political constituency that can take on the clout of the exploiting minority and 'intruding community' i.e., Savarnas or the Aryans. One of the most striking and important examples of such socio-political and cultural liaison is the Mulnibasi movement's claims on the unity and solidarity of the Dalits and the Muslims. As I will elucidate a little later, such liaisons are not just based on sharing victimhood and social marginalization, but also on framing and re-framing the narratives of their recent and distant pasts, their recorded pasts and mythical histories.

4.3 Dalit Muslim unity?

The claims of political and ideological solidarity or an assumed or imagined cohesiveness between the 'lower caste' groups and the Muslims in the assertions made in the Mulnibasi movement are based on two things: their shared status of being two marginalized groups and their shared past. While the Mulnibasi ideologues try to prove the first one by showing connections between various Hindu scriptural injunctions on low caste groups and their present precarious predicaments, the claims on a shared past are based on tendencies to see the present-day poor Muslims of the state as the progenies and descendants of the

previously converted 'Hindu' lower caste groups. However, these claims of the Mulnibasi movement or the expectations of their ideologues to persuade such a huge mass consisting of Dalits, backward castes and Muslims to perceive the Savarnas as their socio-cultural and political other, are often interrupted by the spectres of the Indian partition. Partitions of 1947 and 1971, as I have already underscored in the second chapter, have had lasting impacts on the most prominent of the Dalit constituencies of the region i.e., Namasudras. Although the Namasudras were concentrated in the eastern parts of Bengal before the partition of the sub-continent, they were scattered across the various refugee camps that were set up in different parts of the newly formed state of West Bengal and in the neighbouring states like Orissa or Bihar as well as more distant lands of the Andaman Nicobar Islands or Madhya Pradesh. Some of these camps were set up in parts of the jungle-mahal area, especially in Bankura and Midnapur regions. Many of the refugees who were sheltered in these camps eventually got settled there and in surrounding areas. Consequently, even in this region we can notice a presence of the Namasudra refugees, albeit a smaller one as compared to the districts like North 24 Parganas. Thus, even when I focus on the Mulnibasi movement of the jungle-mahal region I must include the Namasudras. Moreover, the Dalit-Muslim solidarity arguments offered by various Mulnibasi ideologues also include many references to this group. Here I focus on the Namasudras because of this Dalit constituency's direct and complex entanglements with the Indian partitions and these have been forced to be involved with the related and often conflicting political mobilisations of the Hindu nationalism, the Muslim League's political priorities as well as their own distinctive identarian Dalit politics. Since the Indian partition was marked by colossal communal tensions, Namasudras often found themselves at strange crossroads. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's study on the intricate relationships that Namsudra Dalits had with the elite upper caste led Indian nationalist movement clearly show how they had a tenuous relationship with the anti-colonial protests.

Even during Gandhi's mass anti-colonial movements, their participation was hardly noticeable. Rather, the politics of the All India Scheduled Caste Federation led by the Namasudra leader Jogendranath Mandal found it more politically prudent and socially convenient to forge alliances with Muslim politics. However, the late colonial phase in the 1940s saw several important factors like increasing presence of electoral politics, steepened demands for separate nation states for the Muslims and Hindus and the growth of an aspiring Namasudra educated middle class. Together, these factors often resulted in various possibilities of assimilating their Dalit politics within the larger homogeneous categories and identities based on nation and religion. Hence, their distinctive status as an anti-caste politics had to either find a place in the Muslim League politics or within the Hindu nationalist discourses. The late forties saw a sharp decline of Dalit assertions led by Mondal and his ilk. Although the Namasudra leader Jogendranath Mondal did join the Liaquat Ali government of Pakistan, the post-partition Islamisation of the Pakistani state pushed Mandal and his followers more and more into the category of 'Hindu minority' rather than Dalits. Mandal's resignation letter to Prime Minister Liaquat Ali, in Bandyopadhyay's estimation, proves this irreversible alienation of the Dalit politics of Bengal region from the Muslim socio-political identity. Indeed, as Bandyopadhyay rightly points out in the postscript of the latest edition of his book *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India*, partition and the horrific tales of torture on the Namasudra Dalit 'Hindus' that it brought about, clearly implies a polarization between Namasudra Dalits and Muslims in the post-partition state of West Bengal. Given this relatively recent history of the two partitions of the Indian sub-continent and how its traumatic events polarized these two groups almost irrevocably, one wonders if the claims of these Mulnibasi ideologues like Swapan Kumar Biswas or Nazrul Islam have any

feasibility.¹⁴⁵ How then does the Mulnibasi movement construct its claims of solidarity between Dalits (especially Namasudras) and Muslims as they stand decidedly polarized in their social as well as political lives? But this conflictual and polarized situation is also hardly the most exhaustive picture. The history of the co-existence of these two groups both in eastern Bengal and in the western part during colonial times is also an important counterpoint we must take note of. Bandyopadhyay draws our attention to such proximities between Namasudra Dalits and Muslims not just in their political negotiations with the colonial rule and the nationalist movement but also in their shared quotidian socio-cultural realities:

But the Namsudra-Muslim relationship was much more complex than simply confrontational; and even when confrontation did occur, religion played a limited role or it was brought in only for post facto rationalization. The two communities, as has been discussed in earlier chapters, fought for the protection and the upholding of the ‘honour’ of their respective communities. The history of their relationship therefore shed new light, on the nature of communalism itself in colonial India. For, interestingly, although conflict was a reality, it was punctuated by numerous instances of co-operation between the Namasudra and Muslim peasants, aligned usually against the upper caste Hindu gentry, their common foe.¹⁴⁶

Most Mulnibasi articulations therefore attempt to counter the post-partition conflictual relationship between the Dalits and the Muslims by basing their ideological claims on a past before the Indian partition. Most of these narratives focus on the long struggles of lower caste groups like Namasudras and Muslims as agricultural laborers who were oppressed by the caste Hindu landlords or take us back to moments in colonial politics that marked alignments of Muslim and Dalit politics. If the memories of dislocation, rape and loot are potent tools for expanding the social and political chasms between these two groups, Mulnibasi movement

¹⁴⁵ I have expressed my concerns about such a politics of solidarity in an article on Bengal’s food politics. See Kalyan Das, “To Eat or not to Eat Beef: Spectres of Food on Bengal’s Politics of Identity”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 50: 44 (2015), 105-114.

¹⁴⁶ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Conflict and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947* (New Delhi: Oxford university Press, 2011) 243. We must also quickly note here that Bandyopadhyay’s argumentative arc has recently been questioned by scholars like Dwaipayan Sen. See Dwaipayan Sen, *The Decline of Caste Question: Jogendranath Mandal and the Defeat of Caste Politics in Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

tries its best to juxtapose that with these other histories of Dalit-Muslim solidarity. The logic of communalism, thus, gets punctuated by a politics of caste. If present day Muslims are simply progenies of former untouchable castes or Dalits who had embraced the egalitarian principles of Islam and there is also a shared recorded history of socio-political struggle during colonial era, Mulnibasi movement does recognize such possibilities of ideologically contesting communalism through an anti-caste mobilization. Thus, these Mulnibasi narratives deploy several tropes of reconfiguring the shared pasts of the two communities. As I have already pointed out, the Mulnibasi movement often draws our attention to the socio-cultural and political precarities of West Bengal's present-day Dalits and Muslims and urge that they should be united as co-sufferers at the hands of the Brahmins and other upper castes like Baidyas and Kayasthas. They then link these observations with the continuity of their precarities from the times of ancient Hindu scriptures that imposed restrictions on the shudras to the common precarities between Dalits and Muslims during colonial era. But these claims are more solidified through their repeated assertion on how so many Dalit constituencies of the Bengal region have historically embraced Islam and thus most of our present-day Muslims are none other than the formerly 'untouchable' 'lower caste' groups. Interestingly, such claims made by Mulnibasi leaders like Swapan Kumar Biswas, retired member of the Indian Administrative Service and the former joint director of the Census department, are based on several colonial documentations on the proselytizing patterns of the 'lower caste' groups. Biswas, in his book *Itihashe Aloke Dalit Muslim Unity* ("Dalit Muslim Unity in a Historical Perspective"), quotes from the colonial census commissioner E. A. Gait's 1901 census reports:

The Namasudra aggregate about 1861000 and the Pods (Poundra) nearly half a million. But the large number have been converted to Mohamedanism and call themselves Saiks. There are ten and a half million of Mohamedans in the Dacca and Chittagaon Divisions and it has

been shown that the great majority of these are the descendants of converts from the rank of these two castes.¹⁴⁷

The most important and visible among these tropes of history through which Mulnibasi leaders are trying to forge a united front of Dalits and Muslims is to show various historical instances and crucial junctures of Dalit and anti-caste movements wherein Muslims became their comrades, fellow protesters and collaborators.¹⁴⁸ In his preface to Mr. Biswas' book on Dalit-Muslim unity, Dr. M. Chisti, the Chief Patron of the Dalit Muslim Friendship Society, draws our attention not only to the egalitarian principles of Islam that presumably attracted numerous 'lower caste' people to embrace Islam but also to some of those historical instances of Dalit-Muslim collaboration. After quickly cataloguing some instances of how Brahmins have always looked down upon the Shudras and untouchable castes, he reminds the readers of Biswas' book that it was the Muslim League that created substantial political space for Jogendranath Mandal when he was cornered and alienated by the Hindu nationalist forces and the Indian National Congress during the 1946 elections. Chisti describes this moment as a mark of friendship and solidarity between these two groups who had a 'common foe' - the upper caste nationalist leadership. His next example is that of Fazlul Haque. Widely known as the Sher-e-Bangla or Tiger of Bengal, Huq, Chisti reminds us, once led a large group of

¹⁴⁷ As quoted in Swapan Kumar Biswas, *Itihashe Aloke Dalit Muslim Unity* (Kolkata: Baridhara Prakashani & Dalit Muslim Friendship Society), 14.

¹⁴⁸ One other way of such reconfiguration of Dalit-Muslim unity could also be based on the long tradition of syncretic religiosity of the lower-class peasants of colonial and even pre-colonial Bengal. As Gautam Bhadra informs us, during the mid-nineteenth century colonial Bengal, in districts like Dinajpur, Rajbangshis, presently listed as a Scheduled Caste group, were embracing the *pir* tradition of rural Bengal's Islam. Similarly, many narratives by Muslim authors, like Dewan Manulla Mondal's *Kantanama* or *Rajdharm* (1842-43), often deployed references to the so-called non-Muslim or Hindu texts like the *Bhagabat Puran* or *Ramayana*. But, this Mulnibasi politics of Dalit-Muslim unity is not based on narratives such as Manulla Mandal's. One crucial characteristic that differentiates the political underpinnings of Mondal's text from the ideological utterances of the Mulnibasi politics is its reliance on a complete disregard for the hegemony of the dominant groups of savarnas. Bhadra rightly informs us that in Mondal's text there is a simultaneity of subordination, resistance and accommodative impulses of the dominated group or *proja*. But that 'subaltern mentality' is itself under scornful attacks in these articulations of the Mulnibasi Dalit-Muslim solidarity. This syncretic religiosity and co-existence of resistance and submission is a pattern that Ranajit Guha also discerns in his essay on the Dom community I explore in the last part of this chapter. See, Gautam Bhadra, "The Mentality of Subalternity: *Kantanama* or *Rajdharm*, *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 54-91.

‘lower caste’ and Muslim peasants against the oppressive rule of the upper caste Hindu zamindars and thus earned the popular description of “Krishak Bandhu” or “Friend of the Peasants”. In his introductory note, Chisti describes another such example of Dalit-Muslim solidarity by informing his readers of how Jyotiba Phule’s school for lower caste students was established on a piece of land donated by Muslims.

But claims of autochthony cannot simply rely on such relatively recent recorded histories to make its claims of being ‘children of the soil’ as opposed to an ‘alien community’ trying to establish its socio-cultural hegemony through textualised identities, mythical assertions and cultures of violence. Thus, all these above-mentioned claims Mulnibasi movement makes find an ideological repository in the never-ending hermeneutical possibilities in mythical narratives apropos the figure of the ‘superior race’ of the Aryans. If the caste Hindu nationalist claims are located in such constellation of narratives vis-à-vis Aryan racial superiority, many of the Mulnibasi articulations find various hermeneutical ways to turn these ‘Brahminical’ mythical claims upside down. Such methodologies are certainly not restricted or limited to only the disenfranchised constituencies in any given context. Thus, possibilities of reading and re-interpretation or ideologically charged (mis)readings are always there. But what I attempt to discern and underscore in the context of the Mulnibasi movement is its particularized reconstruction of methods of anti-caste cultural politics pioneered by figures like Phule and Ambedkar. The target in such readings is to essentially recognize not just the tropes through which pasts-mythical and recorded- are rendered contested through mediations of hierarchized social identities or their cultural articulations. This is also an attempt to take note of the constantly adjusted changes and alterations that occur from time to time even within the traditions of what Dorothy Figueira calls ‘anti-myths’. As these methods of reading pasts make their inroads in the concerns of the present,

they make changes and open up possibilities of complex historiographic formulations. In such attempts, I deploy an understanding of myth that Figueira succinctly describes:

Myth functions as a narrative which possesses credibility and authority and whose charters are manipulated to elicit sentiments which, in turn, construct social formations or legitimize changed social and political conditions. A myth can be reconstructed to activate “latent” symbolic meanings that play upon the sentiments of affinity to effect political reform.¹⁴⁹

4.4 Contesting the Aryan myth through Asur Smaran

The multifarious disciplinary literatures (like comparative linguistics, Indological studies, European Romanticism in Germany and Britain, Indian nationalist discourse) on the Aryan myth can never be adequately summarized. The early Indological scholarship, Orientalist thought as well as Enlightenment era’s European writings are often replete with various related and analogous versions of the Aryan myth. Energized by the European concerns for bringing about anti-Church public sentiments, the growing views on how climate can determine institutions of human societies and an increasing popularity among European men of letters to look for origins of human civilization got intermingled to produce and incessantly circulate the myth of the Aryans. These narratives often looked towards the Orient for narratives of rational religion and other concomitant civilizational markers through which Montesquieu, Voltaire and other *philosophes* of France and later other European thinkers, especially the German Romantics, brought about this idea of an Aryan society as the quintessential seat of civilizational advancement. Through the early travel writings of the Jesuit priests, traders and other visitors, Europeans came across Asian societies and religions and this opened up, as Figueira suggests, further possibilities of exchange of ideas that resulted in a search among the Europeans for some ‘root religion’ or Ur-religious discourse.

¹⁴⁹ Dorothy Figueira, *Aryan, Jews, Brahmins: Theorizing Authority Through Myths of Identity* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2015) 3.

It is this trope that brought about the emergence of the Veda as the Ur-text of human civilization and ‘Aryan’ as the ideal example of human race. Figueira’s research also shows how Voltaire’s own efforts to undermine the corruptions of revealed religion in the European context provoked him to look for a better alternative in the Oriental past. In many of his writings, his contemporary Brahmins or their socio-religious practices are often vehemently criticized as abominable tendencies similar to those of his contemporary French Church. This comparative paradigm provoked him to come up with a theory of decay and degeneration as he thought the Ur-texts like Veda or Ur-religious dispensations like the Brahminical religion later got corrupted through the wily Brahmins of his times. He found too much resemblance between these cunning and perfidious Brahmins and the custodians of the Christian faith in the Enlightenment era Europe. This template is important for the present context as this trope of Voltaire gets repeated in too many subsequent European writings and in Indian nationalist narratives. Indian nationalists in their quests for energizing the anti-colonial struggles often derived from many of these Europeans sources of Voltaire, Max Muller or Nietzsche to come up with their own theories of a Golden past that had only become decayed due to foreign rules and contamination owing to Aryan encounters with the native aborigines. As has been already hinted at in the introductory notes on contemplating the caste-modernity exchanges, this has direct repercussions on my concerns about caste in Bengal and my concerns in Dalit historiography. I explain the connections and exchanges between ideas and their currents apropos of related concepts like Aryan, caste etc. in much greater thematic and philosophical details in the next chapter. However, what matters here is the emergence of a notion of a quintessentially civilized group of people i.e., Aryans and the ancient Vedic Golden Age as the ultimate realization of the Aryan race’s civilizational potential. This structure of the Aryan myth and the notion of a Golden Vedic Age as the repository of the Aryan racial excellence and perfection got repeated in the writings of subsequent generations of scholars,

especially the Orientalists. Orientalists like Henry Thomas Colebrooke and Sir William Jones shared this mythical belief in the supremacy of the Vedic society. Such narratives had a direct impact on many of the early nineteenth century socio-religious reformers in India. Like Voltaire in France, Rammohun Roy believed that the ancient Vedic civilization or the Vedic, especially Upanishadic textual corpus, mark the apotheosis of the superior civilizational tendencies of the Aryan race. Like his European predecessors and contemporaries, Roy believed that the problems of superstition and prejudice that marked his contemporary Hindu society happened due to later perversions among the Brahmins, custodians of everything that is best in the Hindu society. He believed that a re-reading of the shastras and smritis could get them back to such Vedic-Upanishadic Golden Age once they adhere to the core tenets of that literature based on monotheistic sensibility and purged of subsequent contaminations brought about by perverted Brahmins. This line of thought was later pushed further by personalities such as Vivekananda who shared this pattern of thought marking the production, circulation and celebration of the Aryan myth. Like Voltaire, Herder, Schlegel, Max Muller, Nietzsche and Roy, Vivekananda believed in Aryan supremacist theories and racial myths. But his views almost directly linked these notions with the caste system in India. Such assemblages and comparisons had happened even before Vivekananda started espousing his theories on the convergence of race and caste. The German philosopher Nietzsche had already juxtaposed his racialized views of the Jews with *Manusmriti*'s perceptions and social injunctions on the outcaste Chandala in *Twilight of Idols* and *Anti-Christ*.¹⁵⁰ Vivekananda's thesis, as Figueira elucidates, was far more explicit and these thoughts had direct influences on the Indian nationalism. Vivekananda, in his turn, not only thought of the Aryan race as the very best of humanity and saw a perfect world in the Vedantist literatures but also presented a

¹⁵⁰ For a reading of Ambedkar's engagements with Nietzsche's texts and his apparent admiration for *Manusmriti*, see Kalyan Kumar Das, "Nietzsche contra Manu: Ambedkar's Nietzsche moment and the Politics of Dalit Rage", *Critical Philosophy of Race* (forthcoming).

narrative of subsequent degeneration of that world into the barbarized, idol worshipping contaminated state. What makes his theory directly relevant for my present context is his ascription of such degeneration to the pre-Aryan groups of people on the Indian landmass—Shudras, Aboriginal communities and Dravidians. These people, in his Aryan supremacist imagination, were uncivilized, uncouth, outlandish and brutish. While his patronizing nationalist mind did see the encounters between Aryan and non-Aryan groups as markers of Aryan magnanimity, many of his other corresponding writings described his contemporary society's problems of cultic religious practices, polytheism etc. as features emerging due to the mixing of races and intermingling of their socio-religious habits and practices. The sensuous, brutish world of the dark-skinned non-Aryans, thus, became squarely responsible for the alloyed, contaminated and degenerated status of the Aryan Brahminism. One can find similar narratives of Aryan supremacy informing the emergence of not only the nineteenth century social reforms but also the narratives of early Indian nationalism. In the writings of Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak or those of the social reformer Dayanand Saraswati, one finds other similar and corresponding narratives apropos caste/race of Aryan Brahmins. The *Mulnibasi* ideologues also recognize these discursive connections and the consequent circulation and perpetuation of the Aryan myth of caste/race. Dr. Islam, author of the *Mulnibasi Istehar* I have already cited earlier in this chapter, underlines these connections before surmounting a direct affront on the myth of Aryan supremacy. His reference has telling significance in the context of Indian nationalism and its complex relations with the issue of caste. After trying to define the *Mulnibasis* by exploiting the governmental categories of the SCs, OBCs, STs as well as the previously lower caste Hindus who got converted to Islam, Dr. Islam draws the attention of his readers to how caste Hindus of Bengal have always perceived themselves as the heirs of the Aryan mythical past. Citing and quoting from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's essay "Bange Brahmanadhikar" ("Brahmins' entitlements

in Bengal”) Islam shows us how Chattopadhyay claims his/their Aryan past by underlining the racial connections between the Aryans of areas near Iran and the five Brahmins of Kanvakubja who came to Bengal to spread Aryan civilisation. While Chattopadhyay exploits the Aryan myth to establish the ‘natural superiority’ of the Brahmins as the legitimate heirs of the Vedic civilization and emphasizes upon the Aryan narrative of racial supremacism, Islam focuses on its alien, foreign and outsider status.¹⁵¹ Reading Islam’s reference to Chattopadhyay’s passionate reclaiming of the Aryan/Brahminical racial/caste pride is certainly not a wholesale rejection of the Aryan myth. Like most such retellings and contested interpretations that emerge out of conflictual coexistence of competing constituencies inscribed into the very dialectics of myths and what Dorothy Figueira describes as ‘anti-myths’, these readings attempt to subvert the hegemonic status of one myth by inserting a different meaning to that myth. Indeed, such contestations of already established dominant myths are often altered by subaltern groups to resist social dominance. Later in this chapter I focus on such tendencies among the Dom people who, in Ranajit Guha’s estimation, altered the narrative structures of a cosmic myth to articulate their politics of defiance. Within the pan-Indian anti-caste thought, such retellings of the Aryan myth were first popularized by the Marathi social reformer Jyotiba Phule. His 1873 book *Ghulamgiri* or “Slavery” is not only one of the earliest examples of ideological camaraderie between the African American people in the United States of America and the untouchables and Shudras of India but also a brilliant witty retelling of the Aryan myths. Indeed, Phule can be described as the earliest proponent of the autochthonous politics of the Mulnibasi movement I have witnessed in different parts of Jangalmahal. Such ideological connections are not to be simply located in the actual anti-mythical narratives Phule or the Bengali Mulnibasis have constructed but also to be found quite explicitly in some of the Bangla Mulnibasi writings.

¹⁵¹ Islam, *Mulnibasi Istehar*, 14-15.

Swapan Kumar Biswas' *Itihashe Aloke Dalit Muslim Unity* that espouses this Mulnibasi politics in West Bengal points out such connections between their Mulnibasi politics and the ideological inspiration they draw from the writings of Phule:

The backward class revolts in the Bombay Presidency had occurred decades before Ambedkar led movements of the untouchables began and that movement was provided by Jyotirao Phule's ideological and revolutionary leadership. Mahatma Phule was born in 1827 in Pune. His movement was against the irrational claims of Brahminical supremacy located in their religious and spiritual claims through rationality-based school education programs for the shudras and the untouchables. Mahatma Phule was a member of the Mali community, a shudra caste. Owing to his school education provided by the Britishers, Phule could become a government contractor. In 1848, his wife Sabitribai Phule started a school where shudra and untouchable girls started getting themselves educated. In 1875 [sic] he wrote *Gulamgiri*. This was a direct war cry.¹⁵²

The Mulnibasi movement in parts of Purulia (as well as in several other parts of the state like Malda, South Kolkata etc.) exhibit a large number of characteristics that are similar to how Jyotiba Phule reinterpreted the Aryan myth or Aryan invasion theory to challenge Brahminical supremacy in late nineteenth century Maharashtra. The most apparent and fundamentally important of these similarities is the very ascription of an outsider or invader status to the Aryans and to perceive the Brahmins as progenitors of the earlier mythical Aryans. Moreover, like Phule, many of the ideologically charged utterances of the Mulnibasi movement often attempt to underscore the lack of moral legitimacy and the resultant absence of democratic values in the Brahminical caste order of the Hindu society. The implication is that the Hindu or Aryan society is an utterly unequal and undemocratic and thus morally bankrupt society. They also argue that the Aryan invasion of the native communities have resulted in the erosion and destruction of many secular virtues that we are otherwise expected to celebrate in a constitutional liberal democracy like India. Phule's invective against the Brahminical social order often relied on similar ideological tropes. Infused with the insights developed by his contemporary and earlier generations of Christian missionaries, Phule often

¹⁵² Biswas, *Itihashe Aloke*, 19.

underlined the moral discrepancies of the revealed Hindu religious beliefs and practices. As Rosalind O'Hanlon suggests, the polemical narratives of Christian missionaries such as John Wilson's *India Three Thousand Years Ago* as well as the modern rationalists like Thomas Paine had a deep impact on such articulations of Phule. When Phule ridicules the Brahminical myths in his book *Ghulamgiri*, he does not debunk the Aryan invasion theory; rather uses it and tweaks it to show the moral inconsistencies and unjust social practices of the Brahmins or the exploitation and marginalization of the shudras and atishudras. Mulnibasi movement of West Bengal follows similar lines of polemical arguments in order to articulate its politics. These similarities can be best summed up when we look at the dominant structures and features of Phule's polemical attack on Brahminical supremacy in Western India:

Phule depicted Brahmins as the descendants of Aryan invaders, who had conquered the indigenous people of India. The Brahmins had usurped the inhabitants' rightful power and property, and had imposed their religion as an instrument of social control designed to perpetuate their rule. This formed the central polemical device in Phule's explanation of the sufferings of the lower castes. It was through this argument that he was able to deny the legitimacy of Brahminic religious authority, to assert the hidden *Kshatriya* identity of all lower castes, and to reinterpret the most important stories, figures, and symbols in popular Hinduism from a new and radical perspective. In this interpretation of ancient Indian history, it is clear that he had drawn very heavily on the missionary accounts that were described [...] in particular on the arguments of John Wilson's work *India Three Thousand Years Ago*.¹⁵³

While O'Hanlon's summarization of Phule's deployment of the Aryan invasion theory to put in place his autochthonous politics bear resemblances with the cultural politics of the Mulnibasi movement in Bengal, there remains an extremely significant point of departure in the politics of the latter. Although extrapolations from the Mulnibasi writings of Biswas and Islam or the above quoted passages from O'Hanlon's book undoubtedly establish such ideological connections, Mulnibasi movement quite clearly does not rely on imagining and

¹⁵³ Rosalind O'Hanlon, "The Aryan invasions and the origins of caste society", *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012) 141-151.

articulating a Kshatriya status for the lower caste constituencies that form the collective socio-cultural and political Other of the Brahmins and other upper castes in Bengal. This is significant not simply because these Mulnibasi writings depart from the Aryan invasion template or its ideological modalities by abjuring any effort to claim a warrior clan status but also because of the location of such claims by Phule in many of the middle and late nineteenth century writings of Christian Missionaries in Western India. O'Hanlon meticulously shows how such imagined kshatriya status for all the Shudras and *Atishudras* that served Phule's anti-Brahminical ideological battle, was derived from the writings of missionaries and scholars like Wilson. Interestingly, O'Hanlon's research also shows how this imagined kshatriya status in the collective past of the lower caste groups was imagined not as a varna or a caste status but in more 'secular' and 'modern' ways in Wilson's writings. O'Hanlon quotes this passage from Wilson to establish her point:

The term Kshatriya, applied by the sastras or Law Book to the second or warrior class in the Hindu community, is used in the Vedas only as a denominative of a party possessed of *kshatra*, or power. In this sense, it is applied to the gods, as to Indra and Varuna. In the Vedas, the word *kshetrapati*, 'the owner of a field', is the name of a person possessing landed property; and the name *kashatrapati*, 'the possessor of power', seems to have been applicable to any party exercising authority of any kind or extent. *Kshatriya* is the equivalent of *Kshatrapati*.¹⁵⁴

Such imagination of a kshatriya root is almost completely absent in the Mulnibasi movement. Although they draw ideological and discursive inspiration from Phule's thoughts and writings and there are many significant similarities in the ways their politics is expressed, Mulnibasi movement is not premised upon such quasi-Sanskritization model for empowering the lower castes of West Bengal. Instead, theirs is a politics that embraces the 'low' ritual rank, shakes off the ascribed 'shame' associated with these caste groups and reclaim their communitarian as well as collective 'Dalit' past without being apologetic about their ritual statuses. Although

¹⁵⁴ As quoted from John Wilson's *India Three Thousand Years Ago* in O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*, 81.

some ideologues like Swapan Kumar Biswas do not always share the unquestionable commitment to Ambedkar as an ideological inspiration and express their apprehensions about the post-partition trajectories of Ambedkarite politics in the political careers of leaders like Jogendranath Mondal, such ‘radicalism’ is significantly Ambedkarite in its essence. I describe this as Ambedkarite not simply because Ambedkar’s templates of anti-caste politics are apparently more ‘radical’ than those of Phule. I call such tendencies in the Mulnibasi cultural articulations more Ambedkarite also because of Ambedkar’s reluctance to see caste primarily through the racialized prism of the Aryan invasion theory. Despite Ambedkar’s negation of the Aryan invasion theory in texts like *Who are the Untouchables*, he remains the most formidable ideological figurehead even in the Mulnibasi movement. The Mulnibasi movement’s ideologues like Biswas do believe that Ambedkar’s political defeat in the Poona Pact was the first step towards destroying the possibilities for the Scheduled Caste politics in Bengal. But Biswas also thinks that Ambedkar was ‘blackmailed’ by Gandhi to succumb to his tactical pressures through which the demand for completely separate electorates for the ‘untouchables’ could not become a reality. In Biswas’ estimation, this has had far reaching consequences for Dalit politics, especially its future in West Bengal. As Dalit politics got forced to accommodate itself within other caste-Hindu led dominant political parties and their political narratives, the possibility for a distinct Dalit politics got foreclosed due to Ambedkar’s surrender to Gandhi during the Poona Pact. But these articulations of Biswas come more as emotionally charged complaints against Ambedkar whom he and other Mulnibasi ideologues otherwise hold so dearly. Biswas describes Ambedkar’s defeat in Poona Pact by comparing it to how the mythical ‘low born’ archer Ekalavya sacrificed his thumb to Guru Dronacharya in the epic of the *Mahabharata*. Biswas describes Ambedkar as ‘the modern Ekalavya’ whose sacrifice partly pre-empted the possibility of a strong Dalit anti-caste vision. Apart from these sympathies for Ambedkar, Biswas draws heavily from

Ambedkar's methods for reading India's past. Although he bypasses how Ambedkar never fully accepted the Aryan invasion theories of caste or followed Phule's model of subverting the Brahminical mythical narratives, Biswas finds enough inspiration in Ambedkar's efforts to read India's past. In his book *Sekal er Bharatbarsho o Arya Akromon*, Biswas attempts to show the civilizational advancement of the Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro pre-Aryan society as the opposite of the Aryan 'barbarism' and 'corruption'.¹⁵⁵ He portrays the pre-Aryan Harappa civilization as the zenith of human advancement and places it alongside other famous ancient human civilizations like Mesopotamia, Egypt etc. Biswas believes that the discovery of the archaeological sites of this pre-Aryan civilization of Harappa is a 'tight slap' on the false claims of Aryan supremacy. According to his estimation, this pre-Aryan society was matrilineal, democratic and scientific as opposed to the corrupt, lazy and morally bankrupt Vedic society. It is in establishing these claims that he repeatedly cites from Ambedkar's writings, especially those that vehemently contest the claims of Aryan/Brahmin supremacy. For instance, he quotes from Ambedkar to establish how the Vedic civilization was a barbaric society that believed in animal sacrifices for gaining divine blessings. Biswas shows how Ambedkar perceived the Vedic Brahmins as a *sura* (or wine) drinking, lazy and barbaric society that not only believed in animal sacrifice but celebrated such violent methods of worshipping their 'greedy' and equally corrupt gods. While, Ambedkar did have his moments to criticize such habits of the Vedic Brahminical traditions and often quoted from the ancient texts and his contemporary Indological scholarships to establish his thesis, he also invented his own theory of the 'broken men' in Indian history to explain the origins of untouchability.¹⁵⁶ As Anand Sharma points out, Ambedkar was not very keen, unlike Phule, to project such differences in habits and practices in quotidian religiosity of the Vedic

¹⁵⁵ Swapan Kumar Biswas, *Sekaler Bharatbarsha o Arya Akromon* (Kolkata: Orion Book, 2009)

¹⁵⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, *Beef, Brahmins and Broken Men: An Annotated Critical Edition from The Untouchables: Who were they and how they became untouchables* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2019).

Brahmins and the non-Aryan peoples as essentially racial differences. By extrapolating passages from the Vedic literatures, Ambedkar surely criticized such habits of yagna and animal sacrifices among the Aryans but this never translated into the invasion theories that Phule believed in. For Ambedkar, the origins of the caste system or the feature of untouchability does not have to be located in the assumed ‘racial conflicts’ between the Aryans and the non-Aryan Dasyus. He anticipates many later scholarships in saying that these differences were at the most ‘cultic’ and religious and not ‘racial.’¹⁵⁷ Instead, as some of my previous references to Ambedkar’s readings of Indian past have already underscored, he interpreted Indian past in terms of ideological conflicts between Brahminism and Buddhism. For such an imagination, the theory of Aryan invasion is neither relevant nor needed. His *Annihilation of Caste* also debunks pseudo-scientific theories of heredity that try to project caste as a social management method to maintain ‘purity of blood’ and thus ‘purity of race’. Time and again Ambedkar shows his lack of interest in spending his intellectual and political energy on such projects to portray Brahmins as the modern-day progenitors of the former invading Aryans as the ‘racial other’ of all the ‘lower castes’. For him, the conflicts between the Aryans and non-Aryans were predominantly religious and cultic just as the differences between the Brahminical order and the people identified as ‘ritually impure’ or ‘untouchables’ was primarily an ideological conflict. Such ideological conflicts were, in his imagination, based on philosophical contestations between Buddhism and Brahminism. However, such textual particularities and embedded ideological strategies in Ambedkar’s writings mean little to Biswas who extrapolate from Ambedkar’s texts to substantiate his thesis and articulate his politics of autochthony. Although, there are such radical differences between Phule’s views and Ambedkar’s views vis-à-vis Aryan invasion theory or the

¹⁵⁷ Anand Sharma, “Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on the Aryan Invasion and the Emergence of the Caste System in India”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 3 (2005): 843-870, accessed December 6, 2020, doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfi081.

differences between Ambedkar's methods of contesting upper caste hegemony and those of the Mulnibasis, the element of speculative and imaginative rewriting of history continues to make its presence felt in all of these instances. While Sharma is right in saying that Ambedkar's close analysis of the Vedic and Upanishadic textual corpus made him ahead of his time in refuting the Aryan invasion theory in racial terms, his 'Broken Men' theory of beef eating and Buddhism following 'untouchables', does hold a lot of imagination and speculation.¹⁵⁸ Although Ambedkar does not follow Phule's opinions on the Aryan race or did not believe in the idea of a racial outsider, his speculative reading in filling the 'missing links' does make him an initiator of the cultural politics of the Mulnibasi movement. Such ideological assemblages go beyond the templates of hermeneutical or archaeological readings that pedantic, fact loving and text obsessed historians celebrate in the 'cloistered lives' of history. The observance of Hudur Durga Asur Smaran is one such example of everyday mythical history and cultural event through which even the statist politics of an electoral democracy gets mediated. Whether Aryan invasion theory is more of a 'myth' in the sense of 'red herring' matters little in such cultural politics.

4.5 Asur Smaran

Asur smaran or Hudur Durga Asur smaran is a socio-religious and cultural ritual that has started in many parts of the state of West Bengal after the rise of Mulnibasi cultural movement in the early part of this century. People, mostly belonging to different tribal groups, Dalits and some O.B.C.s who describe themselves as the 'autochthons' of India observe this *utsav* or 'festival' during the Durga Pujo celebrations in Bengal. In one of the first recorded descriptions of one such program in Malda, the organizers of Hudur Durga Asur Smaran described it as a *utsav* or festival as opposed to 'puja'. According to Charan

¹⁵⁸ For a relevant note on this speculative dimension in anti-caste thought, especially Ambedkar, see Ambedkar, *Beef, Brahmins & Broken Men*, 351-374.

Besra, one of the Mulnibasi activists of the Malda region and the President of the Majhi Pargana Gaonta which organizes this ‘festival’, explains: "This is not a Puja, this is a festival. Because by terming it a Puja, we would bring ourselves back into the same Brahminical structure that has oppressed us. This is an 'Utsav' commemorating the memory of 'Asur Samrat Hudur Durga' for his bravery and his leadership of his people."¹⁵⁹ But who is Hudur Durga? To find an answer to this question I made several visits to the South Western parts of the Jungalmahal districts like Purulia where, I had heard, this is observed in many villages. In October 2015, I visited Sonaijuri in Purulia district's Kashipur to have ‘first-hand experience’ of this *utsav*. On 22nd October, 2015, I took a bike ride to visit the Bhalogora high school ground where Shikar Disham Kherwal Bir Lecture Committee was organizing what they described as “Hudur Durga (Mahishashur) Smaran Dibas”. For those who were celebrating Durga Pujo that year, it was the day of Maha Nabomi. In one of the pamphlets of this Asur Smaran, one comes across the articulation of their anti-Brahminical cultural politics. According to this pamphlet, most young men of the Santhal, Munda, Oraon and other tribal communities put on the garments of a warrior woman and collectively perform their Dansai dance with Serengh or Bhuang in their hands. When Bengali people celebrate Durga puja these adibasi Mulnibasi ‘bhumiputra’ commemorate the sacrifice of their king Hudur Durga Mahishashur. This text also tells us that many Dalit communities like Bauri, Sahish and other such communities also perform similar rituals as they perform Kathi dance wearing garments of a female warrior. According to the organizers of Hudur Durga Smaran Dibas, these are all cultural and social practices that refuse to accept the now dominant narrative of Durga pujo wherein Durga is represented as the quintessential embodiment of goodness and the celebration of Durga pujo as a triumph of goodness over evil embodied in the portrayals of Mahishashur. For the tribal

¹⁵⁹ Georgy Kuruvilla Roy and Samata Biswas, “Asur Utsav, not Durga Puja”, *Round Table India*, October 29, 2013, https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7012:asur-utsav-not-durga-puja&catid=119:feature&Itemid=132.

and Dalit youth of the region, Shikar Disam Kherwal Bir Lecture Committee's pamphlet tells us, Mahishashur is their hero who sacrificed his life at the hands of a 'cunning' Aryan goddess Durga. According to them, Dansai dance or Kathi dance are observances that are rituals and performances of their religiosity that have been in existence in many parts of Jungle Mahal from a time much before the public celebration of Durga Pujo became popularized by Raja Kangsha Narayan Khan of Rajshahi's Taherpur in eastern Bengal (now Bangladesh). In their Mulnibasi social culture, the time during Durga Pujo is not a time for celebration but a time to remember the sacrifice of their king Hudur Durga Mahishahshur. In his book *Munibasi Istehar*, Dr. Islam also quotes the entire text of this pamphlet that I collected in 2015. He offers us a detailed description of this program of remembrance or festival in his book and quotes the entire text of this pamphlet. According to the Asur Smaran narrative, this mythical/historical figurehead of the Adivasi communities of Jungle Mahal was their courageous *Anarya* or non-Aryan ruler King Hudur Durga Ghorashur and he was wrongly killed by the Aryan goddess Durga:

The earliest forefather of the Adibasis was Hudur Durga Ghorashur or the great king Mahishashur who was unethically killed or murdered by the foreign Aryan invaders' goddess Durga and this resulted in the loss of state power among India's sons of soil adibasi kherwals. From history we get to know that during the time these Aryan foreign invaders defeated the great king of Bharatbhumi Hudur Durga or Ghorashur in a completely unethical battle and established the Aryan empire called Aryabarta and were celebrating their victory, the Santhal, Munda, Kol, Kurmi, Mahali, Kora and other similar communities of the Kherwal group could not accept their defeat and started performing their Dansai and Kathi dances. They eventually left the Sindhu valley to take shelter in various forest areas of Assam, Kachar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Bangladesh and southern India.¹⁶⁰

In his book *Asur Sabhyatar Sandhane*, writer and Dalit activist Gobardhan Manna cites his conversations with Cherian Mahato, the Mulnibasi ideologue and one of the organisers of Asur Smaran festivals in West Bengal and describes who Hudur Durga is and gives us their mythical narrative of Mahishahur as a non-Aryan ruler:

¹⁶⁰ Islam, *Munibasi Istehar*, 39-40.

Mr. Charian and his friends have been organizing Hudur Durga Smaran Dibas for the last few years. But who is this Hudur Durga? In his reply to this question, Mr. Charian said- “From the first chapter of the Devi Puran we know that Kushwadip region’s ruler Ghorashur was the son of Sindhu civilization’s non-Aryan ruler Rambhashur. This Ghorashur is the Hudur Durga. The word ‘Durga’ means the one who protects ‘durgu’ or castle or the one who leads an army. Ghorashur or Mahishashur is also known as the protector of the Ashur castle and thus known as Durga or Hudur Durga. (Santhali Dansai Sirit) Hudur Durga was a great humanitarian, honest, peace loving, just and fair, powerful, knowledgeable, pious, abstinent, simple, subject-loving, cultured and a socialist ruler. Aryan invaders unethically warred against him, betrayed him and used a woman, Durga, to murder this great non-Aryan emperor king. This is how Surs defeated the Mulnibasi of the Sindhu region, destroyed their Asur civilization to establish their Aryan empire in the Indian land and thus ensured permanence of their colonialism.¹⁶¹

These narratives apropos Asur Smaran during the Durga Pujo festival of Bengal is an example of how the Aryan invasion theory is localized to articulate anti-caste politics of the Mulnibasi movement. While Mulnibasi movement and such autochthonous claims are quite common in Dalit literature discourse as well as anti-caste literatures and activism across the country, this localized manifestation is a more recent development. The pan-Indian political and cultural narratives around the Aryan invasion theories of caste constitute the fundamental structure of myth making or, to use Figueira’s phrase, anti-myth making in Bengal’s Mulnibasi movement, this localization of autochthonous politics is based on accommodating and appropriating already existing local histories and recorded histories of Bengal. Considering the narratives that constitute the counter-myth or anti-myth of Mahishashur or Ghorashur or Hudur Durga, one can underscore several of these narrative strategies. This anti-myth formation does not simply stop at suggesting that Durga and Asur do not symbolize goodness and evil (as suggested by Durga Pujo narratives) but also go on to include local Adivasi rituals like *Dansai* dance or cultural performances like Kathi dance. While Gobardhan Manna suggests that this ancient Ashur or Dravidian civilization that was allegedly destroyed by the Aryan goddess Durga was similar to almost all major civilizations of the world e.g., Mesopotamian, Egyptian etc., there is also an effort in Manna’s book *Asur*

¹⁶¹ Gobardhan Manna, *Asur Sabhyotar Utso Sandhane* (Uluberia, Howrah: Baridhara Prakashani, 2015), 14.

Sabhyotar Sandhane to link the Durga/Asur mythological narratives with recorded colonial history. In his book Manna quotes extensively from Radharam Ray's *Kolkata Bichitra* to argue that the popularization of Durga pujo as a mass celebration during the Sarat season (what can be roughly considered as Autumn) is of a more recent phenomenon. He cites Ray's essay "Kolkatar Durgotsab" to remind his readers that commentators on Bengal's cultural history like Radharaman Ray or Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay described the popularization of Durga pujo celebrations as a celebration for victory of the British in the Battle of Plassey of 1757. Manna cites Mohammed Helaluddin's book *Sarodotsab Samrajyobadi Utsab* (Sarodotsab/Durgapujo is a colonial festival") where Helaluddin describes how Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay perceived Siraj as an Ashur and Lord Clive and his aides as *debotas* or gods. For Bandyopadhyay, the Battle of Plassey marked the victory of the Aryan Britishers and the defeat of the Asur Muslim emperor Shirajuddaulah. Manna's citation of Ray also informs us that the two most significant proponents of this perception of Durga pujo celebrations as a victory of the Aryans were Nadia's king Krishanchandra and Kolkata's Raja Nabakrishna. Both of them were encouraged as well as funded by none other than Lord Clive to celebrate Durga pujo. Thus, through these references, Manna not only provides us with a counter-myth or an anti-myth that exploits the existing Brahminical myths taken from texts like that of Devi Puran or the mythical narratives of Aryan invasion but also links such myths with recorded histories. Earlier I have suggested how Mulnibasi articulations follow Jyotiba Phule's strategies and structures for interpreting Brahminical mythical narratives and Puranic tales. I have also underscored the fact that these often do not follow or reiterate Ambedkar's reluctance to accept the Aryan invasion theory of caste or his belief in the theory 'broken men' from similar racial backgrounds. Although these narratives of autochthony take their discursive initiations from Ambedkar as much as from Phule, the anti-myth making narrative strategies follow those of Phule. But these localized manifestations of the Aryan invasion

theory of caste mediated through the Hudur Durga Asur Smaran festivals in Jungle Mahal offer more discursive complexities and subtle departures from Phule. Phule's 1873 text *Gulamgiri* takes its ideological inspiration from two important sources- the anti-racism and anti-slavery political struggles of the African-American people in the United States and the rationalist philosophies of Thomas Paine. The writings and criticisms of the Christian missionaries and English certainly provided Phule with the necessary ideological impetus to articulate his clarion calls to denounce Brahminical 'irrational' mythical tales and embrace a more rationalist mental frame in favour of modernity. In such articulations he also apparently perceives the British rule as an opportunity for people like him and billions of India's lower caste people as opposed to the tyrannical Brahminical rule of the Maratha Peshwas. Hudur Durga Asur Smaran, as I have already demonstrated, does follow these narrative structures provided by Phule and this festival's cultural claims are completely based on the Aryan invasion theory of caste. Like Jyotiba Phule's narratives that ridicule the Brahminical tales, Gobardhan Manna and other Mulnibasi ideologues often link their popular anti-myth making apropos Hudur Durga with Puranic figures such as Hiranyakashipu. Like Phule they describe such figures as Hiranyakashipu as a benevolent and just non-Aryan king who was betrayed by the Aryans or caste Hindus and has been wrongly portrayed in the Brahminical puranic tales. Yet, unlike Phule, the Hudur Durga utsab in Bengal also articulates an unequivocally anti-colonial voice. Rather than perceiving the British rule as a more preferable option to the Brahminical regimes, the Mulnibasis in Bengal and the followers of Hudur Durga Mahishashur, portray the Brahminical rulers as colonial agents. This is why Halaluddin and Manna cite Ray and Bandyopadhyay to establish how the modern day Brahminical hegemony in Bengal is a result of upper caste collaborations with the colonial establishment. The discursive tendencies in the Mulnibasi cultural narratives I describe in this chapter are not only based on the Aryan invasion theory of caste to portray the upper castes as outsiders and

invaders but also enhance such arguments by connecting them with the recorded histories of the British colonial rule. These anti-myths are certainly operating as popular narratives of past that are not easily accommodated in the disciplinary domains of modern professional history nor do they occupy a legitimate discursive space within history's 'cloistered' life. In such senses, these are mythical imaginary and non-historical narratives of the past that the Mulnibasi Dalits and Adivasis are subscribing to. Yet, they depart from Phule's sympathies for the colonial rulers as well as the strictly 'mythical' (thus outside disciplinary history) nature of *Gulamgiri*, to articulate a complex anti-myth/historical imagination that remains overwhelmingly imaginative and still connects such imaginations with recorded disciplinary history of Bengal's colonial past. Identifying such narratives as the Hudur Durga Asur Smaran either in terms of counter-myth making or in terms of strict disciplinary rational history will thus make only a limited reading in our concerns in postcolonial historiography. While Hudur Durga narratives and the Mulnibasi movement show the never-ending discursive possibilities of internal contestations within the narrative world of a particular myth and how these constantly shifting and contingent adjustments and readjustments in myth making are based on immensely heterological processes, these narratives also get mediated through statist aspirations and their claimed subscriptions to modern notions of 'historical truths'. As Dorothy Figuiera argues, many of the readings and contestations of the Aryan invasion theory or the Aryan supremacist narratives by Phule and Ambedkar questioned the assumed legitimacy of the nationalist appropriation of the same myth. The result of such anti-caste contestations resulted in further myth making. But these were myths and imaginative renderings of the past that are posited against the nationalism of the upper cast elite narratives like those of Dayanand Saraswati, Bal Gangadhar Tilak or Swami Vivekananda. Yet, the moment we look at the narratives of Asur Smaran or Mulnibasi we can clearly discern a more complex picture that operates within the domain of myth and yet goes

on to lay its discursive claims on fact based rational history; it follows Phule's belief in the Aryan invasion theory of caste and then follows the radical denunciation of Phule like claim on 'Kshatriya' ritual ranking and follows Ambedkar's path. These narratives draw ideological inspiration from Phule and yet do not share his belief in the 'benevolence' of the British rule. It is these heterogeneities that postcolonial historiographies will have to take into consideration while making attempts to engage with the Dalit imagination of their past or their politics in the present times. While the Mulnibasi and Dalit re-imagination of the Aryan invasion theory of caste continues to operate as mythical imaginations of 'pre-historical pasts', the anti-caste ideological departures within such mythical histories act as the determining characteristics of the anti-caste politics in these articulations. Most postcolonial historiographies, like that of Ranajit Guha's essay on the sociological appropriation of the otherwise cosmological myth of Rahu in my discussions on the Doms of Jhargram, often focus on how subaltern imaginations of past are contained predominantly within what Debjani Ganguly calls 'mythographical' narratives. Guha in this essay articulates such penchants in postcolonial tendencies:

Religion is the oldest of archives in our subcontinent. All the principal moments of the ancient relationship of dominance and subordination and resistance. These codes have their origin in historically articulated structures of power. Congealed and generalized through recursive use over long periods, they tend to outlive their original functions and operate in subsequent cultures not only as a relic but also as an overdetermining factor. The result is a cumulative documentation of subaltern and elite attitudes to power as expressed in myth, cult, ritual and custom and their permutations in the belief systems.¹⁶²

Thus, Guha simultaneously recognizes the fact that mythical narratives operate as dynamic (not as relic) narratives through which 'some ancient and unresolved antagonism' between the dominant and the dominated gets articulated and also underlines the necessity to

¹⁶² Ranajit Guha, "The Career of an anti-God in Heaven and Earth", *The Truth Unites: Essays in Tribute to Samar Sen*, ed. Ashok Mitra, (Shantiniketan: Subarnarekha, 1985), 1.

recognize how this antagonism adds to the latent or explicit dynamism in mythical narratives. But what interests me here is that his argumentative arc (as well as Ganguly's) places the articulations of antagonism or social resistance of the 'lower castes' almost solely and entirely within the discursive domain of 'mythographies'. This implies less focus on two things: a) how the internal dynamism of these mythical, 'mythographical' or anti-mythical articulations of traditionally dominated groups make several ideological departures that (in the context of the Mulnibasi movement) do not get restricted either within the Aryan invasion theory or in Phule's appropriation of it and move towards a more radical wholesale rejection of any claim on a higher ritual rank (kshatriyahood in Phule) ; b) how these narratives exploit governmental categories of the state to articulate ideological voices dissimilar to the nationalist historiographies that tend to focus on the Vedic Golden age of ancient India. Guha is certainly right when he speaks of how the unresolved social antagonisms find their ways in imaginative retellings of cosmological myths. But what this containment of anti-caste resistance within the domain of myths often overlooks is this wide range of complexities and ideological departures. My focus on Guha's essay with respect to the writings of the Dom community also shows how some Dalit imaginations of their community's origin or evolution of histories is indifferent to such resistances within the discourse of Brahminical mythical universe of Rahu or the civilizational myth of the ancient Aryan that helped both the colonial historiographies and nationalist historiographies to read these narratives of 'resistance'.

4.6 The Doms of Jungle Mahals and heterogeneous responses to social dominance¹⁶³

In the 1990s when, presumably, Bengali Dalit writings started its journey, the south Asian political and economic world was marked by the global pull in favour of a neo-liberal free market economy, both in terms of the policy changes that occurred at global levels and

¹⁶³ An earlier version this part of my dissertation was first presented at the Third International Annual Conference on South Asian Studies at the Ireland India Institute of Dublin City University in Dublin, Ireland, on 26th April, 2019.

the national economic policies of the Manmohan Singh era of the then Congress led Indian government. This also coincided, historically and chronologically, with the rise of what we have come to call Hindu right wing populist politics. It needs to be seen whether such chronological assemblage speaks more than what is apparent i.e., a mere chronological coincidence. However, at a more localized level, the emergence of anti-caste cultural and literary articulations occurred, at least in West Bengal, as a cultural/political revolt against the Bengali middleclass, upper caste, 'Bhadralok' socio-cultural apathy towards the lower castes and tribal people. It is interesting to discern how the broader significance of the term 'Dalit', originally intended to incorporate a wider range of disenfranchised constituencies (other than the Scheduled Castes as the only/primary Dalit constituency) as encoded in the Marathi Dalit Panther Manifesto document of 1972, has more pronounced reverberations in West Bengal as the journey of this movement began by registering the death of a tribal (Lodha) girl Chuni Kotal as symptomatic of how caste Hindus denigrate the downtrodden. Notwithstanding the legal nuances of the death of Chuni Kotal, one can reasonably argue that this suicide acted as a catalyst to articulate some of the social fissures and the concomitant anxieties of the Bengali society at the turn of the century.¹⁶⁴

One of the defining and most regularly articulated characteristics of this otherwise socio-cultural and literary movement is its persistent criticism of the Left regime in the state of West Bengal. The literary articulations of various Bengali Dalit groups (especially Namasudra writers and poets) of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries often revisited and re-articulated the memories and trauma associated with the Massacre of Marichjhanpi that occurred in the early days of the Left front government. In the twenty first century, spectres of Marichjhanpi would often be cited as psycho-socially interacting with the

¹⁶⁴ Monoranjan Byapari, "Is there Dalit writing in Bangla?", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.42, Issue no. 41, (2007), 4116-4120.

more recent and contemporary political uprisings of the Singur-Nandigram movement against the Left government. Indeed, one of the remarkable cultural articulations of the last few years of the Left regime, is the persistent retellings of the Marichjhanpi massacre through newspaper writings, editorial columns, but also through Dalit autobiographical writings, memoirs and poems. The spectres of Marichjhanpi, Singur-Nandigram movement and the anti-OBC reservation statements issued by the top leadership of the Left government, led to a politically loaded perception that the caste Hindu led, essentially ‘Bhadralok’ based Left government has never truly bothered about the empowerment of the marginalized Dalits in the state and has undermined the significance of caste in managing egalitarian governance by shifting the focus on ‘class’ as the more potent socio-political register. Rather, the allegation was that the Marxist leaders were indifferent to the collective community interests of the Dalits in general and the most visible and politically most articulate section of the Bengalee Dalit community-Namasudras /Matuas, in particular. This, as Uday Chandra, Praskanva Sinha Roy, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Kenneth Bo Nielson and many other social scientists / cultural historians think, paved the way for Mamata Banerjee’s political rise in the state of West Bengal and beyond.¹⁶⁵ Here, we must also remember that Ambedkar’s long and quite elaborate tenuous relationship with the Indian Marxists as well as his philosophical criticisms of Marxist revolutionary politics serve as the ideological justification for connecting those politically traumatic events in West Bengal’s recent history.¹⁶⁶

However, Pitambar Hati, the Dom-poet I met at his native village Ragra in the recently formed district of Jhargram (previously a part of my own native district of Paschim

¹⁶⁵ Uday Chandra, Geir Heirstad and Kenneth Bo Nielson, ed., *The Politics of Caste in West Bengal*, (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2016). Also, see Indrajit Roy, “Transformative Politics: the imaginary of the Mulnibasi in West Bengal”, *The Politics of Caste in West Bengal*, 169-192. My references to the post-Marxist thinkers are partly influenced by his references to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.

¹⁶⁶ For an example of how Ambedkar attempted critiques of Marxist thought in some of his writings, see Kalyan Kumar Das, “Encountering John Dewey’s Pragmatism in the Indian Context: Ambedkar’s Critique of War, Violence and Nationalism, *Dewey Studies*, vol. 2, issue 3, (2018), 125-142.

Medinipur), narrated a significantly different story when I met him early this year. The village of Ragra, in the banks of a rivulet called Dulong, is almost an hour's distance from the Railway township of Kharagpur and less than two hours away from its former district headquarter -Midnapur town. Soutik Hati, an acclaimed young poet and Pitambar's nephew, informed me that Pitambar was a card holding party member of the CPIM for the greater part of his life and he does not agree with the popular politico-cultural articulations of the Namasudra led Bengali Dalit Sahitya Sangstha. In other words, Pitambar offers a radically different narrative from the narratives that researchers on Bengal's recent caste equations are usually more familiar with.

Doms in Bengal, like in other parts of the country, are known to be a caste group with a low ritual rank, socially and economically degraded and deprived constituency and often seen as 'food gathering nomadic community'. Doms are quite often associated with other ritually low ranked caste groups such as Mangs and Bhangis in different parts of eastern and northern India. Colonial ethnographers like H.H. Risley or researchers like G.W. Briggs (who wrote *The Doms and Their Near Relations*, 1953) often call such social assemblage as 'dom group'. According to Soutik's father and Pitambar's elder brother, Biswambhar Hati, there are primarily two distinct groups among doms- a) *shilpi dom* and b) *bajoniya dom*.¹⁶⁷ The first group has a hereditary profession of basket making. This explains the professional adjective 'shilpi' which means craftsman here. These Doms, to which the Hati family belongs, have been making baskets with the branches of a tree called Antari, widely available in the neighboring parts of the region that has come to be widely known as the Maoist region of Jangalmahal in West Bengal. The second category, according to Biswambhar, includes doms who play *dhaak*, *dhol* and other similar musical instruments. To give us a popular instance,

¹⁶⁷ Biswambhar Hati, "Swadhinotar Sottor Batsorer Alope Dalit Sreni", *Alor Mela: Ekti Sahitya Patrika*, vol. 43, (2017), 83-91.

he refers to Khirod Hatta who played dhols for Satyajit Ray's iconic film "Gupi Gayen, Bagha Bayen". Biswambhar, although seemed somewhat reluctant to admit, accepted that there is also a popular perception that doms are the people who burn the dead human bodies in the Hindu community. Since this work is marked by the dark ritual of death, it is, alongside the community that performs the task, is often considered as defiled in the traditional Hindu social order. It is this group that is described as 'sabdehi dom' ('sabdeho' means dead body in Bangla, 'sabdehi' is the adjective of the term) by Biswambhar. After his slightly hesitant acceptance of this third category, he and his son Soutik took me to meet Pitambar .

Pitambar Hati, in his sixties now, informed me that he survives by making *antari* baskets but in his younger days he used to play dhol, perform and direct theatre performances known as *jatra* in this part of Bengal and actively participated in communist political activities. In those early years, Pitambar was more passionate about writing anti-caste *jatra* scripts, *chora* or rhyming couplets in the local Bangla dialect of the region that is different from the standardized Bangla of the urban cultural elite because of linguistic interactions with Oriya and Hindi. During our conversations, Pitambar informed me about his direct engagement with the local CPIM and its left politics. Till this day, Hati claims to be a firm believer in the potential of left politics to bring about anti-caste social activism. During our conversations, Pitambar shared the narrative of how his family as well as his entire Dom community was ostracized, oppressed and exploited by the local landlords –the Mandals. Mandals, otherwise identified as a 'lower caste' surname is the surname of a local land holding family of *Kaibartas* who used to exercise political and social clout over the local Dalits- Doms and Bagdis. Hati, unlike my Namasudra/Matua interlocutors, identified the first couple of decades of the left rule as a time of empowerment of local Dalits. The distribution of land rights, fight for participating in local social events are all instances of how local left politics opened up unforeseen avenues of social mobility for Dalits in this area. It is through

this political party that Hati and his ilk waged a battle for social justice against the local nationalist elite- Mondals who have traditionally been the supporters of the Indian National Congress. But this political activism, Hati informs, was for him an integral part of how he enthusiastically participated in several cultural activities that I mentioned above. Many of his poems bear testimony to how he always resorted to poetry to not just narrate his own personal struggles but to also fight an unequal social system of caste. In a poem titled “Jaat o Juto”, Hati sarcastically portrays this anti-caste fight against humiliation and for human dignity. In this poem he describes how Jodunath Bauri, a low caste man is reprimanded by the local zamindar for wearing shoes- a practice that only upper caste ‘civilised’ people are allowed to have. When zamindar asks Jodunath to take off his shoes and informs him that lowly people like Jodunath are not supposed to wear shoes, Jodunath Bauri presents a riddle like question: “Jodu bole Juto pore Jodi hoi asobhyo/juto pora babu der kyano balo sobhyo?” (Jodu says, if wearing shoes is mark of incivility, how do we describe show wearing babus (gentlemen) as gentle and civil?).¹⁶⁸ Such anti-caste Dalit literary narratives also occur in the acclaimed Dalit novelist and short story writer Narayan Samat who also belongs to this Dom community. It was Soutik Hati who first led me to Samat’s novels. While most of his novels do discuss the plights of the marginalized sections of the Bengali society, his novels are not explicitly informed by any apparent anti-caste activist spirit. While some of the narratives have some anti-caste visions articulated by their characters, they do not cite or refer to Phule or Ambedkar. Samat also does not always describe himself as a Dalit writer despite his tendency to be unapologetically explicit about his anti-caste radical views. While most of his texts focus on multiple registers of social exclusion and suffering of the toiling mass, his novel *Nupurer Dhwoni* is perhaps the best example of his elaborate and explicit fictional

¹⁶⁸ Pitambar Hati, “Jaat o Juto”, *Premar Pithe Gham*, (Midnapur: Khabor Akhon, 2015).

engagement with anti-caste activism.¹⁶⁹ Based on the struggles and activism of a Kolathi Musad woman Anasua Musad in the Western state of Maharashtra, this novel becomes a fictionalized critique of the ‘feudal’ tradition of keeping Kolathi women as devdasis in the rural Maharashtra. Reflecting on the endless intertwining of caste and gender, this novel focuses on Anasua’s struggles to resist being ‘the lower caste prostitute’ that most Kolathi women are forced to become. The first-person narrator often compares Anasua with the leader of Narmada Bachao movement Medha Patkar and the leader of the Lodha Unnayan Samiti Mahasweta Devi. While, like Pitambar Hati, Samat is not much bothered about the mythical origins of his community, his anti-caste sensibilities are certainly expressed in novels such as *Nupurer Dhwani*. What also strikes us here is Samat’s belief in a pan-Indian anti-caste activism wherein a Bangla Dalit novelist fictionalizes the struggles of a Marathi Dalit woman against the local caste Hindu landlords who simultaneously claim social and political dominance in the region.

But Pitambar Hati’s *choras* and *jatras* or Samat’s novels were not the only modalities that Dom activists like Hati adopted to bring about social change. As his brother Biswambhar informs, Pitambar and many other local Dalits often waged war against the oppressive socio-religious practices of the local elites. Reminiscing one such incident in 1975 in an article titled “Swadhinotar Sottor Batsorer Alope Dalit Sreni”¹⁷⁰ (“The Condition of the Dalit class in the light of 70th Independence of India”), Biswambhar informs us how his family was initially barred from taking active participation in the local Durga puja committee and how Hati family and the local Dom community fought against it by petitioning before the office of the Sub-Divisional Officer and the District Magistrate of undivided Midnapur district. Biswambhar informs us how they received support from good hearted and

¹⁶⁹ Narayan Samat, *Nupurer Dhwani* (Kolkata: Education Forum, 2007).

¹⁷⁰ Biswambhar Hati, “Swadhinotar Sottor”, 89-90.

progressive local Left leadership in this fight against socio-religious exclusion by negotiating with local governmental authorities.

Before I met the Hati family and Pitambar Hati in particular, I had already read Ranajit Guha's relatively obscure essay "The Career of an Anti-God in Heaven and on Earth"¹⁷¹ where Guha gives us a genealogy of the myth of Rahu- the monster who drank *amrita* or the nectar of immortality or elixir during the Puranic battle between gods and monsters/asuras at what French scholar on mythography George Dumezil calls *festin d'immortalite* in the mythical Churning of Ocean (*Samudra Monthan*). Rahu is also a mythical and puranic character who is cursed and despised within the Hindu social order because of his ability to devour Sun and Moon. Therefore, the myth of Rahu has serious cosmic overtones for the Hindus. Rahu's shadow that causes lunar and solar eclipse according to a Hindu believer, Guha informs, is also often paralleled with the contaminating shadow of an untouchable like Dom or Bhangi. According to Guha, it is this myth of Rahu that many 'lower-castes' constituencies read and narrate in different ways to articulate their defiance against the caste Hindu dominance. The 'anti-god' figure of Rahu is often imagined by such groups like Doms and Bhangis as an image of 'cultic standing'. For Guha, such a retelling map the career or trajectory of the anti-God from an essentially celestial domain into the domain of social violence. Myths and their subaltern retellings, for Guha, constitutes an important domain for articulating resistance: "[...] once the syncretic wrapping is taken off, the content of many a myth can be identified as what it really is-that is, as a figure of some ancient and unresolved antagonism."¹⁷² In Guha's estimation, the Brahminical mythical tale of Rahu, both in its cosmic /celestial stigma and its social variant (manifested in the ritual debasement of and untouchability against the castes of 'Dom group'), is something that the

¹⁷¹ Ranajit Guha, "the Career of an anti-God", *The Truth Unites*, 1-25.

¹⁷² Guha, "Career of an-anti-God", 2.

ritually ‘impure’ lower castes simultaneously assimilate and contest. Guha thinks that such mythical narratives of loathing (in the figure of Rahu) that Doms were forced to believe eventually got assimilated and internalized by them. Without calling this a moment of Sanskritization of a previously nomadic food gathering tribe that now has found a lower ritual status in the Hindu fold, Guha says:

[...] the objects of such loathing have persuaded themselves, thanks to the weight of tradition, to internalize the sense of their own impurity. All of them have myths about some sort of an original sin to account for their polluted status and that sin assumes invariably the form of a deviation from Brahminical norms of purity on the part of an ancestor. Supach Bhagat, the first *dom*, is said to have turned up rather late at a feast given by Siva and Parvati for all castes and ate what was left over. Since then, his descendants have been condemned to eat the leavings of all other castes, so that according to Risley, they would readily identify themselves at least in some parts of the country as belonging to the *jutha-khai* (‘eater of leavings’) caste.¹⁷³

But Guha also concedes that despite such internalization of ritual debasement expressed through such common tales of mythical and original sin, Doms have had “other components of the same consciousness, expressed in a parallel set of myths and legends fabricated by the same subaltern fantasy, which use religiosity at least as a *cahier de tolerance*, if not quite a proclamation of revolt”. It is this side of such mythography that Guha identifies as the constituent element of social resistance encoded in a mythical tale. It is through such resistance through religiosity and myth-making that the anti-god Rahu has a different career:

[....] both the sun and the moon at one time borrowed something from Dhrubh [i.e. Rahu]
[....] This debt must be repaid, and if at any time the sun or the moon is not able to pay on the debt, it is attacked by Dhrubh who begins to devour it. He never quite does so, however, and vomits it up, as there is still money owing and payments must go on.¹⁷⁴

Guha surely identifies this as an instance of how everyday ‘pre-modern’ or ‘non-modern’ resistance often gets encoded in this variegated firmament of myths, counter-myths and

¹⁷³ Guha, “Career of an Anti-God”, 9.

¹⁷⁴ Guha, “Career of an-Anti-God”, 20.

mythographies. Indeed, such instances often range from Phule's autochthonous myth of 'Aryan as the invader/outsider' and sudra/sudratisudra as Mulnibasi, Ambedkar's idea of 'broken men' to these mythical counter-narratives of Doms or mythical tales of 'original sin' that Namasudras/ Matuas also believe in. In various efforts of Subaltern Studies engagements with such narratives, the focus is invariably placed on how 'non-modern' socio-religious practices had also some allocated space for social resistance of the subaltern and such non-modern practices should not be dismissed by 'elitist' Marxist, nationalist, colonialist or statist (in Hegelian sense) historiographies as simply 'pre-modern' and therefore, to use a term used by Eric Hobsbawm – 'pre-political'. Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, Dipesh Chakrabarty's anti-historicist anxieties in *Provincializing Europe*, Debjani Ganguly's application of subaltern studies framework to read Dalit life worlds in *Caste and Dalit Life Worlds: Postcolonial Perspectives*, Gautam Bhadra's deployment of Bakhtinian 'carnavalesque' in *Eman o Nishan* or Guha's "The Career of an Anti-God" are all instances of this epistemological effort. But, my interactions with Pitambar Hati and his family tell me a more complex story where negotiations with modern/ statist institutions to participate in an otherwise Brahminical socio-religious event is interspersed with performances of *jatra*, utterances of *chora* and a passionate, vigorous belief in the Left political activism against caste and class differences. Surely, non-modern socio-cultural and religious practices do not leave them and this certainly creates, to some degree, a domain of autonomy as well as social resistance against the ritual debasement that a 'lower caste' constituency otherwise inhabits. But Pitambar Hati's sharp refusal to believe in or even know about any story of mythical origin of social degradation of his community tells a very different narrative. Elsewhere, I have expressed my prioritization of such complex, often overlapping narratives of resistance and accommodation by showing how deeply ambivalent the relationship between Dalits and

state can be.¹⁷⁵ This rigid refusal to tell a story of mythical past by Pitambar as well as the other aforementioned coordinates of socio-religious, cultural and political survival demands a different framework other than what Guha emphasizes. Even if one keeps aside the Marxist dismissal of Subaltern Studies framework as a ‘postcolonial orientalism’ in the works of Vasant Kaiwar and more recently, in the works of Vivek Chibber, one has to recognize the over-emphasis on non-modern life practices of subaltern groups as instances of resistance in the work of subaltern studies collective. Perhaps, the interactions with Pitambar Hati, his poems, his active left politics, anti-caste struggle, his membership in the CPIM, his traditional, hereditary profession as a *bajaniya* and *shipli* Dom, his petitions in front of the magistrate to take part in a Hindu religious event and his reluctance to devise or recognize a mythical/mythological explanation of social stigma that marks him- are all instances of how unimaginably contingent these negotiations can be. Materially determined, historically and politically contingent, yet ideologically embedded in some radical ambiguity, none of these vectors through which such multi-faceted politics articulates itself is enough to arrive at any easy conclusion. Pitambar Hati, for me, is an instance of how Dalit engagements with institutional/governmental sites cannot be easily read as ‘statism’ and therefore, their constructions of past as either ‘historicist’ or ‘statist history’ and yet, it cannot be entirely subsumed in a mythographic world. Perhaps, such instances show the very impossibility of normative social sciences’ search for easy translations of local/particular into the universal and at the same time, invokes the universal in an almost intuitive fashion, instead of a rational subscription to modernist historicism or a mythopoetic justification of their lowly social status. It is because of such wide range of registers of Dalit resistance that we need to think of a Dalit historiography (in contradistinction with subalternist / subaltern historiography) that

¹⁷⁵ See, Kalyan Das, “Subalter Historiography to Dalit Historiography: Tracing Heterogeneity in Dalit Subalternity”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. L, Issue no. 7 (2015), 60-65.

speaks to a post-Marxist lens in its (im)-possible efforts to make sense of a “universality that is a contaminated universality: (1) it lives in this unresolvable tension between universality and particularity, (2) its function of hegemonic universality is not acquired for good but is, on the contrary, always, reversible”.¹⁷⁶

Guha exhibits a similar tendency to recognize the possibility of a rebellion or resistance against the dominant social groups in some of the mythical and other such non-modern narratives that are, as per his own admission, originally or primarily operating to normalize the subordination and exploitation of the dominated groups. Thus, both in “The Career of An Anti-God” and his magnum opus *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, he emphasizes upon the possibility of a rebellion within the overall grammar of such narratives of bhakti or myths through which peasant groups are originally subordinated. Echoing his observations in the essay “Career of an Anti-God”, Guha briefly shares some of these localized mythical narratives:

There were the consecrated memories of legendary low-born servants who had died for their high caste masters. In Bengal, Kalu the Dom was immortalized in a cycle of late medieval ballads composed in honour of the deity, Dharma. Born to one of the most ‘unclean’ of Hindu castes, he was slain in a battle while trying to help his lord recover some lands usurped by a rival magnate.¹⁷⁷

Guha goes on to cite more such examples from the southern Indian areas like Malabar and the legends of the Coorgs or the tale of a Tiyaar servant of Kottayam in order to make his general claim that, at times, despite being the narratives originally intended and circulated to normalize oppression also served the ‘lower castes’ adequate ideological and discursive impetus for bringing about the necessary consciousness of a rebellion or resistance:

¹⁷⁶ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, (London & New York, Verso, 2014).

¹⁷⁷ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 19.

Thus, the power of ideas and the circumstances corresponding to them made the peasant sensitive to the distance which separated him from the pillars of that society, a distance regarded by him as almost natural condition of his existence. Indeed, the authority of all the superordinate classes and groups was secure only so far and as long as he was reconciled to that condition. However, paradoxically enough, his revolt against that authority, when the hour struck, derived much of its strength from the same awareness.¹⁷⁸

This is the model of resistance that I see somewhat as at best only a secondary means of articulating resistance in the narratives that I explore in Pitambar Hati's or in Biswambhar Hati's writings. Even if there are mythical, non-modern elements in these narratives, there are fresh attempts to create new myths and narratives or else there is an almost complete and direct negotiation with the powers that be apropos the state. My assertion, therefore, departs simultaneously from Guha's fascination or preoccupation with how peasants *twist* and *subvert* the very narratives that normalize their oppression as a point of beginning to gain some kind of 'political' consciousness (as opposed to Habsbawm's 'pre-political' state) or articulations like those of Debjani Ganguly's to make Ambedkarite framework also look vehemently and predominantly mythical. I disagree with the second one because (a) I recognize the intellectual discomfort that the SS scholars have always had with Ambedkar's *overtly* 'modern' ways of articulating resistance and (b) there are other ways of contemplating a critique of modernity/Enlightenment or a modern template of historiography in Ambedkar as well as Dalit writings without *entirely* resorting to 'pre-modern' or 'non-modern' puranic and other mythical narratives. My next chapter on Ambedkar's ideas of past and his complex intellectual inheritances illustrate this point I am making here. There are many ways of articulating resistance in these writings that neither predominantly fall under a myth of Kalu, the Dom or Rahu's myth nor do they unquestionably (in their assumed 'gullibility') subscribe to the 'myths' of modernity i.e., some kind of statist paradigm or the other. This is why, instead of suggesting either a linear narrative of maturity or 'coming of

¹⁷⁸ Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, 19.

age' type understanding of the Dalit discourse through assuming the progress from a more mythical point of peasant consciousness to a more 'modern' template of Ambedkarite anti-caste political worldview, as it is assumed in many Dalit activist articulations, these writings I engage with in this dissertation do not readily make available convenient templates of resistance. Thus, ideas of ambivalence, simultaneity and heterogeneity are not merely signifiers that suggest some incomprehension; rather they constitute the very fabric of these narratives of protest and resistance. To expect some pattern has only resulted in articulations like those of historian Sekhar Bandyopadhyay who think of Namasudra narratives in terms of firstly a moment of resistance, followed by internal conflicts and ultimate subsumption within the dominant Brahminical forces resulting in their appropriation by nationalist politics or it might result in the other extreme wherein Ambedkar and Dalit discourse might be seen as almost annoyingly 'modern' e.g., Chatterjee's idea of Ambedkar as 'unalloyed modernist', Pandey's idea of Dalit autobiographies as exhibiting the 'common sense of the modern' or Chakrabarty's accusations against both Ambedkar and his mentor of being 'historicist' and ultimately 'liberal' and thus placed within the philosophical framework of Enlightenment modernity. These explorations, on the other hand, clearly exhibit a more complex mapping of Dalit consciousness than that of Ganguly's scattered referencing of distant and varied Dalit narratives and their placements under the convenient rubric of postcolonial and/or 'Subaltern historiography'.

Chapter IV

Understanding ‘Ambedkarism’: Situating Dalit History in the Postcolonial Predicament

“Philosophy represents the class struggle in theory. That is why philosophy is a struggle (*Kampf*, said Kant), and basically a *political* struggle: class struggle.” (Louis Althusser, *Lenin, and Philosophy and Other Essays*)

“Emancipation is once again a vast question today and I must say that I have no tolerance for those who- deconstructionist or not-are ironical with regard to the grand discourse of emancipation. This attitude has always distressed and irritated me. I do not want to renounce this discourse.” (Jacques Derrida, “Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism”, *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*)

“History is really a record of every interruption of the even working of the force of love or of the soul. ...History, then, is a record of an interruption of the course of nature. Soul force, being natural, is not noted in history.” (Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj*)

5.1 Manohar Mouli Biswas’ ‘Ambedkarism’: Locating Ambedkar in the postcolonial frame:

In all the preceding chapters in this dissertation I have often referred to the persistent ideological, political and philosophical presence of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in the articulations of Bengal’s Dalits. These previous chapters also suggest that this influence is certainly not a unilinear and one-sided influence of Ambedkarite thought on the various localized equations of caste in a region like West Bengal. But this does not undermine the persistence with which Ambedkar’s name is taken by the Dalit writings I have explored so far. As the introductory chapter of my dissertation suggests, this persistent presence of the Ambedkarite thought in the imaginative articulations of Bengal’s Dalits started finding its pronounced and organized avatar through the emergence of organisations like Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha. The famous Namasudra writer Manohar Mouli Biswas and most members of this organization often voice statements that also have a solid undercurrent of Ambedkar’s anti-caste visions in their literary and cultural narratives. Thus, Ambedkar’s philosophical and political writings and the anti-caste imagination that these express have often served as the initiating point of

the Bangla Dalit literary discourse. In his book *An Interpretation of Dalit Literature, Aesthetic Theory and Movements: Through the Lens of Ambedkarism*, Biswas succinctly summarises this by calling this influence of Ambedkar ‘Ambedkarism’ in Bengal’s cultural arena. In the introduction he writes:

At the outset I should say [that] the Marxist literature is based on Marxism. Similar is the case with Dalit literature, [sic.] totally, based on Ambedkarism. Marx told of ‘class’ subjugation and deprivation. Ambedkar, throughout his life had been concerned with Indian caste-based social hierarchies had perpetuated the subjugation and deprivation in the Indian society. This phenomenon has tried to highlight new literary aesthetic and theorizes a new domain of literature which all are their outcome of consciousness and movements.¹⁷⁹

This idea of ‘Ambedkarism’ in the domain of literature, aesthetics and culture and its juxtaposition with Marxism or Marxist literature have special significance. Firstly, it can be taken as a hint at the left rule in the state that has, according to the polemical utterances of Biswas’ and many anti-caste activists, ‘muffled’ the Dalit cultural as well as political voices. To that extent this can be taken as a subtle hint at how the dismissive attitude of many leftist intellectuals of the region towards a discursive construction like ‘Dalit literature in Bangla’ is ‘hypocritical’. If they do not have problems with a template like ‘Marxist literature’ that takes its ideological inspiration from Marx’s writings why should they have reservations about a literary canon that is inspired by Ambedkar’s thoughts? On a more extended note, this also points to the various repressive and coercive political methods that both Congress and the Left Front establishment allegedly deployed to silence the caste question in the region. This has been a repetitive polemical statement made by these Dalit activists and writers. But in recent past, this has also been validated by academic research on the history of caste politics in Bengal. Dwaipayan Sen offers a detailed documentation of this coercive silencing of the caste question of Bengal in his monumental work on the political life of the Namasudra

¹⁷⁹ Manohar Mouli Biswas, *An Interpretation of Dalit Literature, Aesthetic Theory and Movements: Through the Lens of Ambedkarism* (Kolkata: Choturtha Dunia, 2017),9.

leader Jogendranath Mandal *The Decline of Caste Question: Jogendranath Mondal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal*. Sen's monograph is also a rigorously argued reminder of how Ambedkar's political and ideological influence on Bengal's caste question is not a recent phenomenon that only began with the establishment of organisations like Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha. Sen reminds us that Ambedkar's presence in the Bengal region during late colonial times is of pivotal historical significance and wonders why this caste question slowly thinned in course of Bengal's post-independence era, especially during the Left rule. His work on Mondal's politics around Ambedkar's political organizations like the Scheduled Castes Federation and the Republican Party of India clearly establish how Ambedkar is neither a distant nor an unprecedented political and ideological inspiration as far as Bengal is concerned. For Sen, Ambedkar and his influence on the region's anti caste politics in the late colonial times is of tremendous historical value:

Mandal's deeper significance surely derives from his leadership within the Scheduled Castes Federation and the Republican Party of India, the foremost attempts at autonomous Dalit political organization in colonial India. Mandal, in short, was Bengal's response to Ambedkar.¹⁸⁰

Given the historically significant fact that Ambedkar won his seat in the Constituent Assembly from Bengal with the active support of Jogendranath Mondal's leadership in the Scheduled Castes Federation, we have enough historical and political justification for engaging with Ambedkar's thoughts and ideas while exploring the anti-caste literatures under the template of 'Bangla Dalit Sahitya'. But Biswas' statement on Ambedkarism has another significance. Debjani Ganguly discusses how Ambedkar's political writings have acted as what she describes as the 'initiation of Dalit literary discourse'.¹⁸¹ In her Foucauldian reading

¹⁸⁰ Sen, *The Decline of Caste Question: Jogendranath Mondal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3.

¹⁸¹ Debjani Ganguly, *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity: Notes on postcolonial hermeneutics of Caste* (London and New York: Routledge).

of Ambedkar's influence on this pan-Indian literary domain, Ganguly draws parallelism between her readings of Ambedkar's influence and how Michel Foucault describes Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud as the 'initiators' of Marxist and psychoanalytical discourses respectively. Thus, any discussion on the Bangla Dalit literary and cultural articulations would remain utterly incomplete if the ideological presence of Ambedkar's intellectual inheritances is not juxtaposed with a close reading of these Dalit narratives. It is in this sense that I find it necessary to explore Ambedkar's thoughts on past and history and locate such thoughts within postcolonial readings of his thoughts, historiographic debates with bearings upon the socio-cultural milieu of the region and Ambedkar's intellectual inheritances. To do this I offer a thumbnail description of how the thinkers of our postcolonial predicament have read Ambedkar and then I argue that his thoughts (and his ideas on history in particular) are not to be subsumed within an unalloyed and absolutist ideological framework within Enlightenment modernity. This is necessary not simply because such an attempt can serve a revisionist purpose vis-à-vis his writings but this will make Biswas' tag of 'Ambedkarism' more pronounced and transparent. In other words, this chapter tries to read how Ambedkar perceived history within his anti-caste politics and how this can be situated within his philosophical inheritances like American pragmatism or Buddhism. In extension, I imply that an understanding of these philosophical issues is important as they can serve as tentative and contingent conceptual tools to read Dalit historical imagination that I have already explored through the narratives of Manohar Mouli Biswas, Manoranjan Byapari, Jatin Bala, Sunil Das, Pitambar Hati or Mulnibasi movement.

This chapter attempts to engage with Ambedkar's own intellectual and philosophical inclinations in order to find some tentatively generalizable philosophies of history and locate them within 'postcolonial critique of modernity' templates. In that sense it creates a speculative framework for an Ambedkarite historiographical project that ideologically speaks

to the general concern for a Dalit historiography within the specific context of Bengal. That Ambedkar had to be concerned with the origins of untouchability and caste or Shudras provides us with a fairly justifiable search for this otherwise complex and heterogeneous project of Dalit historiography. While Debjani Ganguly's book tries to show compatibilities of Dalit mythographic history with the basic tenets of the Subaltern Studies critique of modernity, I attempt a different methodology that is analogous to projects of intellectual history of the Global South in which Ambedkar's intellectual inheritances can offer us tropes that are different from the metanarratives of Enlightenment modernity. I do not, in any immediate and convenient sense, suggest that this template, with all its tentativeness and speculative nature, is capable of abstracting generalities out of an infinite pool of negotiating strategies that the Dalit predicament brings about in its encounter with modernity. What I try to do here, in contradistinction with Ganguly's projects, is to register the significant contradictions and incompatibilities that we have already noticed between the Bengali Dalit narratives and the intellectual modalities of the Subalternist historiography. In this chapter I try to put those textual and empirical observations made in the earlier chapters in philosophical conversations with Ambedkar's own methods of negotiating with a Dalit past. In other words, this chapter tries to bridge the gap between Ambedkar's methods of doing history or his intellectual universe and how Bangla Dalit literary narratives negotiate with individual and communitarian pasts. This is only possible by on one hand, tracing the philosophical debates between modern philosophers of history like Hegel and subaltern studies historians like Ranajit Guha and on the other hand, by putting Ambedkar's conceptualizations of past in conversation with those critiques of Hegel by Guha by situating Ambedkar's idea of history within his broader intellectual affiliations e.g., American pragmatism and Buddhism. Through a reading of Ambedkar's own texts that speak of his idea of historian's task or his philosophical allegiances to these intellectual orientations, I

connect Ambedkar as a philosopher of history with the specificities we have come across in Bangla Dalit narratives I have surveyed in the previous chapters. In so doing, Dipesh Chakrabarty's 'postcolonial' observations on Ambedkarite vision of history becomes invariably contested. While Chakrabarty notices a solid quotient of modernity's historicist hangover in Ambedkar's 'decisionism', I discern a fundamentally different view of history that Ambedkar envisions. Ambedkar certainly recognizes the necessity of a rationalist view of history that is based upon facts or sees the 'historicist' necessity to locate the roots of untouchability in past. But he also realizes how imagination has to be brought in to perform the 'impossible' task of knowing the origins of untouchability or the birth of the Sudras. He is acutely aware of what calls 'the missing links of history'. If he is simply a torchbearer of modernity's historicism, as Chakrabarty would have us believe, then Ambedkar's unequivocally articulated scepticism on Goethe's emphasis on a rationalist understanding of history would not have occurred to Ambedkar. In *Beef, Brahmins and Broken Men*, an annotated edition of Ambedkar's text *The Untouchables: Who were they and how were they born?* Ambedkar questions Goethe's model of history after extensively quoting and lauding Goethe's philosophy of history: "But Goethe does not tell what the historian is to do when he comes across a missing link, when no direct evidence of connected relations between important events is available."¹⁸² And then goes on to answer:

I believe that in such cases it is permissible for him to use his imagination and intuition to bridge the gaps left in the chain of facts by links not yet discovered and to propound a working hypothesis suggesting how facts which cannot be connected by known facts might have been inter-connected.¹⁸³

I will come back to this Ambedkarite vision of history and how Chakrabarty's reading of Ambedkar's historicist tendencies offers us only an incomplete picture at the end of this

¹⁸² B.R. Ambedkar, *Beef, Brahmins and Broken Men: An annotated critical selection from "The Untouchables"* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2019), 92.

¹⁸³ Ambedkar, *Beef, Brahmins and Broken Men*, 93.

chapter. Before I locate those Ambedkarite views on history within his intellectual universe consisting of American Pragmatism, Buddhism or the possible philosophical connections we can make between those philosophical traditions with post-Nietzschean continental philosophy of Jacques Derrida, I must offer three things: a) a description of a postcolonial critique of Hegel's western philosophy of history , b) underscore the engagements of such postcolonial critiques with the question of caste and then c) a brief description of how Ambedkar or his anti-caste thoughts have been received by postcolonial scholars, especially by the Subaltern Studies historians. These are then followed by brief descriptions of Ambedkar's inheritances like pragmatism and Buddhism and how they can offer us a different 'critique of modernity' – an ideological, intellectual and discursive universe through which Dalit narratives make more sense than the usual existing postcolonial frameworks that focus on seeing caste itself as an instance of 'non-modern life' or see foundational philosophies like Advaita Vedanta as antidote to western modernity.

Ranajit Guha, in his book *History at the Limit of World-History* said:

What is involved is not only the fact or force of conquest but its collusion with all aspects of colonialist knowledge. Everything that answered that description, whether as philology or political economy, travelogue or ethnography, or any other in a long list of arts and sciences, was party to such complicity, but none more so than philosophy overarching and comprehending them all. Philosophy owes this primacy to its power of abstraction, which enables it to assemble and arrange all the manifold activities and ideologies associated with colonialism under the rubric of Reason. ¹⁸⁴

Apart from showing us the historical relationship between prose and history and the genealogy of history's 'inevitable' mistrust on poetry, this book shows us, with just and adequate emphasis, how the idea of the State is not just the basis for epistemologically privileging 'official', elite history, but is also a morally, even spiritually privileged site within

¹⁸⁴Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York,2002), 2.

the *world historical*, ‘civilisational’ and ‘universalist’ Hegelian schema. This idealist philosophical framework of Hegel, by conceptualizing the state as a site intricately involved with his notion of ‘spirit’ and as a necessary component in the totalizing discourse of ‘world history’ logically paved the way for a philosophical legitimization of colonialism. This is amply and dangerously evident in Hegel’s own words in *Philosophy of History*. Talking of Europe’s long fascination with India’s treasures-both material and spiritual- and referring to the victory attained by Lord Clive’s East India Company, Hegel says: “The English or the East Indian Company, are the lords of the land (India); for it is the necessary *fate* of Asiatic Empires to be subjected to Europeans; and China will, someday or other, be obliged to submit to this fate.”¹⁸⁵ Such words of confidence did not simply flow from his well-known profound sense of racial superiority. Rather, these words, when put within the philosophical context created by Hegel, looks like a logical certainty that renders any chance of Indian, localized contingent senses of history completely irrelevant, if not absolutely impossible. This intricate relationship of Hegelian idealism with the brutal history of colonial violence can hardly be undermined or overlooked by any serious reader of philosophy and cannot certainly be understudied by a scholar like Guha. This reflection and justification of the violence of colonialism, as Ranajit Guha’s critique of Hegel’s *die weltgeschichte* or *world history* attempts to showcase, therefore, resides in this philosophically abstracted privileging of the state as a site for normative definition or parochializing of a particular ‘sense of history’ that pushed aside all other variants of ‘sense of history’ to the margins of our existence. Since this Hegelian notion of state is also a site of Reason, Guha rightly shows the philosophical connections between the Hegelian idea of state and the Enlightenment philosophical framework. Guha’s attempt to turn to the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore’s essay “Sahitye Oitihāsikotā”

¹⁸⁵ Akash Singh Rathore and Rimina Mohapatra, eds., “Philosophy of World History”, *Hegel’s India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), 143.

(“Historicality in Literature”)¹⁸⁶ is a point of departure to recuperate some of those other, ‘different’ senses of history and also to exploit the murky relationship between poetry and history (or, rather ‘historicality’ /*oitihāsikotā* in this context).¹⁸⁷

Perhaps, it is needless to point out that some of the recent developments in world politics and particularly the political developments in most of the democracies like India or the United States of America, have emphatically and forcefully asserted the supremacy of different variations of ‘nation-statism’. At this juncture in our political existence, we can hardly afford to be blind to this fetish for an aggressive nation-statism based on the Nationalist jingoism in these political structures. No one, in other words, can even dare to ignore the centrality of nation-states in such a political world or to echo Quentin Skinner’s genealogical perceptions on the idea of the state, we might realize that ‘State’ continues to be the ‘master noun’ in our political utterances and negotiations¹⁸⁸. The presence of international agencies like the United Nations, World Trade Organisation etc. look frustrated if we consider such overarching presence of Nation- States at the level of negotiations that occur at these international institutions. Such statist fetish is so strong that national identities often make us forgetful of grave planetary priorities like climate change which so dangerously perpetuates, to quote author Amitav Ghosh, our ‘Great Derangement’¹⁸⁹. Therefore, Guha’s critique of Hegelian association of state with a greater spiritual and moral worth, not only holds significance for understanding the epistemological violence meted out to the colonized and his sense of history, but is also capable of underlining the perpetuity of such Hegelian

¹⁸⁶Here I am quoting from Ranajit Guha’s translation of Tagore’s original Bengali text. See, Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History*, 95-99.

¹⁸⁷For a more detailed elaboration of Tagore’s views on literature and history writing, see Ranjan Ghosh, “Rabindranath and Rabindranath Tagore: Home, World, History”, *History and Theory* 54 no. 4(2015), 125-148, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.10782>. For an interesting critique of Guha’s views on this, see Rosinka Chaudhuri, “Historicality in Literature: Subalternist Misrepresentations”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 39 no.42 (2004): 4658-4663, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4415683>.

¹⁸⁸Quentin Skinner and Bo Strath, eds., *States and Citizens: History, Theory, Prospects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁸⁹Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Gurgaon: Penguin, 2016)

‘elitism’ in subsequent post-colonial, nationalist historiographical and political discourses. Quite predictably, Guha and other Subaltern Studies historians have tried to not only critique such ‘elitism’ in colonialist historical narratives but also in subsequent anti-colonial nationalist historiography. Quite justly, in such a project, they had to revisit the Hegelian dialectical schema and the series of *aufhebung/aufheben* leading to *Geist*. Moreover, given Tagore’s strong utterances against nationalism and the idea of the state, it is also quite understandable why Guha would find some epistemological window in Tagore’s poetry and his strong dismissal of ‘pedantic historians’ by focusing on the unique subjectivity of the poet at a particular moment in creative frenzy. Texts such as Tagore’s essay “Historicality in Literature” or his lectures like “Nationalism in India”¹⁹⁰ bear testimony to such apprehensions that the poet had. While I have no scope whatsoever, to disagree with Guha’s ways of locating the problems of ‘elitism’ in history writing in Hegel’s ‘world history’, some ironies, however, are left out of Guha’s framework: if Tagore constitutes his moment of criticism of Hegelian world history, how does one think of the grand claim that Tagore is a ‘world-poet’ or ‘Biswakobi’ or ‘ami prithibir kobi’ (“I am a poet of the entire world”) in his own words? This question does hold some scope of research in the interesting field of ‘world-literature’ and looks significant when we counter pose this with Hegel’s phrase ‘world history’. The recent studies in the sphere of *Weltliteratur* have already shown interesting connections between comparative philology or comparative literature and orientalism.¹⁹¹ This is definitely suggestive of why ‘biswokobi’ – the hallowed qualifier ascribed to Tagore- could have been a further point of intervention in Guha’s critique of Hegelian *die Weltgeschichte*. Secondly, Guha does not have any extensive observations to make on another Hegelian point as to why India has no history, despite the fact that it has had a long civilization of its own. Hegel had

¹⁹⁰Rabindranath Tagore, “Nationalism in India”, *Nationalism* (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2012), 85-116.

¹⁹¹As an example, see, Baidik Bhattacharya, “On Comparatism in the Colony: Archives, Methods, and the Project of *Weltliteratur*”, *Critical Inquiry* 42 no.3, (2016):677-711, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/685608>.

two objections in accepting the proposition that India has ‘history’ – a) there is no State or there is no Indian State; therefore, no history *as such* and b) India has no history because India has a caste system. While Guha spends too much ink of his quill to show us the banality of the first, he is absolutely silent as far as the explanation or a critique of the second Hegelian reservation. This seems highly incongruous especially because Guha himself has drawn our attention to the second Hegelian apprehension reflected in Hegel’s ‘refrain’ like utterances on India in the Second Draft of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*:

India was a different matter altogether, culturally speaking. Hegel, unlike James Mill, his English contemporary, had nothing but admiration for its intellectual achievements. But these did not qualify it for statehood in his view. The promise of some development in that direction was “incipient” in the earlier phase of “social distinctions” among its people, but came to nothing as these “petrified into natural determinations- i.e., the caste system.” Which is why India has no history, he [Hegel] says.¹⁹²

However, such projects of either *weltliteratur* or how caste constitutes one of the most deluding, intractable aspects of postcolonial theories or how caste can be thought of as the most telling moment of ‘unthought’ (in a Heideggerian sense) within postcolonial studies are beyond the planned or anticipated scope of this present chapter. My endeavour here is neither to simply point out the limitations of Guha’s text nor to show some inherent deficiency in the framework that Guha offers simply for the sake of it. Rather, Guha’s *History at the Limit of World History* is a case among many such subaltern studies and postcolonial studies texts that exhibit a conspicuous absence of some significant aspects of the broader western philosophical firmament in postcolonial studies on one hand and eliding the caste question in South Asian postcolonialism on the other hand. It is a rather strange exercise in picking and choosing only those examples in the western foundationalist philosophical streams to surmount a critique of the colonial situation or elite colonial

¹⁹²Ranjit Guha, “Historicity and the Prose of the World”, *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York, 2002),9.

historiography from the perspective of the postcolonial subaltern. Ambedkar, in this chapter, constitutes that fertile philosophical crossroad through which we will revisit some of those (western) philosophies that critiqued the Enlightenment modernity from within- an Enlightenment modernity to which Rene Descartes, Immanuel Kant, and G.W.F. Hegel would belong- a philosophical inheritance that is critiqued by Edward Said, Ranajit Guha and others for fairly obvious reasons that revolve around questions like subaltern agency, difference or representation. In other words, my task is to make a survey of Ambedkar's statism as a point of departure and see if that can be located within such broader foundationalist, essentialist and transcendentalist philosophical outlook that western Enlightenment upholds and then trace some counterintuitive possibilities in Ambedkar's engagements with state, democracy etc. that might not necessarily deduce - in any immediate sense-a modernist, universalist or rationalist frame. We need to see whether Ambedkar's statism can be conveniently tied to such Enlightenment framework of modernity by looking at his ambivalent treatment of the idea of the state, his critique of nationalism and in turn, by looking at his philosophical engagements.

5.2 Ambedkar as a 'frustrated interlocutor of modernity'?

More often than not, Babasaheb Ambedkar, in modern Indian political thought, has been perceived as a thinker predominantly associated with the idea of the Indian state and in extension- a quintessentially 'modern' personality. In the capacity of the chairperson of the Constitution drafting committee, as the first law minister of independent India, as the leader of the 'depressed classes' who negotiated with the colonial establishment- perhaps, we have too many reasons to think that Ambedkar, seemingly so committed to the most important site of India's political modernity i.e., state, must have been an obsessively statist person. Such perception, dominant in the domain of the real politick as well as in academic scholarship, has projected Ambedkar as a *modernist*, *rationalist* person whose faith in statism resulted in a

limited and often frustrated or crippled political empowerment of Dalits or women and other such minoritized constituencies. This has often led to an identification of Ambedkarite cultural and literary narratives like those of Sunil Das or Swapan Kumar Biswas as either essentially modern and rational or this has pushed such narratives of past in the domain of myths and counter-myths. On one hand, scholars like Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey who have been otherwise sensitive to Ambedkar's concerns, have also looked at such statist negotiations as either Ambedkar's inability to see through the paradoxes and contradictions of modernity (in the Enlightenment sense) or as his inordinate faith in the institutions of state power that have, by and large, roots in the early modern normative political theories emerging out of western Europe. Before pointing out how Ambedkar dreamt of equal citizenship out of his faith in the homogeneity of the space and time of the nation state, Chatterjee presents Ambedkar quite explicitly in terms of western Enlightenment modernity in his book *Politics of the Governed*: "Ambedkar was an unalloyed modernist. He believed in science, history, rationality, secularism and above all, in the modern state as the site for the actualization of human reason."¹⁹³ We can also think of another similar instance from Gyanendra Pandey's book *A History of Prejudice: Race, Caste and the Idea of Difference* where Ambedkar is described as a quintessentially modernist figure who had misplaced his faith on the 'universal prejudice' of our times i.e., belief in the welfare and interventionist capacities of an essentially Hegelian state in his fight against the 'vernacular prejudice' of caste (other instances would be sexism or racism etc.). This is how, according to Pandey, Ambedkar is presented to us: "The representation of Ambedkar as the immaculately attired, unambiguously rational, learned, imperturbable and unshakeable modern leader...".¹⁹⁴ These are two significant examples of how Ambedkar is invariably perceived and projected by such leading academic

¹⁹³ Partha Chatterjee, "Nation in Heterogeneous Time", *Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 9.

¹⁹⁴ Gyanendra Pandey, *A History of Prejudice: Race, Caste and Difference in India and the United States* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 92.

commentators on our postcolonial predicament. But, even by Ambedkar's most vocal detractors, both in his time and ours, he is perceived as a statist person. One can think of an instance like Arun Shourie's *Worshipping False Gods*,¹⁹⁵ where, Shourie quotes Ambedkar, albeit in completely decontextualised and fragmented manner, to establish Ambedkar as a British stooge who always sabotaged the nationalist cause (hence, a false God). In such perceptions, Ambedkar is seen as a statist who negotiated with the British colonial state, instead of fighting to bring about the free Indian nation state. Starting from the popular perception of Ambedkar as the constitution maker to such scholarly suggestions and detractor's reservations about him, Ambedkar, it seems, cannot be anything but either a helpless (in case of Chatterjee or Pandey) or a malignant (in Shourie) statist thinker in the Hegelian sense. This makes him quite different from either Tagore who explicitly discarded the idea of nation-state by calling it a 'machine' and by pointing out its Western origin or Gandhi whose vegetarianism, non-violence, and manifest anti-British politics substantiated his centrality in most academic engagements in postcolonial studies. I cited these in order to show how, over a long period of time, the statist and political aspects of Ambedkar's intellectual presence has been over determined to such an extent that we have overlooked too many missing links, ellipses, silences, contradictions in most of our observations on Ambedkar or his political philosophies as well as our postcolonial re-cognition of western philosophies through a thinker like him. In this essay, I seek to address his statism as my point of departure to look deep into some of those philosophical aspects of his thinking. This, as we shall see later in this chapter, will not allow us to unambiguously over determine his statism or his subscription to modernity. In order to do so I will adopt two steps. Firstly, I will revisit some of his own writings on the idea of the nation-state, nationalism etc. and

¹⁹⁵ Arun Shourie, *Worshipping False Gods: Ambedkar and the Facts Which Have Been Erased* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2012).

secondly, I will locate these observations within a larger philosophical framework with which Ambedkar closely interacted.

To begin with, one must focus on how Ambedkar critically perceived the idea of the Nation-state and what his ideas and criticisms on Nationalism were and secondly, one must see how Ambedkar perceived the operational/functional framework of the State that is placed at a crossroad where the conjoined ideas of ‘Nation-state’ and ‘state as governmental apparatus’ overlap. In other words, this section of the chapter holds discursive significance to read characters like Subol’s mother in Nakul Mullick’s post-partition autobiographical novel *Khoma Nei* or a narrative like *Sukhchand*. If Ambedkar’s own views on nation-state can be proved to be considerably critical of the ideology of nationalism, then, I argue, it becomes possible to create discursive connections between his views and the corpus of Namasudra partition narratives I explored in the first chapter. In the first segment, I would like to have a look at some of Ambedkar’s texts that directly deal with the idea of the state- predominantly in terms of its operational framework and functional expectations. These are – his fragmented piece called *Untouchables and Pax Britannica* and his ambitious, meticulously researched book *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, as well as some other texts like *Buddha or Karl Marx?* and *Annihilation of Caste*. However, the second and larger book-*Pakistan or the Partition of India* has enormously important observations by Ambedkar on the idea of the Nation and Nationalism. Focusing on this part of the text has serious critical vantage points that interact closely with Ambedkar’s contemporaries like Gandhi and Tagore. A lot of scholarly attention has been paid to Ambedkar and Gandhi as two contending political visionaries and opponents. But there has been absolutely no focus on how Ambedkar commented upon, albeit in relatively small references, Tagore’s views on Nationalism and the idea of a Nation-state. While, *Untouchables and Pax Britannica* is important to understand Ambedkar’s opinions on the colonial state, it is in *Pakistan or the Partition of*

India that Ambedkar not only engaged with the most important and immediate political concern of the time i.e., partition, but also extensively commented on the existing critical literature on the idea of the Nation expressing his apprehensions about the aggressive and mechanical nature of the Nation-state (tellingly echoing Tagore's well known reservations about the Nation). Yet, Ambedkar looks more like a political pragmatist who, upon knowing his political stakes and compulsions, perceives political concerns contingently and not simply in terms of either a simple historico-teleological inevitability or in terms of downright dismissal. It seems that he was quite aware of the dangers of this apparatus and yet would push for a workable, highly contingent and instrumental view of the functional and operational structure of the Nation-state. Recognising these will then pave the way for a different trajectory through which we shall see some of the important philosophical encounters that Ambedkar had and how these shaped most of his perceptions, including his ideas of the nation-state or democracy. This will also show why it might not be a great idea to look for a philosophical reply to Hegelian impulses in the Vedic or Upanishadic discourses as is done by Tagore in his 1941 essay and as Guha elucidates by subscribing to Tagore's invocation of Upanishadic literature. This is why I revisited the philosophical connections between Hegel's idea of statism or statist history and Guha's reply to it through Upanishadic route via Tagore's conversations with the young Bengali poet- Buddhadeb Basu- "Sahitye Oitihāsikotā" ("Historicality in Literature"). Let me illustrate with an example of what kind of questions will be determining the sub-textual contours of this present chapter before I initiate a discussion on Ambedkar's thoughts on the nation-state and his engagements with different philosophical thoughts in the succeeding pages of this chapter.

Chandogya Upanishad is a major Upanishadic text from which several narratives and conversations have entered common knowledge and common ritual practices among the Hindus. The Gayatri Mantra that is regularly chanted by many pious Hindus occurs here in

Chandogya Upanishad. Stories like Jabala Satyakam, Satyakam's conversations with the great sage Gautama have eventually entered the neo-Vedantic era of nineteenth century as well. It is in this text, however, we come across a sloka that says that one is either born as a pig or a dog or an untouchable or a lower caste (*chandala*, in modern terminology it would be 'Dalits') because of the sins committed in one's last birth. It is important that we notice how this sloka legitimizes the dehumanization of Chandals through a cosmic design based on the idea of after birth. These lines happen in Chapter X of Part V of the text titled as- "The Various Paths Followed after Death":

Those whose conduct here [on earth] has been good will quickly attain some good birth-birth as a brahmin, birth as a kshatriya, or birth as a vaisya. But those whose conduct here has been evil will quickly attain some evil birth-birth as a dog, birth as a pig, or birth as a chandala.¹⁹⁶

If such is the philosophical assumption of an Upanishadic text then how is it that Guha or Tagore find a philosophical reply to colonialist philosophy that Guha accuses Hegel of doing? Or in other words, if Hegel's racism, coupled with Enlightenment rationalism, instigated him to conclude that India cannot have history or Africans are sub-human creatures, are we to conclude then that Tagore and Guha have framed their responses on the basis of an Upanishadic philosophy that willy-nilly look like an essentially casteist framework? This is just one symptomatic illustration of the larger philosophical and discursive problem that is puzzling us here: if Hegel's racist 'philosophy of spirit' (where 'Oriental Spirit' is only in its primitive, 'pre-political' stage; hence, without history) acts as a foundation for the colonial enterprise, do we really need to look for a philosophical reply to such Hegelian impulses by relying on Upanishadic texts that, as I have already shown, undoubtedly smacks of blatant stigmatization of certain groups of people, namely untouchables or Dalits? The essay by Tagore finds a reply to Hegelian pedantic historian's

¹⁹⁶Swami Nikhilananda, *The Upanishads: Taittiriya and Chandogya* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 270.

fetish for factual statist, history in the nuanced interpretation of a sloka in *Brihadarnayak Upanishad*. It is to be noted here that Tagore himself does not mention the particular Upanishad and it is Guha who, in his scathing attack on Hegelian *die weltgeschichte*, points out the name and locates the particular sloka in the text. For Tagore, it is simply the generalised idea of an ‘Upanishadic philosophy’ that can counter pedantic historian. If we continue with such a broad rubric, one cannot help but engage with *Chandogya Upanishad*- a text that is particularly significant for the beauty of its poetry and its rhythmic energy or *chaanda*. It is against such a backdrop that I frame the questions revolving around how we do postcolonial studies in an Indian or South Asian context (for caste exists in other countries like Nepal and among Bengali Hindus in Bangladesh or Tamil migrant populations in Sri Lanka). In this essay, I argue that it is in an effort of mapping Ambedkar’s intellectual history or his philosophical encounters that one gets an opportunity to not only ask these questions but also to find a possible answer to this apparent rigmarole. We will have a number of further occasions to come back to this question in our subsequent engagements while looking at Ambedkar’s philosophical orientations. In such a pursuit, as I show later in this piece, we will be encountering a different Ambedkar whose philosophical framework stand in the opposite direction of what Hans-Georg Gadamer called ‘Enlightenment’s prejudice against prejudice’; contrary to the beliefs shared by Chatterjee or Pandey. Just as Gayatri Spivak uses ‘Hegel’ as a metonymic trace of the world historical assumptions of the dominant western philosophical traditions in her book *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*¹⁹⁷, I use ‘Guha’ as a metonym of the postcolonial discourse analysis that emphatically began with Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and I treat Guha’s *History at the Limit of World History* as a representative, symptomatic short hand for such post colonialism, especially in the context of

¹⁹⁷Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

how it has been put into a ‘framework status’ within postcolonial studies engagements with caste vis-à-vis modernity . In the concluding sections of this chapter, we shall revisit our references to the Upanishadic texts and see if Tagore’s interpretation of Upanishadic texts in itself is loaded with an interesting response to colonial modernity in the backdrop of nineteenth century Calcutta. But, for the time being, let us see how Ambedkar perceived the quintessential site of colonial and postcolonial modernity- the Indian nation-state.

5.3 Ambedkar, the Nation-state and a possible critique of Nationalism

In his fragmented piece called “The Untouchables and the Pax Britannica”¹⁹⁸, Ambedkar brutally attacks the colonial state. It is important that we notice the nature of his arguments in such virulent attack. Although at an apparent level, this looks like an appeal or rather, a demand for negotiation with the colonial power for the betterment of the ‘depressed classes’ (a colonial term to designate the ‘lower castes’ in Hindu society), I recognize a couple of aspects beyond such apparent reading. As it will be evident soon, such re-cognition of these aspects will no longer allow us to tag him as a ‘modernist’.

The larger argument of the text is that the most flourishing period of the British Empire-Pax Britannica- was brought about not at the cost of an undifferentiated ‘colonised Indians’, but on the strategic pauperization of the untouchables and a limited but definite upward mobility of the caste Hindu natives who benefitted from the colonial education system more than any other colonized constituency. Apart from making such an argument, in this text, Ambedkar also makes some important observations on the nature of colonial law and also the legal discourse in general. Even while he admits that colonial law or British Rule of Law has opened certain avenues for the depressed classes, it has deliberately stayed away

¹⁹⁸ B.R. Ambedkar, “The Untouchables and the Pax Britannica” in *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, ed. Valerian Rodrigues (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), 351-358.

from bringing about any major structural reformation of the Hindu society. While arguing along such a line, he comments on law:

It is true that caste and untouchability are social matters. They will vanish when people will begin to inter-dine and inter-marry. Law cannot compel a person to marry with another. But it is also true that law can prohibit a caste from preventing a person from marrying a person outside his caste.¹⁹⁹

Apart from the unmistakable duality with which he comprehends the legal discourse, we must see that he is never oblivious to the ultimate possibility of a dispositional change or a change in attitude. Such an observation also reaffirms the way he defined the caste system as ‘notion of mind’. Unless, there is a notional change at the level of perceptions, no law can be effective. Despite recognizing the interventionist capacities of law, Ambedkar never overlooked such a dispositional nature of the caste system as is evident in his 1936 undelivered speech at the Annual Congress of *Jaat Pat Todak Mondal* in Lahore-

Annihilation of Caste:

Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from communicating and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion; it is a state of the mind. The destruction of caste does not therefore mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change.²⁰⁰

But in *The Untouchables and the Pax Britannica*, the greater argument involves some concrete elucidations around the supposed interventionist role that the colonial state often projected to legitimize its presence in India. Here, Ambedkar refers to a debate between Sir Maneckji Dadabhoy on one hand and Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Sir Surendranath Bannerjee and Sir Reginald Craddock on the other. It is significant that Ambedkar spends too much time to discuss this debate in the Central legislative that happened in 1916.²⁰¹ Ambedkar draws our attention to how the Parsi legislator raised the question of untouchables’

¹⁹⁹ Ambedkar, “Untouchables and Pax Britannica”, 351.

²⁰⁰ B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, ed. S. Anand (New Delhi: Navayana, 2014), 286.

²⁰¹ Ambedkar, “Untouchables and Pax Britannica”, 352.

plight in the central legislative and how Banerjee and Malaviya silenced him by saying that this is an internal (to the Hindu society that is) *social* matter that does not need any immediate intervention by the political realm i.e., the British colonial rule. In his response, as Ambedkar's extensive quotations suggest, Reginald Craddock also echoes Bannerjee and Malaviya: "...the problem in dealing with this question (addressing the problems of the depressed classes) is more social and religious than purely administrative."²⁰² Craddock therefore considers that the change of heart among caste Hindus in their treatment of their lower caste brethren will ultimately address the problem and the British rule does not have to intervene in such matters. Although Ambedkar does not explicitly show us, this perspective of the colonial establishment has a tellingly uncanny continuity. The British colonial policy, after the initial challenges of tax or revenue collection and policy struggles of Hastings and officers of the Company before him, decided not to interfere with the native customs and practices. They took such lessons of governance from their European counterparts – Dutch and Portuguese- who came before them; apparently messed with the native social practices and eventually did not succeed in establishing such a large empire as the British would later do. But this is not simply about a colonial government's reluctance to execute reforms in the native society because of a fear to be overthrown. As my interlocutor in this essay Ranajit Guha himself suggests-such a non-intervention policy was a direct and indirect outcome of European orientalism that goes back to Voltaire's play on Genghis Khan. Guha's efforts in establishing a genealogical trajectory of the 'idea' of Permanent Settlement shows how the Orientalist perspective considered an undifferentiated Oriental society and culture as *superiorite naturelle*. As Guha's exposition implies, the fear of the colonial power in meddling with native society's internal matters came from such orientalist awestruck obfuscation of oriental societies like Chinese and Indian:

²⁰² Ambedkar, "Untouchables and Pax Britannica", 354

Served straight as by [Quintin] Craufurd or packed in allegory as by Voltaire, this faith in the *superiorite naturelle* of Eastern civilizations was an important ideological feature of the Enlightenment. The thesis underlying the story of Genghis–Kan in China was adopted by many Englishmen as a guide to their interpretation of Indian history as well as to the formulation of Indian policies. Thus, it was William Bolt’s idea that the Portuguese had lost their power because they ‘tried to abolish the customs’ of the Hindus and force Christianity on them, so that as soon as the natives had found protection and toleration in any new-established European settlements, all the trade in the neighbouring Portuguese ports dwindled away to nothing.²⁰³

Therefore, Ambedkar’s attack on the colonial establishment does not have to be seen essentially as a ‘negotiation’ with them to cull out certain reformatory measures or legal interventions to circumvent the plight of the untouchables. Rather, by declaring that the British Empire flourished primarily through the strategic impoverishment of the depressed classes and by saying that it has not shown either the courage or the political will to intervene in native social customs like that of caste, Ambedkar lays bare not only the hypocrisy of the colonizer but also the internal discursive mechanisms that sustained and helped the Empire to flourish. Far from showing Ambedkar’s uncritical subscription to Enlightenment, such a reading shows how Ambedkar’s inquiries, albeit indirectly, exposes an Enlightenment myth that fuelled orientalism and sustained colonialism. My references to the Mulnibasi movement and its complex entanglement with the Aryan invasion myth can be recalled here. That the Mulnibasi movement simultaneously exploited the Aryan myth and yet, articulated what Dorothy Figuiera calls ‘anti-myth’ or ‘counter-myth’, speaks to such discursive possibilities of critiquing Enlightenment modernity we see in Ambedkar here.

Many like Chatterjee think that Ambedkar underwent several frustrating experiences in the capacity of a constitution framer and later as the first law minister of independent India and it is out of these consecutive frustrations in the realm of the political –exemplified in the site of the state and engendered by his supposedly ‘excessive statism’- that he embraced

²⁰³Ranajit Guha, “Early Departures, 1769-1772”, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (New Delhi, 2016), 20.

Buddhism. I firmly contest such a view for several reasons- reasons that are apparently ‘political’ and reasons that are more ‘philosophical’ (this comes with the necessary punctuation that these are hardly mutually exclusive terrains; rather that is exactly what this essay, as much as Guha’s criticism of Hegelianism, attempts to point out). If Ambedkar’s ‘fascination’ or ‘faith’ had already faced severe frustrations before his penultimate move to Buddhism just one and half months before his death, he must not have criticized the Marxists about ‘withering away of the state’ in an unfinished text written around the same time- *Buddha or Karl Marx?* In Chatterjee’s chronological estimation, this is a text that comes after his ‘frustrating’ experiences with the state apparatus- because of his unsuccessful attempts to transform the Hindu Code Bill into a law during Nehru’s tenure as the Prime Minister and so on. In this text, Ambedkar firmly contests the Marxist assumption that there will be a point of time when the state apparatus will no longer be needed. Ambedkar, rather bluntly asks:

The Communists themselves admit that their theory of the State as a permanent dictatorship is a weakness in their political philosophy. They take shelter under the plea that the State will ultimately wither away. There are two questions which they have to answer. When will it wither away? What will take the place of the State when it withers away? ²⁰⁴

And then answers that the Marxists, in their utopian zeal, have not bothered about this question and they do not have any direct answer to this. Therefore, unlike the wilful Marxists- unlike Engels or Lenin, Ambedkar recognizes the fact that the state apparatus will be there irrespective of its acceptability or the lack of it. This is the most tempting moment for us to tag him as a statist as opposed to Leninists who see the state apparatus as a mere stage in their revolutionary trajectory that eventually would lead them to a stateless state. But do such utterances necessarily imply that Ambedkar was an apologist of the state apparatus? Opposed to this popular belief, I would argue that Ambedkar sees the state as a historically

²⁰⁴Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, “Buddha or Karl Marx?” in *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches (henceforth BAWS)* Vol.3, ed., Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Government of India, 2014), 459. Henceforth, “Buddha or Marx”.

contingent site. Perhaps he would not even mind if it goes away; but he would also make his point firmly by saying that ‘I need to engage with it as long as it is there’. Unlike Tagore and ironically enough the Marxists (who, perhaps by following George Lukcas, often described Tagore as an ‘elite, bourgeois’ poet), Ambedkar would see it as a potential political force that would not easily go away. In other words, Ambedkar recognized the *persistence of the state* in the way Skinner sees it as the resilient *master noun* of our contemporary political world. Hence it is important for him to negotiate with this potent apparatus. In this essay I call such an attitude ‘instrumental institutionalism’ to describe Ambedkar’s perceptions towards the state. But this is not all. In an attempt to answer the second question that he placed in front of the Marxists: “what will take its place when the state withers away?”, Ambedkar comes up with an answer that negates any Hegelian tension in his thought. Ambedkar’s reply to this question is religion. One wonders why would a ‘statist person’ and ‘an unalloyed modernist’ think of such an answer. We must also note that Ambedkar categorically describes the ‘state’ as a means here. In his estimation, violent dictatorship of the proletariat might be a provisional solution to the bourgeois hegemony but this will eventually need not a simple ‘withering away of the state’ but something more tied to human disposition. Disagreeing with Thomas Carlyle who described Marx’s Critique of Political Economy as ‘pig philosophy’, Ambedkar says:

Carlyle called Political Economy a pig philosophy. Carlyle was of course wrong. For men need material comforts. But the Communist Philosophy seems to be equally wrong for the aim of their philosophy is to fatten the pigs as though men are no better than pigs. Man must grow materially as well as spiritually.²⁰⁵

In his analysis, Communism can offer material equality to men but religion like Buddhism can bring about dispositional changes that won’t require violence. But a reservation might be immediately raised about the nature of such a religion. Surveying the last few pages of his

²⁰⁵Ambedkar, “Buddha or Marx”, 462.

Annihilation of Caste, one might conclude that Ambedkar is speaking of a Kantian civil religion or he is prescribing a religion that would be controlled, managed or supervised under the custodianship of the state. As far as this text is concerned, such a reading is quite possible and, undoubtedly, such a reading would foreclose the possibility of an Ambedkarite understanding of religion that is not reliant upon the custody of the state. Shifting our attention to *Buddha or Karl Marx*, however, underlines a different point here. Ambedkar, in this book, does not think of religion under the custodianship of the state; rather, he anticipates the anarchist possibilities that appear with the ‘absence of a sovereign political entity such as the state’. Religion, in such an estimation, would be an answer to the anticipated anarchism coming after the disappearance of the state and not (as he himself had prescribed for Hinduism in *Annihilation of Caste*) as something to be kept under the permanent supervision of the state. While making these observations, therefore, one also needs to recognize how Ambedkar’s observations and arguments have changed or evolved over a span of two decades or more.

If partition is the most prominent historic moment that marks the birth and subsequent rise of nation-states in South Asia, then it would be quite productive for us to see how Ambedkar sees it. The instrumental and contingent view of the state that I read in Ambedkar makes itself more apparent in this text that is entirely dedicated to the pros and cons of partitioning South Asia. In order to do so, we need to revisit some of his arguments, observations and concerns in his meticulously researched book *Pakistan or the Partition of India*²⁰⁶. Also, this has enormous significance for any engagement with the Namasudra partition narratives I have explored in the second chapter. Since the spectres of Partition

²⁰⁶Dr. Babasaheb. Ambedkar, *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, in *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches (henceforth BAWS)* vol.8, ed., Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Government of India, 2014), 1-482.

haunt those narratives , it will be important to see if Ambedkar, the discursive initiator of Bangla Dalit cultural movement, had any point of criticism to offer in this context.

To begin with, one needs to underscore how Ambedkar narrates the reasons for writing this book. In the Prologue²⁰⁷, he informs us that he started thinking about the Pakistan question only after the resolution for a separate state for Muslims had already been taken by Muslim League in no uncertain terms. This book, he suggests, does not prescribe or suggest anything directly. That judgment- to form separate nation states for the two dominant communities- is something that he would leave for his readers to decide. His manifest intention here is to simply create an inventory of pros and cons for such contemplations.

But the second chapter (not so much the Prologue) is absolutely important for our present concerns. It is tellingly titled: "A Nation Calling for Home"²⁰⁸. It is in this chapter that Ambedkar extensively quotes from the anti-Semitic thinker Ernest Renan's long essay on nationalism- "What is a Nation?". Renan's essay²⁰⁹, as is quite well known now, defines the Nation as a spiritual entity. In such a definition, Renan is not at all very far from Hegel's idealist notions around the same. Unlike Tagore, they define the nation-state as a site for higher moral or spiritual worth. However, the question for us is- does Ambedkar uncritically subscribe to similar understanding of the nation-state? Given the fact that he so extensively quotes from Renan, the answer would be in the affirmative. But does he? In this section of the text, after recognizing the necessity of a strong sense of social unity for even thinking of a nationality, Ambedkar puts forward his perceptions as well as his apprehensions:

²⁰⁷ Ambedkar, *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, 5-6.

²⁰⁸ Ambedkar, *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, 29-39.

²⁰⁹ Here, Ambedkar quotes extensively from Renan's famous essay. See, Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?" in *Nation and Narration*, ed., Homi Bhaba (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 8-22.

This national feeling is a double-edged feeling. It is at once a feeling of fellowship for one's own kith and kin and an anti-fellowship feeling for those who are not one's kith and kin.²¹⁰

Ambedkar describes this strange duality as the 'essence' of what is called a nationality and national feeling. Even while he was contemplating on an issue that would very soon see the apotheosis of anti-colonial nationalist sentiments, Ambedkar reminds us of such duality of a nation-state- on one hand, it creates what Anderson calls 'horizontal comradeship' by overriding differences within an arbitrarily defined border and on the other hand, a sharp sense of antagonism towards people beyond those borders. Even though this is not the focal point in this book, such duality in Ambedkar's understanding of the nation does not leave him till the last sections of the book. In Part III- "What if not Pakistan?" Chapter IX- titled as "Lessons from Abroad", Ambedkar discusses the fragility of nation formation by citing the cases of Turkey and Czechoslovakia. In the section entitled-"The force of nationalism, once unleashed, almost cannot be stopped", Ambedkar recognizes the nature of such a potent force in all its brutality.²¹¹

But as far as the Hindu imagination of the Indian nation-state were concerned, Ambedkar's apprehensions went beyond the recognition of such potency in the idea of a nation. On one hand he recognizes how important this matter had become to all contending stake-holders and on the other hand, even at the moment of crisis, he never forgets to remind us about the ideological hoax that the Hindu nation or nationalism would be at a more discursive level.

In 1950s Ambedkar started writing his ambitious book-*Revolution and Counter-Revolution*²¹². In an almost completed chapter in this otherwise unfinished book- "Krishna

²¹⁰Ambedkar, *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, 31.

²¹¹Ambedkar, *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, 205 -229.

²¹²Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, "Essays on the *Bhagawat Gita*: Philosophic Defense of Counter-Revolution: Krishna and His Gita" in *BAWS*, vol. 3, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Government of India 2014), 357-380.

and His Gita", Ambedkar refers to how modern nationalist commentators on *Gita*- from Bankim Chandra Chatterjee to Balgangadhar Tilak or Jawharlal Nehru- have re-interpreted it to create a spiritual or philosophical (if not merely theological) basis for the construction of the great edifice of Indian nationalism. Ambedkar comments on the kernel or the seed sloka of the *Gita* here- "karmanye ba dhikaraste ma phalesu kadachana"(2:47). Ambedkar, disagreeing with these leaders, points out how the word 'karma' here never implied worldly actions needed for the betterment of our material existence if one looks at pre-modern interpretations of the *Gita* and how 'karma' and 'gyan' can never be mingled with each other. We must note that such modern interpretations in these nationalist re-interpretations created a domain of India's ancient spiritual discourse that is compatible with the demands of modernity as a fertile ground upon which the nation-state would then be constructed.²¹³ Thus, Ambedkar's 'disobedient' reading and 'sacropolitics' of it, to go beyond Jimmy Casas Klausen's Derridean or Battailean reading of Ambedkar's interpretations of the *Gita*,²¹⁴ was also significant in rupturing the grand ideological claims needed for articulating nationalist discourse.

But these disruptive readings by Ambedkar never allowed him to be entirely dismissive about the inevitable presence of the nation-state in the way Tagore approached it. Ambedkar recognizes the fact that the state will exist and in so far as it exists in our lives, we need to engage with it. Such instrumentalist views are symptomatic of his pragmatic frame of mind. This hardly makes either Ambedkar (or the Dalit discourse that follows him) a mere apologist of nation-statism. But we also need to ask if the term 'pragmatic' is a mere

²¹³For a discussion on the relationship between non-dualism (*Advaita* philosophy) and nationalism, see Sibaji Bandopadhyay, "Non-dualism and Nationalism: A Case Study: *The Dawn Enterprise*", *Sibaji Bandopadhyay Reader: An Anthology of Essays* (New Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2011),80.

Also see Sibaji Bandopadhyay, "Translating Gita 2.47 or Inventing the National Motto" *Three Essays on the Mahabharata* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2016), 1-190, at 167.

²¹⁴ See Jimmy Casas Klausen, "Sacropolitics: how to disobey sacred scripture (on Ambedkar's *Bhagavadgita*)", *Disobedience: Concept and Practice*, ed., Elena Loizidou (London and New York, Routledge, 2013)60-82.

accidental qualifier that I added to his name? It is a question that I deal with in the next section.

5.4 Ambedkar and Pragmatism

Ambedkar spent some of his most intellectually enriching times during his graduate days at the Columbia University in the City of New York from 1913 to 1916. On various later occasions, Ambedkar looked back at these formative years when he came under the intellectual influences of some of the best minds that America could offer. Among these intellectuals and philosophers, it was Professor John Dewey who had a lasting intellectual influence on Ambedkar. Eleanor Zelliot and Kadam repeatedly speak of this influence on Ambedkar in their works²¹⁵. Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Scott Stroud and Keya Maitra have all identified John Dewey as a significant philosophical influence on him. In a longish essay²¹⁶, Professor Mukherjee has painstakingly shown how Ambedkar extensively quoted from Dewey's book *Democracy and Education* (1916) in his undelivered speech *Annihilation of Caste* (1936). Several of Ambedkar's ideas and terms e.g., 'democracy as social ethos', 'social endosmosis', 'social efficiency' etc., are originally ideas that occur regularly in Deweyan philosophy. While Maitra has meticulously shown how Ambedkar's encounter with Dewey, has determined Ambedkar's constitutionalism, Stroud, in recent past, has shown the rhetorical and communicative impact of Dewey's philosophy on Ambedkar's political persuasion and how Ambedkar has translated Dewey's thoughts for the deeply stratified Indian social context²¹⁷. Even though, Dewey- Ambedkar encounter has not been adequately

²¹⁵Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1996). Also see, K. N. Kadam, "Dr. Ambedkar's Philosophy of Emancipation and the Impact of John Dewey", in *The Meaning of Ambedkarite Conversion to Buddhism and Other Essays* (Mumbai: Popular Books 1997), 1-33.

²¹⁶ Arun Prabha Mukherjee, "B.R. Ambedkar, John Dewey, and the Meaning of Democracy", *New Literary History* 40, no.2 (2009), 345-370, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27760261>.

²¹⁷See Keya Maitra, "Ambedkar and the Constitution of India: A Deweyan Experiment", *Contemporary Pragmatism* 9, no.2 (2012), 301-320, https://brill.com/view/journals/copr/9/2/article-p301_18.xml. Also see Scott R. Stroud, "Pragmatism and the Pursuit of Social Justice in India: Bhimrao Ambedkar and the Rhetoric of

studied by Ambedkar scholars, one can say that this has been, at last, recognized as a major area to be looked into through such recent interventions on Ambedkar. Following Mukherjee and Stroud, I could also show the readers how Ambedkar extensively quoted from either *Ethics* or *Democracy and Education* by John Dewey. But I refrain from doing so as this would not allow me to focus on the philosophical nature of pragmatism- a tentatively defined philosophical orientation to which Dewey belonged. While most of these essays that I cite here have informed us that John Dewey was a pragmatist philosopher, they primarily focus on two or three major philosophical aspects of Dewey without giving us any general idea of the nature and scope of pragmatism as a distinct philosophical stream in western philosophy. While Stroud shows how pragmatism has focused on the necessity of rhetoric or the educative and pedagogical value of communication in Dewey's pragmatism, Mukherjee's essay simply emphasizes on how Ambedkar's notion of democracy was directly influenced by Dewey's pragmatist notions of democracy as a way of life or a social ethos. But what exactly is American Pragmatism? What do we mean when we say that John Dewey was a pragmatist philosopher? None of these articles have answered these questions in any extensive fashion. I turn to Pragmatism as a philosophical orientation to show some of its dominant features vis-à-vis other prominent traditions in western philosophy. Among these other prominent traditions, we will see how pragmatism interacted with the Enlightenment philosophy- the philosophical tradition that, according to Chatterjee, Pandey and others, Ambedkar has apparently inherited.

The Greek term 'pragma' in Pragmatism implies action. Pragmatism, we must note at the outset, does not readily give us a concrete philosophical '-ism' as such. According to Richard Rorty (the American pragmatist philosopher who considered Ambedkar's mentor

John Dewey as his philosophy mentor) pragmatism is also something that brought Platonist metaphysics or Philosophy down from its hallowed, elevated status and tied it with practice. Pragmatism does not make any hierarchical schematization or differentiation between higher and lower truth or between *doxa* and *episteme*. But pragmatism does offer some extremely persistent philosophical reservations that several American philosophers of late nineteenth century or early twentieth century had about the dominant, foundationalist tendencies in Enlightenment rationalism in Europe. While pragmatism significantly deviated from the positivists and empiricists, it also categorically pointed out the severe philosophical limitations in western philosophy-particularly the philosophies of Rene Descartes, Immanuel Kant and Hegel. These were reservations that several post-Nietzsche continental philosophers like Martin Heidegger or Jacques Derrida later elaborated. It is highly fascinating to see how pragmatist philosophers anticipated the philosophical thoughts of Heidegger or Derrida.²¹⁸ Notwithstanding the differences between Derrida's neologism 'deconstruction' (which was also a critique of Heidegger's term *Destruktion*) and the loosely defined philosophical orientation of 'pragmatism', *en route* for Ambedkar, one can be legitimately tempted to engage with Derrida's term *pragrammatology*- a portmanteau term that, quite ironically in our present context, occurs in a book on Hegel by Derrida- *Glas*. The similarities between these ways of thinking might be a little off the track here. What matters the most is to underline their shared, common anxieties and suspicions about the philosophical assumptions of the foundationalist, essentialist and universalist trends in western philosophy i.e., Enlightenment modernity. In 1993, in a debate in Paris, philosophers and thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau and Simon Critchley contemplated on several of these philosophical similarities. It is significant for us to notice that the basis of this interaction was a shared commitment that these philosophies (always

²¹⁸See, Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin,1999), xxviii.

resisting to be defined as, strictly speaking, philosophies) had in their attitudes towards Enlightenment philosophies. Richard Bernstein summarizes this in the prefatory comments to Chantal Mouffe's book *Deconstructions and Pragmatisms*-the book form of the debate in Paris:

Both Derrida and Rorty have been the focus of controversy not least because the implications of their work radically undermine the dominant rationalist approach. Whilst their perspectives are very different, their common rejection of a foundationalist conception of philosophy locates them on the same side in a number of debates, particularly those concerning the legacy of the Enlightenment.²¹⁹

Such apprehensions and reservations about the Enlightenment philosophies are also rampant in the earliest pragmatist philosophers like the Massachusetts based logician Mathematician Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce is considered to be the foremost of the pragmatist philosophers and a close philosophical interlocutor of William James and John Dewey. It is worth our time to notice how Peirce's pragmatism started off with a firm rejection of Rene Descartes' philosophy. Richard Bernstein, in a chapter entitled "Peirce's critique of Cartesianism" in his book *The Pragmatic Turn*, succinctly summarises such anti-cartesian framework of pragmatism/pragmaticism of Pierce. While commenting on how Peirce fundamentally disagreed with the Cartesian search for genuine knowledge and the idea of complete doubt with which we are to begin our Cartesian epistemological journey, Bernstein asserts:

In opposition to Cartesianism and to what Hans Georg Gadamer calls "the Enlightenment prejudice against prejudice", Peirce insists that all inquiry, including scientific and philosophical inquiry, begins with tacit prejudices and prejudgements.²²⁰

But for Peirce, it is also not enough to recognize the presence of beliefs and prejudices in the apparently objective constructions of truth and hence, his firm rejection of Cartesian absolute doubt. It is also important, in Peirce's schema, to recognize the fact that anything *indubitable*

²¹⁹Richard Bernstein, *Deconstructions and Pragmatisms*, Chantal Mouffe, ed., (London and New York, 2005), i.

²²⁰ Richard Bernstein, "Charles S. Peirce's Critique of Cartesianism", *The Pragmatic Turn* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 33. Henceforth, *Pragmatic Turn*.

does not imply, in any sense, that it is incontestable and therefore, *incorrigible*. In that sense, the pursuit of knowledge would be a self-correcting mode of inquiry that takes utmost cognizance of human fallibility and ontological contingencies. Indeed, *fallibilism* constitutes another significant part of Peirce's philosophy. But we must not confuse fallibilism with epistemological scepticism either. Bernstein explains:

Fallibilism is entailed by the conception of inquiry as a 'self-correcting enterprise' which can put any claim in jeopardy, though not all at once." Epistemological scepticism feeds on the illusion that 'genuine' knowledge is incorrigible. If any claim to knowledge may turn out to be false, then presumably, we are never in a position to say that we "really know" anything. But Peirce's strong assertion is that the very idea of absolute incorrigible knowledge is incoherent and should be abandoned. Any scientist will admit that most of our current hypotheses and theories will need revision in the future. In other words, strictly speaking, as they currently stand, they are "false". But it would be absurd to conclude that because we will revisit or abandon current hypotheses and theories, we do not "really know" anything about the world. We should always seek to test our knowledge claims with the best possible evidence and the strongest arguments, but with an honest sense of human fallibility.²²¹

Let me cite Ambedkar at this point and one cannot help but notice the striking similarity of tone between Peirce and Ambedkar:

"To a critic who is a hostile and malicious person and who wants to make capital out of my inconsistencies, my reply is straight. Emerson has said that consistency is the virtue of an ass and I don't wish to make an ass of myself. No thinking human being can be tied to a view once expressed in the name of consistency. More important than consistency is responsibility. A responsible person must learn to unlearn what he has learned. A responsible person must have the courage to rethink and change his thoughts. Of course, there must be good and sufficient reasons for unlearning what he has learned and for recasting his thoughts. There can be no finality in thinking."²²²

If Peirce was vehemently criticizing the Cartesian frame in western philosophy, we must note, he was also influenced by the Kantian way of emphasizing the necessities of 'practical reason'. In fact, Peirce took many important philosophical cues from Kant in formulating and framing his pragmatism perspective. But this relationship of the pragmatists with Kant is hardly an exhaustive estimation. This is precisely the assumptive fallacy that a post-War

²²¹Bernstein, *Pragmatic Turn*, 36-37.

²²² Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, "Thoughts on Linguistic States" in BAWS, ed. Vasant Moon, vol. 1 (New Delhi: Government of India, 2014), 139.

thinker like Max Horkheimer suffers from in *Eclipse of Reason*. Horkheimer's long and brutal repudiation of the pragmatists including especially Peirce and Dewey, hardly goes beyond the Kantian influence of pragmatist instrumentality. Moreover, Horkheimer hardly considers Dewey's rejection of Kantian distinction of morality and prudence or 'categorical imperatives' or *a priori*. Ambedkar's philosophy mentor and teacher Dewey, for instance, disagreed with Kant on several philosophical issues- issues that are now largely considered to be the central pillars of Enlightenment modernity- reason, morality, rational self and universality²²³. Dewey's evolutionary notion of thought was so directly opposed to Kant that Richard Rorty has no qualms in describing Dewey, along with feminist philosopher Annette Baier, as a 'militantly anti-Kantian philosopher'.²²⁴ Commenting on how Dewey and other pragmatic philosophers were deeply uncomfortable with the Kantian understanding of Reason, Rorty says:

The Enlightenment replaced the idea of [such] supernatural guidance with the idea of a quasi-divine faculty called 'reason'. It is this idea which American pragmatists and post-Nietzschean European philosophers are attacking.²²⁵

Despite a Hegelian beginning and an anti-Kantian perspective, John Dewey, according to Rorty, later deviated to a more biologicistic view of life and human beings. Unlike Marx whose deeply Hegelian, world historical, teleological assumptions were evident from ideas like 'Oriental Despotism' or 'Asiatic Mode of Production', Dewey increasingly navigated towards a more biologicistic perspective that negated *telos*, underscored multi-dimensional human nature and contingencies of life as he replaced destiny with luck, chance or accident. This biologicistic turn²²⁶ in Dewey also saved pragmatist thoughts from being universalistic and

²²³For a brilliant polemic against the Pragmatists, see, Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (London and New York, Continuum Impacts, 2004). For a response to Horkheimer from Pragmatist's side of the debate, see, Hans Joas, *Pragmatism and Social Theory* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1993).

²²⁴Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 76.

²²⁵ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*., xxvii.

²²⁶ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, xxiii.

made it anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist. In Rorty's opinion, such views also negate the Platonic essentialist view of human nature²²⁷. The solid presence of a strong anti-Platonism is something that cuts across all the major Pragmatist philosophers. Interestingly, such an anti-Platonist, anti-essentialist view of human personality is also emphasised by Ambedkar in an unambiguous manner in *Annihilation of Caste*:

[....] the ideal of chaturvarnya has, as you will see, a close affinity to the Platonic ideal. To Plato, men fell by nature into three classes. In some individuals, he believed, mere appetites dominated. He assigned them to the labouring and trading classes. Others revealed to him that over and above appetites, they had a courageous disposition. He classed them as defenders in war and guardians of internal peace. Others showed a capacity to grasp the universal-the reason underlying things. He made them law-givers of the people.²²⁸

And a little later he says:

Plato had no perception of the uniqueness of every individual, of his incommensurability with others, of each individual as forming a class of his own. He had no recognition of the infinite diversity of active tendencies and the combination of tendencies of which an individual is capable. To him, there were types of faculties or powers in the individual constitution.²²⁹

Here, Ambedkar destroys the argument in favour of the caste and *Varna* system that it is based on *gunas* or certain intrinsic or dominant human qualities that define each *varna*. In debunking this *guna* theory of *varna*, Ambedkar simultaneously disagrees with a foundationalist (in so far as they believe in the infallible status of the Vedas, hence *Astika* despite this philosophy's negation of God) Brahminical philosophy- Kapila's Sankhya philosophy in *Sankhakarika*²³⁰ that speaks of three *gunas*- *satva*, *raja* and *tama* , as well as Plato's ideas of three determining principles in his *The Republic*.

No reference to Ambedkar's encounter with American Pragmatism can be completed without a discussion on their understanding of democracy. It is quite needless to say that both

²²⁷ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, xviii.

²²⁸ Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 266.

²²⁹ Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 267.

²³⁰ Iswar Krishna, *The Sankhya Karika or the Memorial Verses on the Sankhya Philosophy*, trans., Henry Thomas Colebrooke (London: Oxford Oriental Translation Fund, 1837).

were ardent votaries of democracy and both, as has been already shown by Mukherjee, Stroud or Maitra, ardently defined democracy beyond the usual Tocquevillian or Lincolnian reading of it or as simply an exercise of universal adult franchise. That, however, does not mean they simply broadened the term in order to make it more inclusive. Ambedkar's understanding of this idea, under the direct inspiration of Dewey became associated more with the social life than with politics in a narrow sense of the term. But many Ambedkar scholars like Debjani Ganguly, Aishwary Kumar and Klausen²³¹ have argued that this influence is not the ultimate determinant in the construction of an idea of Ambedkarite democracy beyond the limits of western liberal political thought. While I agree with such observations, I find it too hasty a conclusion on Deweyan democracy. In order to raise this issue, I will not look at the most famous text on democracy by Dewey-*Democracy and Education*. Rather, I will consider an early text by Dewey that had seeds of a non-liberal sort of understanding of democracy i.e., beyond the limits of western liberal theories or contractarian ideas. This was Dewey's first explicit essay on democracy- "The Ethics of Democracy"²³². Dewey, in this significant essay, was responding to Sir Henry Maine whose writings on 'self-sufficient' Indian villages influenced late Marx's interesting opinions on the agrarian societies like Russia (but also India) as well as shaped the Gandhian utopia of Ram Rajya. Maine, the former Vice Chancellor of the University of Calcutta, described democracy as 'a wild burst of destructive wantonness; an arbitrary overthrow of all existing institutions'. Responding to such strongly articulated reservations that Maine had about democracy, Dewey summarized Maine's points by saying that (a) Maine understood democracy merely

²³¹While Dewey's influence on Ambedkar vis-à-vis modernity is almost absolutely inconsequential for Ganguly, Dewey is only a limited influence on Ambedkar in Kalusen and Kumar. See Debjani Ganguly, "Dalit Mythographies: Ambedkar as Modernity's Interlocutor", *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-modernity: Notes on a postcolonial hermeneutics of caste* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 129-154. Aishwary Kumar, *Radical Equality: Ambedkar, Gandhi and the Risk of Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 39. Also see, Klausen, "Sacropolitics", 76.

²³² Bernstein, *Pragmatic Turn*, 71-72.

as a form of government, (b) government is simply a relation between the sovereign and the subject and more importantly (c) the sovereign is simply the multitude of individuals. Rejecting all of them Dewey categorically discarded this notion of a pre-social individual. According to Dewey, if we merely think of human beings as ‘non-social units’, as mere multitude then democracy is bound to look like anarchy. Dewey also thought that a natural outcome of such understanding of human nature was the birth of ‘social contract theories’. He debunks the contractarian view of western liberal political thought that ‘men are mere individuals, without any social relations *until* they form a contract’²³³. Such perspectives had an unmistakable imprint on the Ambedkarite notion of democracy not merely as a form of government but as a way of life. Such Ambedkarite appropriations of Deweyan ideas can prove that both of them were heading into a direction not prescribed by liberalism. That Ambedkar certainly did not tread the path of western liberalism in his understanding of religion or in the articulations in the political domain have already been firmly asserted by many scholars on intellectual history e.g., Christopher Bayly²³⁴. Yet, in Dewey’s notion of democracy, as Ernesto Laclau suggests, there was an overestimation of the Habermasian consensus view of democracy and a liberal hope (also shared by neo-pragmatists like Richard Rorty) that willy-nilly elides the question of conflict²³⁵. On the contrary, Ambedkar, unlike Dewey, was travelling on a path that was enormously conflict ridden. In fact, it would not be an overstatement to say that Ambedkar, in his contemporary Indian political scenario, embodied conflict more than many other Indian statesmen. Rather than thinking of democracy in terms of consensus generation, conflict or ‘undecidability’ can become

²³³ Bernstein, *Pragmatic Turn*, 72.

²³⁴To have a fuller explanation of this, see Christopher Bayly, “Ambedkar: Liberal or Counter-liberal?”, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2012), 297-300.

²³⁵To understand how Dewey and other pragmatists share this Habermasian impulse, see Ernesto Laclau, “Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony”, *Deconstructions and Pragmatisms*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London and New York: Routledge, 2005) 49-70.

enabling conditions that would not allow democracy to be a self-effacing category and invoke a Derridean ‘democracy that is to come’ (*la démocratie à venir*)²³⁶. Ambedkar’s perceptions on democracy, in this sense, follows a path of ‘democracy that is to come’.

But the general philosophical orientation of Dewey and other American pragmatic philosophers was such that they found most of the founding principles of Western Enlightenment modernity completely unacceptable. It is such an understanding that (as I have already shown with the reference to Mouffe’s Paris conference) connected Pragmatism with Derrida’s deconstruction in particular and post-Nietzschean continental philosophy in general. While Kumar, Klausen or Ganguly have gone into their own directions to show how Ambedkar went beyond Dewey, none has spoken at length about this philosophical nature of Deweyan thought and its anti-foundationalist scope. A Benjaminian, Derridean or Batailleian speculative reading of Ambedkar is not only possible but laudable. But to ignore the textual and the immediate and not to locate a possibility of a critique of the dominant Enlightenment modernity therein, is a serious limitation. Let us now turn to the other side of such anti-foundationalism that influenced Ambedkar. It is this pragmatist intellectual inheritance of Ambedkar that makes his anti-caste vision not simply a product of liberal, Enlightenment modernity but a complex anti-foundational, fallibilistic frame through which the Dalit discourses have evolved. This fallibilism, speculative and anti-foundational dimensions of his thoughts, I argue at the end of this chapter, had a deep impact on his vision of history.

5.5 Ambedkar, Buddhism and Lokayata Philosophies

The most common accusation against Ambedkar’s turn to Buddhism is that he politicized Buddhism and thereby gave birth to a ‘distorted’ Buddhism or a ‘heretical trend’ as far as

²³⁶I am developing this notion vis-à-vis Ambedkar on the basis of Derrida’s elaboration of this in “Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism”. See, Jacques Derrida, “Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism”, *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, 85.

Buddhism in India is concerned. Earlier in this essay I have pointed out the fact that his turn to Buddhism has also been interpreted as coming out of his frustrating experiences in the realm of the political²³⁷. Let me get this contradiction straight for the sake of advancing my arguments further: on one hand, scholars and commentators agree that Ambedkar distorted Buddhism and curved out his own version –*navayana* Buddhism that suited his purpose of politically liberating his followers and on the other hand, it is assumed that he embraced a theological perception, in opposition to his apparent lifelong commitment to Enlightenment rationality. Presumably, if we have to follow Chatterjee's logic, he did so after getting frustrated with modernity. Such assumptions and other related paradoxes around Ambedkar's embracing of Buddhism can be refuted through a simple chronological analysis and a note on the texts chosen for commenting on Ambedkar's Buddha turn. Chatterjee assumes that Ambedkar embraced Buddhism after his frustrated encounters with modernity and yet forgets the fact that Ambedkar encountered Buddhism quite early in his life. In the Preface to his book *Buddha and His Dhamma*, he informs us that his encounter with Buddhist philosophy and Buddha's life happened as early as his boyhood days through the biography of Buddha written by Dada Keluskar who happened to be his father's friend. According to his own words, this was an early and a lifelong influence. In the same preface, we notice how Ambedkar claims that he studied all the major religions for more than thirty-five years and only then concluded that Buddha's teachings would be his best resort. That he was contemplating conversion is also amply evident from many of his speeches and writings in 1930s-most notably in his famous polemic in 1936- *Annihilation of Caste*. Chatterjee's assumption that his bad experiences eventually led him to embrace Buddhism, therefore, looks like a hasty and superficial conclusion that itself carries an Enlightenment baggage. As A Raghuramaraju shows, such quick conversion to a different faith was a Cartesian tendency.

²³⁷Chatterjee, "Nation in Heterogeneous Time", 24.

As opposed to Descartes, Ambedkar extensively read about different religions, contemplated conversion for almost three decades and then, just before his death, finally embraced Buddhist faith. It was hardly a sudden leap of faith as it is in Descartes and unlike Descartes, his was a project more tied to the question of arriving at a religious disposition rather than simply leaving one behind.²³⁸

In most of the discussions on Ambedkar's embracing of Buddhism, scholars turn to *Buddha and his Dhamma*- the only finished text that Ambedkar wrote on this issue. But in my estimation, scholars have overemphasized the significance of this text. In the preface to this book, Ambedkar himself says:

I would like to make it very clear that I claim no originality for the book. It is a compilation and assembly plant. The material has been gathered from various books. I would particularly like to mention Ashvaghosha's Buddhavita [Buddhacharita], whose poetry no one can excel. In the narrative of certain events, I have even borrowed his language.²³⁹

But such chronological references would not help us understand the nuances of such conversion either. The popular academic perceptions held by such scholars as Pandey and Chatterjee is such that it has now reached the status of a dogma. Hence this needs a more philosophical elaboration.

The spectres of this paradoxical dogma have been haunting *Buddha and His Dhamma*- right from the day of its publication. Once we look at the reviews of the book, we realize that Shourie's dismissal of the book by calling it *Ambedkar and his Dhamma* goes back to 1950s – almost immediately after Ambedkar wrote *Buddha and His Dhamma*, embraced Buddhism in a mass conversion in 1956 and died. In a review of the book published in *The Maha Bodhi* in 1959 the critic charged that Ambedkar's *Buddha and His*

²³⁸A. Raghuramaraju, "Problematising Lived Dalit Experience", *Economic and Political Weekly* 45 no.29 (2010),165, <https://www.epw.in/journal/2010/29/discussion/problematising-lived-dalit-experience.html>.

²³⁹B.R. Ambedkar, *Buddha and His Dhamma*, ed., Akash Singh Rathore and Ajay Verma (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011) xxvii.

Dhamma was ‘enough to shock a real Buddhist’²⁴⁰. One might dismiss such charges brought against Ambedkar by following the Carl Schmitt way i.e., by saying that most modern political institutions, concepts and ideas, including the idea of the state, are secularized versions of various theological traditions. Therefore, to say that Ambedkar was politicizing Buddhism presupposes that theological postulations are to be entirely devoid of political considerations. One can further argue that such assumptions about a depoliticized, ‘otherworldly’ Buddhism- that Buddhism is a world abnegating theological doctrine that leads one to *Bodhi* or *Enlightenment* – go back to the days of orientalism. Such a view was not only shared by orientalist who saw Buddhism as otherworldly path to *nirvana/nibbana* but has also been upheld by the harshest critics of Buddhism in the Western philosophical tradition: G.W.F. Hegel who saw Buddhism as a 'primitive religion' and a 'religion of annihilation' and Karl Jaspers who pointed at the impossibility of a becoming/being 'a western Buddhist' (as Buddhism, in their interpretation, was leading to an absolute nothing and thereby rejecting this material world entirely)²⁴¹. Such a perception, as modern philosophers working on Buddhism have explained, is based on the twisted interpretation of the Buddhist notion of *anatta*. Taken literally, this means ‘no self’ and hence, the anxieties of Hegel and Jaspers who would never be interested in a doctrine that negates the existence of an empirical or physical self. But Buddhist *anatta* is not at all a simple negation of the everyday empirical self. It primarily serves to establish and philosophically reinstate the core Buddhist principle of *pratyuttyasamutpada* or ‘dependent co-arising’. Buddhism here proceeds by negating the presence of a foundationalist understanding of a ‘transcendental’ *atman* and recognizes how we exist in constant mutual dependence. Such a notion of ‘no-self’ is however difficult to understand through simple rational argumentation. Buddha

²⁴⁰This is mentioned in the “Editor’s Introduction” in Ambedkar, *Buddha and His Dhamma*, xi.

²⁴¹Jin Y. Park, ed. “General Introduction”, *Buddhisms and Deconstructions* (New Delhi: Motilal Benarasidass, 2011), xii.

himself explains: Everything exists: this is one extreme. Nothing exists: this is another extreme. Not approaching either extreme the Tathagata teaches you a doctrine by the middle [way].²⁴²

Ambedkar in the introduction to his book *Buddha and His Dhamma* invokes such complex understanding of self by denying that such transcendentalist notion of a self or atman in most *Astika* philosophies cannot have any place in Buddhism. While cataloguing some of his 'problems' with some of the supposedly core Buddhist principles (like Four Noble Truths, Rebirth etc.), he says:

The Buddha denied the existence of the soul. but he is also said to have affirmed the doctrine of karma and rebirth. At once a question arises. if there is no soul, how can there be karma? if there is no soul, how can there be rebirth? These are baffling questions.²⁴³

Ambedkar's discomfort with the Four Aryan Truths also begins with a fundamental presupposition apropos the notion of an *essential* understanding of self-i.e., self as the essence of being. At a more explicit level, he finds the Aryan Truths unacceptable as they push the onus of *dukkha* or sorrow onto the suffering self. If Buddha does not uphold the notion of self, Ambedkar complained, how is it that we can hold the self-accountable for the sufferings on his or her life. Pushing the burden of suffering or humiliation onto the sufferer, in a somewhat reductive reading, looks like 'victim blaming'. Such philosophical assumption, therefore, forecloses the epistemological possibilities of Ambedkar's anti-caste politics. Hence, his discomfiture with such ideas is understandable. It is these arguments of Ambedkar that made his reformulation of Buddhism look like a heavily politicised Buddhism. But, instead of considering this as a new way or *navayana*, one can argue, these interpretations of Ambedkar were very much in line with some of the major branches of Buddhist thought system. Buddhist idea of *anatta* is one such. Corresponding to this notion is the idea of 'void'

²⁴²As quoted in Jin Y. Park, "Naming the Unnamable: Dependent Co-arising and Differance", *Buddhisms and Deconstructions*, 9.

²⁴³Ambedkar, *Buddha and His Dhamma*, xxxi.

or *sunyata* and 'dependent co-arising' in Nagarjuna's Madhyamika Buddhism. Ambedkar's rejection of Aryan Truths, as Gokhale points out, is reminiscent of Nagarjuna's logical and dialectical thought that negated the idea of those Aryan truths as well. Discussing the heterodox traditions of Buddhism and debunking an orientalist monolithic understanding of Buddhism as a composite philosophical system, Gokhale says:

The propounders of various schools of Buddhism have rearranged and reinterpreted Buddha's statements and derived basic tenets for their own schools from them. So, what was regarded as the core of Buddha's teaching according to one school of Buddhism was sometimes regarded as peripheral by another school [...] So even a doctrine such as that of the Four Noble Truths which is generally regarded as the core of Buddhism, becomes the subject of critical examination and consequent dialectical negation in the Madhyamika philosophy of Nagarjuna.²⁴⁴

Therefore, Ambedkar's debunking of such 'core' principles is not at all unprecedented in Buddhist traditions and can be found in Nagarjuna, considered to be 'one of the finest philosophers of India' by Bimal Krishna Motilal. But such similarities between Ambedkar and Nagarjuna, in my estimation, continues in their argumentative patterns as well. In order to elucidate this, we need to cite the Buddhist logical idea of *apoha* as an argumentative implication of 'triple-character' or *trairupya* in Buddhist epistemology.

Bimal Krishna Motilal, the exemplary Indian philosopher at Oxford, roughly defines *apoha* in "Buddhist Logic and Epistemology:

In modern terminology, we may say that according to Buddhist logic by such general terms (such as 'cow') we do not assert genuine predicates of a thing and that rather we DENY the supposition of all contrary predicates. "This is a cow" does not assert the cow hood of the subject; it denies that anything contrary to cow hood can be predicated of this subject.²⁴⁵

In a somewhat similar vein, Ambedkar, in his tract *Annihilation of Caste*, does not immediately utter, if we can reduce his primary statement to this- "caste is an unacceptable

²⁴⁴As Gokhale is quoted in Ambedkar, *Buddha and His Dhamma*, xviii.

²⁴⁵Bimal Krishna Motilal, "Buddhist Logic and Epistemology", *Buddhist Logic and Epistemology: Studies in the Buddhist Analysis of Inference and Logic*, eds. Bimal Krishna Motilal and Robert D. Evans (New Delhi: DK Printworld, 2012), 2.

system" and then proceeds to produce evidence in support of his *protigya* or statement as is the practice in Naya philosophy in India. Ambedkar, on the contrary, puts himself in the shoes of his opposition to single out those 'suppositions of all contrary predicates' of the caste system- caste as eugenics, caste to maintain the purity of race, caste as division of labour etc. Reminiscent of *reductio ad absurdum* or *argumentum ad absurdum*, Ambedkar, the barrister trained in Grey's Inn London, goes on to deny those contrary suppositions while exempting compatible suppositions. That Nagarjuna, alongside other Buddhist logicians like Dinnaga or Dharmakirti, was a similar practitioner of *bitanda* or debate is pointed out by Motilal in the aforementioned text:

By using arguments that can be variously interpreted as destructive dilemmas, *reductio ad absurdum* and so on, Nagarjuna wanted to show that the so called Naya method is defenceless against proving a contradiction and letting in paradoxes. In particular, Nagarjuna showed that there is this untenable contradiction between our a priori certainty and the empirical evidence that every being is dependently co-originating and one is therefore driven to the conclusion that every being is empty, i.e., empty of its own-being or own-essence or own-nature, for otherwise it could not have been dependently originating.²⁴⁶

It is quite interesting to see that in many comparative philosophical studies of recent times, Nagarjuna's *sunyata* or *void* or no-self has been compared to Jacques Derrida's ideas apropos *differance* and Derrida's discomfort with any 'metaphysics of presence'. The Korean American philosopher Jin Y. Park, in her essay "Naming the Unnameable" has underscored such speculative possibilities:

The focal point of the well-known Buddhist concept of no-self is not the issue of either accepting or denying the existence of self so much as it is how to change one's mode of thinking from a substantialist to a non-substantialist way. Along with Derrida, we can state that the major issue in the Buddhist concept of no-self is the matter of how to escape the "instituting question of philosophy", which is "what is...". Through the theory of no-self, Buddhism introduces a new mode of thinking that neither affirms nor negates the existence of being.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶Motilal, "Buddhist Logic", 35.

²⁴⁷Park, "Naming the Unnameable", 10

A little later, Park reminds us that such a conception of *sunyata* can be compared to Derrida's persistent critique of 'western metaphysics of presence':

Derridean deconstruction joins [Nagarjuna's] Buddhism in its efforts to explain the state of being through its interdependency. According to Derrida, the history of Western Philosophy has been the metaphysics of presence, whereby philosophy maintains itself by giving being an onto-theological essence. The onto-theological metaphysics of essence outlives the mutability of beings in the phenomenal world. This longevity-or rather, this immortality of essence-has been explained as grounded in the nature of essence. Be it as Plato's Idea, Descartes' ego-cogito, the Kantian *a priori* or even Heidegger's crossed out Being, philosophy has survived by identifying the unoriginated origin as the ground of our being and the world.²⁴⁸

Such conceptualisation of 'no-self' , *sunyata* in Nagarjuna's

Mulamadhyamakakarikas(resembling Derrida's problems with a definitive understanding of *being*), at the level of philosophising and in its dispositional dimension, does not allow the insistence on the immortality of soul or Atman as it occurs in the foundationalist schools in Indian philosophy such as *Advaita Vedanta*- a school that based its philosophical postulations on the infallibility of the Vedic literature, upheld Upanishadic thought and found a tellingly invigorated resurgence in nineteenth century colonial India. Such anti-Vedic perspective, a discomfort with ideas like Aryan Truths, afterbirth or karma or atman as immortality of self or essence of being- consequently place Ambedkar at a philosophical crossroad that cannot be connected with the foundationalist trends either in Indian or in Western philosophical traditions. It is this nature of Ambedkar's interpretations of Buddhism that resembles the imaginative reconstruction of a Buddhist past Sunil Das attempts in his works. As I have already explained, Das often quotes extensively from works like *Buddha and His Dhamma* and how the ancient Bauri tantric religiosity slowly embraced Buddhism's anti-caste, anti-Brahminical nature. Thus, underscoring Ambedkar's reading of Buddhism as not necessarily 'modern', 'strategic' ploy or a result of despair is also a persuasive trope to think of those Bauri interpretations of their community's past.

²⁴⁸Park, "Naming the Unnameable", 11.

On a similar note, Ambedkar's intellectual disagreements with the Brahmanical discourse also gets manifested through his readings of Charvaka- Lokayata philosophies and even in his readings on Tantric practices that, as he himself pointed out, slowly found its place within practised Hinduism in places like Bengal.²⁴⁹ While Ambedkar's encounter with Buddhism creates the most intense and exhaustive engagement by him with Indian philosophy, his attacks on foundationalist *astika* philosophies in India e.g. Jaimini's *Purba Mimangsha* or his understanding of the *Gita* as the counter revolutionary text *par excellence*, also demanded that he engages with other Anti-Vaidik philosophies like Charvaka- Lokayata. In his book *Riddles in Hinduism*, Ambedkar points out that the Vedic epistemologies never went uncontested even within India. Anticipating the possibility of being tagged as a 'typical product of western modernity' as he was referring to western scholars in his rebuttal of Vedic scriptures, Ambedkar says:

It would no doubt be objected that all foreign scholars are prejudiced and that their views cannot therefore be accepted. Fortunately, we are not altogether dependent upon the views of foreigners. There are leaders of indigenous schools of thought which have taken the same view (about the Vedas). The most notorious example is that of the Charvakas.²⁵⁰

Asserting this, Ambedkar goes on to elaborately quote from Brahminical sources that ridiculed Charvakas. Like most notable Indian Marxist or materialist scholars on Charvaka- Lokayata, Ambedkar was absolutely aware of the fact that most of the texts produced by Charavaka philosophers were destroyed in subsequent times or 'counter-revolutionary times', to use Ambedkar's use of the phrase. Hence, he quotes from Madhavacharya's *Sarva Darsana Samgraha*. Even though Madhavacharya's efforts were to refute Buddhism and Charvaka philosophies, the Sankaracharya follower Advaita Vedantist Madhavacharya quotes extensively from Brahaspati. According to Ambedkar as well as Ramakrishna Bhattacharya

²⁴⁹B.R. Ambedkar, "Riddle no.14: From Ahimsa Back to Himsa", *Riddles in Hinduism* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2016),100.

²⁵⁰ Ambedkar, "Riddle no.6: The Contents of the Vedas: Have They any Moral or Spiritual Value?", *Riddles*,67.

or Debiprasad Chattopadhyay, Brahaspati was a major anti-Vedic voice among the Charvakas.²⁵¹ The significant point however, is that Ambedkar's selection of quotations in this book clearly suggest the importance of Charvakas in pre-modern India in terms of how they refuted foundationalist schools of Indian philosophy, rejected afterbirth, Karma and the supremacy or infallibility of the Vedas.

5.6 Whither postcolonialism or the case of India writing back to the Empire

While Berlin, Bonn and other German centres of learning were witnessing an enthusiastic academic attention on Indian cultures, languages and philosophies, Calcutta- the epicentre of the British colonial enterprise in South Asia- was experiencing a similar, if not more, enthusiasm about India's supposedly 'great spiritual heritage'. In 1839, while Hegel was fighting an intellectual duel with Alexander von Humboldt on the philosophic merit of the *Bhagavat Gita*, Debendranath Tagore, father of the great poet Rabindranath Tagore and an illustrious member of the native elite society, established an institution to reformulate the fundamental tenets of Vedic and Upanishadic texts that would meet the theosophical and social challenges generated by the Christian missionaries in the colonial city of Calcutta.²⁵² This organisation came to be known as Tattvabodhini Sabha ('Truth Propagators Society'). Its mouthpiece - *Tattvabodhini Patrika*- became a well-known journal on the renewed interest on Vedic literatures as well as their acceptability in the time of colonial modernity. This organisation followed the footsteps of Rammohan Roy, widely known as the "Maker of Modern India", the so-called harbinger of the 'Bengal Renaissance' and the Bengali Brahmin social reformer who crusaded against widow immolation. Following his Brahmo Samaj that

²⁵¹ See Debiprasad Chattopadhyay, *Lokayata Darshan* (Kolkata: New Age, 1956). Also, see Ramakrishna Bhattacharya, *Studies in the Carvaca Lokayata* (London: Anthem, 2012).

²⁵² For an example of Hegel's conflicts with Humboldt about the Gita, see G.W.F. Hegel, *On the Episode of the Mahabharata known by the Name Bhagabad-Gita by William von Humboldt*, ed.& trans. Herbert Herring (New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1995). For my references to Debendranath Tagore and Tattvabodhini Sabha here, see Brian Hatcher, *Bourgeois Hinduism, or the Faith of the Modern Vedantists: Rare Discourses from early Colonial Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

had an immense influence in igniting the popular interests in Vedic and Upanishadic literatures, Tattvabodhini Sabha became more focused in sustaining and strengthening those interests. As Brian Hatcher informs, most of those renewed interests in ancient foundational texts of Indian philosophies were on one hand being influenced by orientalist enthusiasm and on the other hand, they were being honed to speak to the demands induced by colonial modernity and activities of Christian missionaries. Out of these interests, Advaita Vedanta became more popular than most other foundationalist streams of Indian philosophies. Most Tagore scholars would agree that Rabindranath's lifelong fascination with Upanishadic literatures owed a great deal to such cultural inheritances garnered by his father as well as by such societies as Brahma Samaj or Tattvabodhini Sabha. However, one notices a remarkable shift from Rammohan to Rabindranath via Tattvabodhini Sabha, in terms of interpretations of Vedic/Upanishadic literatures. While Rammohan's interpretations of these texts emanated largely from his desire to show how tenets of Enlightenment rationality could comfortably meet with the fundamental coordinates of Advaita Vedanta or Upanishadic philosophies, Tagore's reading of the same set of texts, as is evident from his arguments in the 1941 essay and according to Guha's suggestions, was directed towards finding an incompatibility between the two. Notwithstanding such shifts, however, one cannot be blind to the fact that even Tagore's readings of Upanishadic texts, such as the *Brihadarnayak Upanishad* here, at the level of philosophising, required an insistence on a *stable absolute*. The requirement of this stable absolute, in Tagore's formulation, is *atman*. Certainly, as Guha suggests, Tagore's interpretation of this goes beyond the premodern commentaries (Advaita Vedantist Sankaracharya and Sankhya philosophies commented on the sloka Tagore quotes from) on the conversations between Jagyavalka and his wife Maitreyee. But this insistence on the uniqueness of subjective creative experience required that Tagore invoked this stable absolute- a foundation without which the Upanishadic philosophy would look quite

impossible. It is at this juncture that one wonders why Tagore did not find Buddhism or Charvaka philosophies to be the philosophical antidotes to Hegelian pedantic historians, despite his love for the Buddha as is evident in texts like *Chandalini*. This question looks all the more baffling when one looks at his tellingly ambivalent treatment of the caste question.

Like Gandhi, Tagore had his own battles against caste. While Gandhi spent most of his energy on temple entry movements and untouchability, Tagore, as Tapan Basu²⁵³ suggests, upheld inter caste marriages as a solution to the 'problem' of caste. However, Tagore does not seem to be suggesting that caste system *as such* is a problem. In 1916, Tagore visited Japan and America. In both these places, Tagore delivered lectures on nationalism and earned a great deal of wrath from Japanese as well as American scholars for speaking against the idea of the nation state. It is during this second visit to the United States when Tagore delivered his famous lecture- "Nationalism in India". While ideas like that of the nation state gave birth to immense competition between races, Tagore argued, India's caste system is the outcome of a 'spirit of toleration'. A little later, he would place caste as antithetical to the West's ceaseless competition and mechanical *weltanschauung*.

Interestingly, Tagore has his own Hegelian moment in the same lecture. Exhibiting this interesting ambivalence apropos of caste, he says: Therefore, in her caste regulations India recognized differences, but not the mutability which is the law of life²⁵⁴. In other words, while Tagore sees caste as putting a limit to competition and jealousy, echoing Hegel, he also sees it as responsible for making Indian society static (mutability as the law of life). Interestingly, this understanding of caste as anti-growth, in Hegel's estimation, also crippled the self-realisation of *Geist* as far as India's position in the larger philosophical schema in Hegel is concerned.

²⁵³ Tapan Basu, "Caste Matters: Rabindranath Tagore's Engagement with India's Ancient Social Hierarchies", *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 35/1 (2012), 162-171, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2011.648910>.

²⁵⁴ Tagore, *Nationalism*, 102.

As Guha's *History at the Limit of World History* suggests and is evident from its subsequent usage as a template for postcolonial hermeneutics of caste like the one made by Debjani Ganguly, it is this kind of a comparative philosophical framework that India's postcolonial studies (as much as India's anti-colonial nationalist struggle) has adopted without paying much attention to the internal differences between warring philosophical traditions within the West on one hand and on the other, relying more on the foundationalist streams in Indian philosophy as a reply to the Western Enlightenment. Through the construction of such a comparative philosophical framework, I argue, Indian postcolonial thought has created an endless epistemological battle between caste and race. Tagore's utterance in that aforementioned lecture itself succinctly summarises this rigmarole:

Many people in this country ask me what is happening as to the caste distinctions in India. But when this question is asked me, it is usually done with a superior air. And I feel tempted to put the same question to our American critics with a slight modification, 'What have you done with the Red Indian and the Negro?'²⁵⁵

While apologists of race overestimate caste as a unique marker of the Indian society, apologists of caste point out the colossal violence executed in the name of racial hatred and colonialism in such never-ending discursive battles. However, Ambedkar's intellectual inheritances and philosophical encounters offer us a massive intellectual and discursive shift in our dealings in such postcolonial predicament. In this contrary scenario, I see such a possibility in Ambedkar as his encounters with pragmatism and Buddhism clearly place him on the other side of the picture where both these philosophical inheritances interact closely with Derrida's deconstruction. With Ambedkar, we can conceive of a philosophical framework that neither normalises colonial violence or racial antagonism nor legitimises the caste system. The philosophical premise in which I have traced Ambedkar is in no way an entirely exhaustive estimation of the philosophical output of his works. I do not intend to

²⁵⁵ Tagore, *Nationalism*, 86.

suffer from such metaphysical zeal around a Foucault's Pendulum or revelation of Truth to describe Ambedkar as "unalloyed" anything. Ambedkar's philosophical engagements include too many names to assume a possibility of mapping such an exhaustive intellectual history. Rather, taking a cue from Ambedkar's philosophical frame, I would join Guha as well as Althusser, to assert that Ambedkar's greatest contribution is that he brings down the hallowed status ascribed to many Brahminic philosophies while not entirely allowing himself to be subsumed within a Western foundationalist frame such as Enlightenment liberalism. That, in my humble suggestion, is no less a Derridean battle against the onto-theological status enjoyed by and ascribed to foundationalist philosophy itself. Despite the fact that Ambedkar finds discrepancies between Vedic and Upanishadic texts and considers it as one of the many riddles in Hinduism as to how they got merged together, he is categorically dismissive about Upanishadic philosophies as instances of 'transcendental philosophies'. According to him, 'transcendental philosophies' like those in the various Upanishads are inevitably ineffective and inconsequential.²⁵⁶

5.7 Ambedkar and History

In the epilogue to his book *Provincializing Europe*, tellingly titled "Reason and Historicism", Dipesh Chakrabarty underlines the centrality of scientific and rational temper as a prerequisite for constructions of modern historical thought.²⁵⁷ Citing Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and its famous phrase "the struggle of the Enlightenment with superstition", Chakrabarty identifies a common fixation with rational historicism as a key feature of Indian historiography. He goes on to explain how most modern historical thinking is often relied on reducing the past into an object of rational interpretation and study through which historical

²⁵⁶See Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, "Philosophy of Hinduism", in *BAWS*, vol. 3ed., Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Government of India, 2014), 87.

²⁵⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000).

thinking arrives at a point when the past is reduced to a nullity. He calls it the 'zero point in history-the past less time, for example of a tabula rasa, the terra nullius, or the blue print. 'Reifying the past into an object of study' becomes a step through which the modern political subject makes 'the past amenable to objectification as well as makes himself free of this object called "history"'. It is through this method in modern Hegelian history, we are told, that some ways of being in this world refuse to be reduced to rationalist reading and get identified as 'anachronistic'. Caste, we can logically conclude, is often assumed as an anachronism. It is part of our modern historical and political common sense that caste, as a thing of the past, remains resilient even as it is identified as something that we presumably should have or indeed have left behind. In his references to Ambedkar's views on history in this section of "Reason and Historicism", Chakrabarty recognises that Ambedkar's conception of past is not as simple as that. He sees a certain feature of 'decisionism' in Ambedkar's idea of the past. In this reading, Chakrabarty identifies Ambedkar as a thinker who is not interested in past as the source for every thinking in the 'now'. Ambedkar, he thinks, makes certain choices that suit his ultimate political purpose of establishing a liberal democracy free of the burden of caste and based on the hallowed principles of the French Revolution- liberty, equality and fraternity. Quoting passages from Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*, he implies that this decisionism approach of Ambedkar possibly came from his mentor John Dewey who was never entirely invested in the 'dead wood from the past'. Immediately after this reference to Ambedkar's decisionism, Chakrabarty reminds us that far from being against the historicist tendency this apparent irreverence to the past (in decisionism) is usually coupled with historicism as a discursive corollary in modern historiographic thought. Chakrabarty's ultimate verdict on Ambedkar's decisionism/historicism double bind is premised upon Ambedkar's statements on the 'origins of caste'. In the anthropology seminar conducted by his professor Dr. A. A. Goldenweizer. A

young Ambedkar presented his historicist approach to past vis-à-vis a search for caste's origin according to Chakrabarty's estimation. Chakrabarty reminds us how Ambedkar regrets the fact that we do not know the causal relationships in history to explain *why* sati or widow immolation, girl child marriage, enforced widowhood and other such social evils came into being. The crucial observation here is the emphasis Chakrabarty puts on the mood of Ambedkar where he *deplores* the absence of proper histories of these evils. According to Chakrabarty, "historicism can circulate only in a mood of frustration, despair and resentment." The question I would ask is: is this an exhaustive mapping of Ambedkar's historicist despair? I ask this question especially after having a somewhat long intellectual detour through which I tried to imply that Ambedkar's intellectual allegiances are not necessarily modernist, rationalist or statist in any absolutist sense. Let me now quickly make a reference to another text where Ambedkar is concerned with the past and yet does not sound as despaired as Chakrabarty would have us believe. Given how Chakrabarty finds Hegel's emphasis on reason-based Enlightenment view of history as the philosophical basis of historicism, the methods of historical imagination we come across in this reference are more than interesting. My reference is to *The Untouchables: Who were They and Why they became Untouchables?* Proving Chakrabarty right, Ambedkar's historicist fixation is at work here again in his fundamental question 'why?' and I have no intention of completely erasing this historicist tendency in Ambedkar. However, I am interested in the method of Ambedkar's analysis. In other words, I am interested to see how Ambedkar approaches an otherwise historicist question pertaining to 'why' to chalk out a 'history of untouchability'. What should interest us is the manner, the method and the tone of Ambedkar as he approaches some deadlock in his pursuit to know this history. Does he become resentful, despaired and then sees this 'incomplete' history as a lack and as something incommensurable with his presumably 'modern' historical temperament?

In the preface to this text, Ambedkar shares his realisation that there is a great deal of difficulty in knowing as to why untouchability came into being. It is as if, he thinks, that moment in history is gone forever and thus, it is unknowable, at least in its entirety. In other words, Ambedkar recognises that there is not enough scope for him to have a total and complete history of untouchability based on reason and facts. He starts by giving us the ‘ideal’ pursuit of historical investigation by citing Goethe. This is a reference that I have already given in some of the earlier chapters of this dissertation and therefore, will refrain from repeating this point in its entirety. What matters here is Ambedkar’s refusal to accept Goethe’s thesis on historical truth wherein Goethe draws sharp and defined distinctions between the truth and the false, the certain and the uncertain and considers the job of the historian as analogous to the task of a judge in a court of law. Like a judge, the historian needs to pass an objective, unbiased, reason-based verdict derived purely from established facts. Ambedkar disagrees with Goethe as he stumbles upon the ‘missing links’ in his quest for knowing the roots of untouchability. Interestingly, Ambedkar does not see this as a unique problem and recognises it as shared challenge for all the historians of ancient Indian history. Quoting Mountstuart Elphinstone, Ambedkar sees these gaps in ancient Indian history as a ‘sad confession’ but goes beyond that:

This is a sad confession but that again does not help. The question is: ‘What is a student of history to do? Is he to cry halt and stop his work until the link is discovered?’ I think not. I believe that in such cases it is permissible for him to use his imagination and intuition to bridge the gaps left in the chain of facts by links not yet discovered and to propound a working hypothesis suggesting how facts which cannot be connected by known facts might have been inter-connected.²⁵⁸

Ambedkar identifies his hypothesis as something that is based on ‘guess’, ‘circumstantial evidence of presumptive character’, ‘considerable degree of probability’, ‘imagination and intuition’ and does not see the necessity to find such hypothesis as either completely feasible

²⁵⁸ Ambedkar, *Beef, Brahmin and Broken Men*, 93.

or final. As opposed to a pedantic historian (like Tagore, he is dismissive about pedantry), Ambedkar sees his task in the following manner:

The task is analogous to that of the archaeologist who constructs a city from broken stones or of the palaeontologist who conceives an extinct animal from scattered bones and teeth or of a painter who reads the lines of the horizon and the smallest vestiges on the slopes of the hill to make up a scene. In this sense the book is a work of art even more than history²⁵⁹

Chakrabarty is undoubtedly right when he says that Ambedkar was trying to annihilate caste or even trying to scrap India's caste-ridden past. As one of the features of historicist thinking, Chakrabarty would see Ambedkar's description like 'dead city', 'extinct animal' as markers of tendencies to see past as 'genuinely dead'. But we must also note that, unlike Marx, Ambedkar is neither weary nor does he express his frustration in reconstructing the 'presumably 'dead' past. Moreover, the question is: was Ambedkar doing this simply because he thought caste was 'unmodern' and thus had to go away. It is also true that on several occasions Ambedkar would even use that vocabulary of liberalism or modernity to build his arguments against caste. But is that the only feature of anti-caste protest we need to recognise in either Ambedkar or the Dalit narratives I have explored in the preceding chapters of this dissertation? I have no problem in describing Ambedkar as a modernist. The problem of the Subaltern Studies scholars like Chakrabarty, Chatterjee or Pandey start the moment they think of such intellectual allegiances in absolutist and purist terms. In his first speech at the constituent Assembly Ambedkar spoke eloquently about safeguarding the unity of the country and saw his role as a member of the assembly in terms of nation-building. Does that make him a nationalist, in any sense of the term? Yes, it does and yet we see those Deweyan statements on nationalism as 'brute force' in Ambedkar's Pakistan or the Partition of India. Was he a liberal? Yes, he was and yet, he was constantly citing the conservative western thinker and statesman Edmund Burke in his Constituent Assembly speeches. What

²⁵⁹ Ambedkar, *Beef, Brahmin and Broken Man*, 94.

Chakrabarty and Chatterjee do not recognize is that caste is neither entirely a conceptual category nor a discursive construct emerging out of complex encounters between a pre-modern Indian society and colonial modernity. For Ambedkar or for Sunil Das, Swapan Biswas, Manoranjan Byapri, Manohar Mouli Biswas or Kalyani Thakur, caste is a lived reality they cannot escape. To look for reasons why this social experience is occurring to them and how this unjust system came into being is always a question that is central to their predicament. For this, they do take recourse to law, state, reason and other components of modernity, political and otherwise. But that is not the only characteristic through which these narratives have to be seen. Chakrabarty's Heideggerian readings in different ways of being in the world must, I insist, also recognize not just 'different ways of being' but also 'different ways of protesting'. Do we, the larger question is, always need to read each and every quest for social justice solely in terms of subscriptions to modernity? Is not that a totalizing prism as well? Who decides that there is a singular script for Dalits to articulate their lived experiences? Who decides that it is either solely historicist or purely magical? If contingency and fractured being are the hallmarks of Chakrabarty's position then I fail to see why Ambedkar is not an example of different ways of protesting qua different ways of being in this world? In *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty himself says:

In drawing this book to a close, I want to raise the question of how we might find a form of social justice but does not allow it to erase the question of heterotemporality from the history of the modern subject.²⁶⁰

If that is the motto of this book and he is not otherwise dismissing every quest for social justice why is it so important for him and his colleagues in the Subaltern Studies to describe Ambedkar as an 'unalloyed modernist'? I do not propose to describe Ambedkar or any of the Dalit narratives I have looked into either in terms of magic and superstition or in terms of

²⁶⁰ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 239.

modern historicism. They can be any of these or all at the same time or none of these. To either read their narratives of life and resistance in 'either-or' terms is what I am uncomfortable with. Neither a pragmatist Ambedkar (who sees his thesis as highly fallible and contingent) nor a Heideggerian like Chakrabarty can have a problem with that.

Conclusion: Towards a Dalit Historiography beyond the Postcolonial aporia of Caste

"Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing the history of the present"- Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

Someone who writes nothing but postcards will not have Hegel's problem of how to end his book- Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*.

6.1 Beyond Ambivalent Modernity:

When I started working on my dissertation one of the earliest pieces I wrote was the *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)* essay on Dalit historiography. In retrospect I realize that there were two crucial words that can be termed definitive and pivotal signifiers encapsulating the very essence of my argument in that essay. But I did not recognize those two words as compelling terms in the essay in the way I do now. These two words are- history /historiography and ambivalence. In the last six years, while conducting fieldworks, trips to different corners of the state, collecting texts and narratives that defied convenient conventional categorizations, I was struck by the sheer heterogeneity of the everyday conditions of cultural, literary and political articulations that I noticed in them. One early trace of this very wide and varied range of my experiences is captured in the word 'heterogeneity' as I used it in the title of the *EPW* piece. I used the term 'heterogeneity' almost as a marker of my incapability to 'read' these narratives to arrive at generalizable research conclusions. Now that I am bringing my work to an end (that, by any means, does not signify a closure), I realize that words like 'ambivalence' or 'heterogeneity' should be understood in much more telling and positive ways than the ways I used them then. I realized this during my work and I found its validation in the work of the Polish philosopher Zygmunt Bauman. His work on 'modernity and ambivalence', especially his idea of 'liquid modernity' are convenient modes through which we can have more appreciative underpinnings of the

term ‘ambivalence’. The very inevitable recurrence of the terms, now I realize, are not signs of my incapacity to read and structure them for the easy conclusions we often derive. These are words that clearly signify, as Bauman would have argued, the very gestures of modern academic ventures to read things schematically to put them in certain structures:

Ambivalence, the possibility of assigning an object or an event to more than one category, is a language-specific disorder: a failure of the naming (segregating) function that language is meant to perform. The main symptom of disorder is the acute discomfort we feel when we are unable to read the situation properly and to choose between alternative actions. It is because of the anxiety that accompanies it and the indecision which follows that we experience ambivalence as a disorder -- and either blame language for lack of precision or ourselves for linguistic misuse. And yet ambivalence is not the product of the pathology of language or speech. It is, rather, a normal aspect of linguistic practice. It arises from one of the main functions of language: that of naming and classifying. Its volume grows depending on the effectivity with which that function is performed. Ambivalence is therefore the *alter ego* of language, and its permanent companion --indeed, its normal condition. To classify means to set apart, to segregate. It means first to postulate that the world consists of discrete and distinctive entities; then to postulate that each entity has a group of similar or adjacent entities with which it belongs, and with which -- together -- it is opposed to some other entities; and then to make the postulated real by linking differential patterns of action to different classes of entities (the evocation of a specific behavioural pattern becoming the operative definition of the class). To classify, in other words, is to give the world a *structure*: to manipulate its probabilities; to make some events more likely than some others; to behave as if events were not random, or to limit or eliminate randomness of events. Through its naming/classifying function, language posits itself between a solidly founded, orderly world fit for human habitation, and a contingent world of randomness, in which human survival weapons -- memory, the capacity for learning -- would be useless, if not downright suicidal. Language strives to sustain the order and to deny or suppress randomness and contingency.²⁶¹

But this appreciation and inevitability of the term ‘ambivalence’ in reading the Dalit narratives from Bengal did not stop me from pushing my engagements with them further in order to look for possible ways (not methods or theories or philosophical abstractions or academic generalizations) through which we can think beyond the familiar domains of either accepting the statist, liberal, ‘modern’ avenues as paths to emancipatory politics or of almost completely being critically dismissive about these. These ‘ways’ of reading the Dalit writings from Bengal can be many. But my initial provocation came from my impatience with the existing debates within Indian postcolonial historiographies, especially in relation to caste

²⁶¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 1.

and Ambedkar. Thus, Sunil Das' engagements with the origins of his community, Byapari's or Bala's reframing of the ancestral myths of the Namasudra community, the 'contested', buried history of the 'Marichjhanpi Massacre' or the Mulnibasi myth and Dom writings, provided me with an opportunity to engage with not just a democratization of history. Instead, I try and look for ways through which these constructions of history, either imaginative- intuitionist or statist, can speak to some of the existing debates within Indian postcolonial literatures on historiography. But more importantly, reading these instances from Bangla Dalit writings helped me engage with their most significant discursive and ideological inspiration i.e., Ambedkar whose own perceptions on history has long been ignored either as 'statist', 'modern', 'liberal', 'historicist' or 'mythographical'. The intellectual framework that Ambedkar inhabited, I humbly argue, does offer us some ways through which these Dalit narratives speak more eloquently. As I look back at the chapters of this dissertation, I realize that this has become a long and somewhat detailed conversation between the collective as well as individual pasts of Dalits and certain strands in postcolonial historiography, particularly the Subaltern Studies interventions in the sub-continent's history. Retrospectively I also realize the polemical undercurrent of this project and this concluding chapter is perhaps best suited to spell them out more unequivocally and unambiguously. In order to elucidate this polemical as well as intensely political and theoretical undercurrent in this dissertation let me cite yet another example from Dipesh Chakrabarty whose works are extensively cited, reinstated and contested throughout this work of mine. In his article "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?", in the journal *Representations*, Chakrabarty persuasively underlines the inherent Eurocentrism in modern historiography. According to him, Indian history, notwithstanding its various inherent tensions and contesting claims, is itself in a relationship of 'subalternity' with the large overwhelmingly western and 'Eurocentric' historiography as well as 'theory' and philosophy as domains of abstracted and

universal knowledge. His favourite example Marx appears again as it does in his *Provincializing Europe*. Marx's penchant for carrying forward the essentially Hegelian statist, transitional, stage-based and teleological history for the entire humankind is critiqued by Chakrabarty in both these instances and thus, is well-known. However, he cites another example from a field that has been particularly popular among literary studies scholars as well as postcolonial historians of a wide variety i.e., continental philosophy. Chakrabarty's example comes from the phenomenological thinker Edmund Husserl. He refers to Husserl's Vienna lecture of 1935:

[...] where he proposed that the fundamental difference between "oriental philosophies" (more specifically Indian and Chinese) and "Greek-European science" (or as he added, 'universally speaking: philosophy) was the capacity of the latter to produce "absolute theoretical insights", that is *theoria* (universal science), while the former retained a "practical-universal" and hence "mythical-religious" character. This 'practical-universal' philosophy was directed to the world in a "naïve" and "straightforward" manner, while the world presented itself as a "thematic" to *theoria*, making possible a praxis "whose aim is to elevate the mankind through universal scientific reason."²⁶²

It is needless to say that this observation of Chakrabarty is reiterated in not only much of the historiographic literature that Subaltern Studies has produced but, in extension, in postcolonial studies discussions in literary studies departments and postcolonial historiographies in a more generalized sense. I have no intention to criticize these repeated observations of the hegemonic Eurocentrism he discerns in much of the European or Western historiography and philosophy of history, ranging from Vico to Collingwood or from Hegel to Ranke and Husserl. What is immediately striking is how many of these statements by Chakrabarty, if taken as symptomatic and representative of postcolonial historiographies, have structural similarities with the polemical utterances of Dalit activists who are attempting to conceptualize 'Dalit history' or even a 'Dalit historiography'. I will come to the limitations

²⁶² Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Past?", *Representations* no. 37 (Winter 1992): 1-26, accessed February 21, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2928652>.

of those conceptualizations at the level of historiography soon. But before that, this parallelism must be stayed with for some time. By similarity I have in my mind instances like Gopal Guru's *Economic and Political Weekly* essay where Guru points out not only the Eurocentric nature of our social science and humanities scholarship but the inherently casteist epistemological binary between 'theoretical Savarna' and 'empirical Shudra'.²⁶³ Just as Chakrabarty sees how there is 'asymmetrical ignorance' among the western scholars about the non-west and yet western thought enjoys the privilege of being 'theoretical' in the sense of being 'universal', Dalit activists are contesting the hegemonic status of 'theoretical' Savarna. The Subaltern Studies scholars, as well as Dalit activist-intellectuals like Guru, have often seen either a childish or a potent way out of this in Dalits' embracing of 'modernity'. Chakrabarty's essay draws our attention to how Indian history is always already seen as 'incomplete', 'inadequate' and in transition towards being 'mature' in wholly embracing and assimilating 'modernity'. The promise of citizenship or the emergence of the modern bourgeois individual or family are alluring propositions for all the natives in a colonial situation, including Dalits. In the post-colonial nation, many of these promises have been strengthened in paper as these get encoded in the text of the Indian Constitution. While I agree with these observations of Chakrabarty and other scholars in the broader domain of Indian postcolonial historiography, I find their readings of Dalit narratives solely in terms of an unquestioned subscription to various templates of modernity extremely hasty and uninformed. If this work has any fundamental impetus it is located in this discomfort of mine. In the previous chapters I have never tried to suggest that Dalits or Ambedkar never ever believed in the so-called 'liberal' promises of citizenship, Indian nation-state, science and rationality in general. That has been the case in many of these instances. But to read these

²⁶³ Gopal Guru, "How egalitarian are the social sciences in India?", *Economic and Political Weekly* 37 no. 50 (2015):5003-09, accessed February 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4412959>.

narratives of Dalits in Bengal or the writings of Ambedkar almost completely in terms of their subscription to these notions would be too irresponsible a reading. My observations in the chapter on Namasudra and Matua writings show how the ancestral myths of their community have undergone sea changes in terms of their anti-caste energies. But I also discern a tendency to not entirely subscribe to the logic of the nation-state or the statist histories it generates among the partition narratives produced by Namasudra Dalit refugees. These are certainly carrying the legacies of the bourgeois individual in the very genre of autobiography and are at times haunted by the figure of ‘abstract equality’ that Marx sees as the primary condition for history’s transition from feudalism to capitalism and eventually to socialism. But Dalit autobiographies are also not just about the individual lives that are narrated in those texts. These are the tales of their communities as well. The distinct figure of an abstract citizen conceptualized in terms of an abstract notion of equality hardly resembles Dalits. This is not simply because they are at the receiving end of state-sponsored and state-executed atrocities but primarily because, in these narrations as well as in Ambedkar’s writings, there is certainly much more than a straightforward imprint of modern liberalism. As I have explained in great details in the fifth chapter in this dissertation, this kind of reading is quite common among the subalternists and postcolonialists. Dalit historiography begins its journey primarily by disagreeing with it. To read these narratives solely in these terms of subscribing to modernity is to read them as ‘innocent’ (read gullible) juveniles who have, as if, unknowingly subscribed to something that will not empower them at all. On the other end of the spectrum, I see Dalit activists spending the larger share of their energies in creating spaces in the state corridors of power or other such institutions that are significant in building the state as well as running our civil society and bourgeois families. Thus, there is no complete denial of what Chakrabartys and Pandey are saying. However, their readings are still incomplete as we see in the earlier engagements with Bengal’s Dalit writings as well as

Ambedkar's writings. This is why I see the necessity for a different framework. This is not a simplistic plea for an alternative epistemology or alternative modernity wherein we can look for some exit point. This is a more modest suggestion wherein the existing framework of postcolonial historiographic constructions are shown as incomplete and then there is a search for tentative and contingent structures where anti-foundational philosophical and intellectual traditions of the west that contested enlightenment modernity are coalesced into different intellectual traditions of the Indian sub-continent that Ambedkar was influenced by. When we recognize the immensely contingent nature of Dalits' engagements with history, we not only get a tentative template of 'Dalit historiography' but also a possibility to see newer ways of conceptualizing postcolonialism itself. This seemingly tall claim has to be unpacked a little. When I say this I imply three issues that can be taken as points of departure as well as anticipation of points of arrival: a) by this I underscore the amnesia or indifference of postcolonial historiography to engage with the issue of caste as a lived experiential trope, b) reading Dalit literary and cultural narratives help us see some ways of engagement with past that seemingly need newer ways of looking at them, instead of the usual elitist historiographies or the subaltern historiography and c) in Ambedkar's writings, as much in the writings of Bengal's Dalits, one can discern a vocabulary of emancipatory politics that comes from philosophical traditions like pragmatism which have long history of critiquing modernity. Dalit history does not have to emerge as a radical and distinct shift from the existing historiographic literatures. What Dalit history and historiography can attempt is to address certain gaps in our concerns in postcolonial historiographies.

I do see the term 'Dalit' as carrying an emphasis on the historical injustice that 'low caste' people have received. Thus, I have no problem in accepting the historiographic definition of the term 'Dalit' that Chinnaiah Jangam provides:

[Thus,] the 1970s can be described as the era of Dalit resurgence and the Dalit Panthers of Bombay emerged as the symbol of this radical politics. While resurrecting “Dalit” as a radical identity-meaning broken or ground down people- they scripted its historical and philosophical roots away from and outside of both colonial and caste-Hindu imagination. While changing the grammar of electoral politics, the Dalit identity transformed itself into a new epistemic language signifying opposition to Hindu Brahminical ideology and also questioned secular knowledge which excluded Dalits including from the writing of the nation’s history.²⁶⁴

I also see it as a signifier that can then become an impetus for seeking to work against the social injustice they have received. But, echoing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, I do not conceive of this term as a ‘positivist’ term completely determined by one’s identity or the lived experiences it brings with it or in other words, I do not see this term as *entirely* determined by what we might loosely call ‘agency.’²⁶⁵ The emphasis on anti-caste, Phule-Ambedkarite ‘Dalit consciousness’ Manohar Mouli Biswas talks about, is certainly a crucial factor in shaping the Bangla Dalit literary and cultural activism. But this anti-caste awareness and its imprint in these autobiographical narratives or novels do not conveniently reflect the existence of a sovereign subject who can then narrate his or her positivist history. In this dissertation I underscore the gaps between the positivist claims of Dalit writers and the claims on the presence of some kind of anti-caste thought informed by Phule or Ambedkar in their writings and the actual outcomes of these claims. One such example of this gap is the simultaneous existence of the term ‘Dalit’ and the continuing presence of the particular caste names in these narratives. The generalities implied or assumed in these terms (Dalit or Mulnibasi), like the term subaltern, are certainly haunted by statist law and yet, unlike an ascribed term like Subaltern, these are self-descriptive terms. Their deployment in various concatenated networks like politics, culture and literature or history is discursively connected

²⁶⁴ Chinnaiah Jangam, “Politics of Identity and the Project of Writing History in Postcolonial India: A Dalit Critique”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 40 (2015), 65, accessed February 21, 2021, <https://www.epw.in/journal/2015/40/special-articles/politics-identity-and-project-writing.html>.

²⁶⁵ Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography”, *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 203-237.

and interlaced or intersected through such registers. These are issues that are deeply embedded in the domain of body-politics and yet more on the fringes or even beyond the limits of the liberal state. Most of the histories that I explore here make claims of generality either through a politics of precarity (lived) or through a past of shared victimhood at the hands of a common foe. But such generalities, as markers of historical consciousness are always already interrupted by their loyalties to particular caste names and communities. For example, a Namasudra or a Bauri author does articulate his or her views in terms of a generalized ideologically charged term like that of Dalit (as a politicised and charged way of self-description) and yet does not give up on his own communitarian identity of being either a Bauri or a Namasudra person. While Dalit is a self-descriptive term signifying a greater quantum of agency it is certainly not to be understood as a sovereign subject which can then write its own history in a completely self-conscious way. But the term 'Dalit' certainly finds both legal/statist and extra-legal/non-statist modes to articulate its united and workably coherent ideologies against the oppressive structures of a caste society. Thus, despite the constant claims of Dalit activists, 'Dalit consciousness' is neither a static nor a solid concept category through which one can conveniently determine a set body of cultural and literary narratives as decidedly and self-consciously Dalit. If Guha's ascribed descriptive term 'subaltern' or his apparently positivist quest for 'subaltern consciousness' in the counter-insurgency documents of colonial archives on peasant insurgency are located in terms of the influence such insurgencies had on those colonial pieces then Dalit becomes a self-descriptive term underscoring caste oppression (captured in the Bangla word '*dalon*') and a commitment to an anti-caste political ethos based on their lived experiences of exclusion and discrimination expressed through cultural narratives. It is these gaps that have been foregrounded in this work to suggest that beyond the apparent 'positivist' claims or even, in some cases, within those very claims, lie possibilities of recognizing non-modern ways of

being that constantly rupture our sense of a ‘dead past’ or a ‘futuristic reappraisal of the past’. Marichjhapi’s spectral and hauntological history, Sunil Das’ paradoxical claims about his community as the original inhabitants of ‘Bauriland and his reference to non-anthropocentric planetary history, Mulnibasi’s autochthonous claims or Pitambar Hati’s non-mythical anti-caste vision – all push us to recognize the endless gaps in positivist histories of caste we often come across. Ambedkar’s intellectual turn to see the project of history as more literature than science or reason’s venture is thus more commensurate with the observations that I have made on these Bangla Dalit narratives.

6.2 *Finitione*: whither Bangla Dalit writings and Dalit historiography?

This work has engaged only with the Bangla Dalit writings that have started emerging from the 1980s or more significantly from 1990s. One way of revisiting my observations could be to engage with the caste question as it occurs in the Dalit and non-Dalit writers’ writings that do not use the term ‘Dalit’. I have also not engaged with the writings produced by Bangladeshi authors like Altaf Parvez or Harishankar Jaladas. Jaladas is a major Bangladeshi author who is often described as ‘Dalit’. Parvez is a major name in the anti-caste discourse in Bangladesh. While I have read their works and have been directly or indirectly influenced and informed by their writings, I restrict my focus in this work to the Dalit writings in West Bengal. It is also important to look at the cultural and literary narratives produced by those ‘lower caste’ constituencies in West Bengal that refuse to see themselves as ‘Dalits’ e.g., the Rajbangshis of North Bengal. The Rajbangshi community is a major political and social presence in many parts of the Northern West Bengal. I have excluded their writings from this dissertation for the simple reason that the term ‘Dalit’ cannot be directly ascribed to them. But this in itself can be a good point of investigation through which some of my observation on Dalit historiography can be informed further. Like Rajbangshis, the presence of the Poundro Kshatriya, Bagdi, Hadi and Chamar communities on Bengals’ caste map can be

other domains that can enrich our concerns in Dalit history in Bengal. As I am getting increasingly familiar with some of the journals and magazines of these communities (e.g., *Poundra Manisha*) and some of their literary writings or the politics of Poundra Mahasangha, I intend to include them in future to extend my present intellectual concerns and anxieties. When I started this research, I would often feel an anxiety regarding the future of the Bangla Dalit writings or their cultural movement and activism. With an ever-increasing body of translations of these Bangla texts and a growing attention of the publishers, this corpus of cultural narratives certainly has an intellectual future as well as a future of its cultural activism. The template of 'Bangla Dalit literature' is also getting expanded as many other Dalit constituencies and new authors are getting published almost every year. Very recently I came across a fascinating fictional account of Bauri community's life in a place called Dethol in the Rarh region of Bankura district. This autobiographical novel *Dethol* by Joydeb Bauri is an important account of Bauri life that could have been incorporated if it had been published before I finished my dissertation. Alongside these newly published instances of Dalit writings in West Bengal, future works can and must engage with the narratives of already well-known writers like Kalyani Thakur Charal, Manju Bala, Shyamol Pramanick, Lily Halder, Kapil Krishna Thakur and others.²⁶⁶ Engagements with Dalit women's writings from Bengal can also become an extremely significant domain of further investigation. Thus, this work has to be perceived as a work in progress not simply in terms of how I suggest the philosophical templates or the hybrid engagements in history those Bangla Dalit narratives offer, but also in terms of how this discourse of anti-caste literature is an increasingly expanding domain. Just as I see my work as a continuation of the work of historiography Subaltern Studies scholars had initiated, this expansion of the body of my primary texts and sources must be seen as

²⁶⁶ Translated collections of Dalit women's writings from West Bengal are also increasingly getting its due recognition. See Kalyani Thakur Charal and Sayantan Dasgupta, ed., *Dalit Lekhika: Women's Writings from Bengal* (Kolkata: Stree, 2020).

opportunities and excuses to revisit this thesis. In that, those engagements might offer more insights not just in the intersections of history and literature but also in the domain of aesthetics. Since Dalit aesthetics, alongside the efforts of Sharnakumar Limbale in Maharashtra or Manohar Mouli Biswas in West Bengal, is capable of offering elaborate articulations, the increasing domain of Bangla Dalit literary and cultural movement will be a fertile soil. Thus, I see this dissertation more in the spirit in which the founding figure of Subaltern Studies saw his/their project. This academic and intellectual spirit cannot be better summed up than Ranajit Guha's own words at the end of his essay "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India":

The elitism of modern Indian historiography is an oppressive fact resented by many others, students, teachers, and writers like ourselves. They may not all subscribe to what has been said above on this subject in exactly the way in which we have said it. However, we have no doubt that many other historiographical points of view and practices are likely to converge close to where we stand. Our purpose in making our own views known is to promote such a convergence. We claim no more than to try and indicate an orientation and hope to demonstrate in practice that this is feasible. In any discussion which may ensue we expect to learn a great deal not only from the agreement of those who think like us but also from the criticism of those who don't.²⁶⁷

I enlist some of those limitations of my work primarily to imply that this dissertation can be seen as a humble attempt in engaging with South Asian historiographic debates from the perspective of caste and Dalit cultural narratives. In doing that, it does not claim either to have completely destabilized the assumptions, inferences and arguments of previous works in this region's historiographic literatures. Neither does this work present a radical epistemological departure in that literature. This work, like most works discussing similar set of concerns and anxieties, is an instance of how academic determinisms play out in research works like the dissertations and monographs we write. Just as Chatterjee and Chakrabarty or Guha see an excessive reliance on Western modernity in Ambedkar's writings and in Dalit

²⁶⁷ Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India", *The Small Voice of History* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012), 193.

cultural activism, I see his intellectual inheritances like American pragmatism, his not-so-modern interpretations of Buddhism, his deployment of imaginative and intuitive history in conjuring a past of caste and the imprint of all these thoughts on Bengals' Dalit narratives. Just as Guha sees a primarily 'mythical' world of enchanted resistance among Doms, I discern a multidimensional frame of resistance that represents what Saurabh Dube calls 'tangled histories' they inhabit.²⁶⁸ When one sees these Dalit narratives either through the template of 'enchanted spaces' or through 'modern places', one arrives at words like 'contradiction', 'strategy', 'ploy', 'tactics' and political choice'. I see these narratives in terms of 'irreducible complexities', 'fallibility', 'contingency', 'survival', 'hauntology' and so on. The meta-narratives of Western Enlightenment modernity certainly do not cease to be operative frames as these Dalits are often forced to live their 'rootless lives' or *sikor chenra jibon*. Their Chandal, Dom, Bauri identities do not leave them either. We might write dissertations on the scary shadows western modernity has been casting on their lives and Dalit activism's most visible members might become very vocal in describing their lives in a liberal and modern rhetoric. But this does not necessarily mean the Dalit cultural narratives have an 'either-or' situation: either they are 'modernist' or they are 'magical'. We need to look beyond this in order to stop seeing Ambedkar's move towards Buddhism as 'strategy' or Dalit activism's invocation of liberal vocabulary as a childlike subscription to modernity. These are narratives that show other realities and other ways of being in this world. These tangled 'stiches on time' are perhaps more vocal when we recognise our 'other' eastern and 'other' anti-foundational western philosophical inheritances like pragmatism, deconstruction or Buddhism. The hauntological history of 'Marichjhanpi massacre', the planetary 'deep' histories in Sunil Das' Bauri history or the 'modern anti-myths' the Mulnibasis conjure or

²⁶⁸ Saurabh Dube, *Stitches on Time: Colonial Textures and Postcolonial Tangles* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

Doms' literary resistance to caste without the ambivalent insubordination through ancestral myths- are all instances of how we can anticipate such historiographic imagination. The term 'Dalit historiography' is one possible way of recognising this. In other words, caste does not have to be an aporia in postcolonial historiography and we do not have to stop simply at reading them as ambivalent. Rather, it is through the prism of caste that we can speculate new readings that would not see Ambedkar as 'modernist' and Subol's mother or Pitambar Hati as instances of enchanted anachronism or as mythographies.

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