

## Synopsis

**Dissertation Title: “Caste and Postcolonial Historiography: Constructions of Past in Bangla Dalit Writings”**

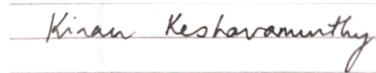
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My dissertation explores the ways in which different Dalit caste groups of West Bengal conceptualize past and history through their autobiographies, non-fictional prose pieces, semi-autobiographical novels, plays and poems. This work does not simply base itself on an implicit demand for either an alternative historiography or a mere democratization of history by incorporating Dalit voices articulated through their autobiographical or fictional narratives. Rather, in this study in Dalit historiography divided in four main chapters, an introduction and a conclusion, I look into how cultural narratives of various Dalit communities of West Bengal offer perceptions of history that do not conform to the historicist assumptions emerging from the western rationalist, ‘objective’ or statist philosophies of history and thus offer us insights into postcolonial historiographies of caste. While the focus of this study is to explore these conceptions of past and history of different

Dalit groups, it also engages with the historiographic insights of Subaltern Studies or Subaltern historiography and how it has explored the caste question in their writings. While the introductory chapter offers an overview of how the caste question is configured in the discourses of colonial and postcolonial modernity and also traces the genealogies of caste in the historical, social and literary texts of the Bengal region, the first chapter following the introduction explores how Namasudra and Matua narratives on their community's origin and autobiographical narratives or semi-autobiographical novels of Namasudra/Dalit writers in the late twentieth century offer us characteristics of Dalit historical imagination. This chapter explores the ancestral myths of the Namasudra community and traces how these mythical narratives have undergone significant ideological changes. In this section of the chapter, I argue that Dalit mythical narratives that attempt to explain their 'low ritual rank' within caste hierarchy are actually dynamic narratives which often travel from an internalization of caste inferiority to a more radical rejection of the entire caste order. I explore these aspects by not only taking into account Namasudra and/or Matua ancestral myths but also by looking into the autobiographical narratives of Jatin Bala, Manohar Mouli Biswas and Monoranjan Byapari. The next part of this second chapter then shifts the focus on some fictional narratives written by Namasudra and Matua writers. These semi-autobiographical novels are mostly narratives of how Indian partition afflicted the lives of these Dalit refugees. It focuses on their plights during the long and tortuous period of refugee resettlement in the Indian sub-continent. Instead of focusing on all such post-partition narratives, I emphasize on a particular incident that has become quite significant in its retrospective constructions in many of these Dalit narratives i.e., 'Marichjhanpi massacre'. While the former Left front government's representatives continue to either deny or undermine the extent of violence these Dalit refugees faced in the island of Marichjhapi in 1979, these narratives capture the colossal effects such incidents had on the collective as well as individual psyche of the Dalit

Namasudra refugees. In this section, I also bring in several narratives of the then police officers, ministers as well as the statements of that time's Chief Minister Mr. Jyoti Basu in order to show how almost all those narratives were obsessed with facts, data and claims of objectivity and then try to juxtapose these with the fictional accounts of the Dalit refugees. This juxtaposition showcases how the government's narratives were statist and they followed the Hegelian pedantic model of history while the instances from Bangla Dalit literature clearly look at the spectral and 'hauntological' dimensions of those experiences as they get mediated through their autobiographical writings. Here I also engage with how 'lived experiences' as narrated in these literary narratives carry claims of what Ethan Kleinberg's 'hauntological' history describes as 'possible pasts' and then put these observations in conversations with Joan Scott's observations on the question of 'experience' in writing history. This also gives me an opportunity to briefly engage with Dipesh Chakrabarty's statements and observations on Kancha Ilaiah's notion of 'experience-based history'. While the question of 'lived experience', as explained by Gopal Guru and Sunder Sarukkai, is quite central to the Dalit predicament, my extensive engagements with the 'two sides' that offer conflicting, opposing and contesting historical descriptions of what happened in Marichjhanpi rethink the intricate relationship between memory, experience and history.

In the second chapter, I explore the various constructions of past that Bauri author Sunil Das offers in his non-fictional prose pieces on the community's origin, his idea of a Dalit heterotopic space of 'Bauriland' or in his historical play on the episode of 'Chuar Rebellion'. This chapter begins with how colonial civil servants like J.C.K Paterson or W. B. Oldham described 'lower caste' constituencies like those of Bauris in their colonial governmental documents like the district gazette reports. In these colonial accounts on the Bauri community one comes across the notion of 'people without history'. This community, according to such colonial civilizational indictments, are people who never had a sense of

history and thus qualify only as ‘uncivilized’ people. After briefly cataloguing such colonial documents that depict the Bauri community, I start exploring the narratives of past that Bauri authors like Sunil Das provide. In many of Das’ writings one certainly comes across an apparently ‘reactionary’ historicist response that vehemently rejects such colonial indictments while getting compromised on their Hegelian undercurrents. But he does that not necessarily by constructing a theory of ‘glorious past’ as it happens in the case of Indian nationalist historiographies that often talk about a golden age in a remote past as the seat of Indian civilization. Das is certainly not preoccupied with such construction of golden age through which he would then contest the colonial claims. Instead, he offers us articulations on how the Bauri community started inhabiting the south-western part of the state of West Bengal and how they are racially connected to other indigenous communities inhabiting in the same region. In these accounts of their pasts, Das often talks about the geological history of the planet earth. At a time when historians concerned with anthropocentrism in historiography are bringing our attention to how such human-centric approach towards history contributes to our carbon economy, this engagement with planetary ‘deep’ history is quite a fascinating account. Unlike the nationalist historiographies that talk of a golden Vedic age through which we are asked to imagine the antiquity of the Indian nation, this Bauri narrative focuses not only on their community’s past but offers us a brief history of this planet. I put these observations within the context of how the notion of ‘historical truth’ or ‘historical research’ got shaped in the academic existence of history in the Indian universities by drawing upon the insights in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *The Calling of History*. The focus on planetary history as depicted in Das’ accounts on his community’s past also offers us opportunities to rethink how Indian nature-historians have hitherto engaged with the caste question. By drawing upon Mukul Sharma’s book *Caste and Nature*, I analyze how these histories that have focused on India’s natural resources or India’s position in the global climate change debates, have been

otherwise blind to caste. Following Sharma, I argue that these caste-blind natural histories can be best contested by juxtaposing them with narratives such as Das'. The next few sections in this chapter I explore the various methodologies that Bauri authors like Das adopts to write his community's past. He does not shy away from deploying several epistemological traditions in building up his community's history. He narrates local histories, attempts socio-linguistics studies and takes the help of disciplines like sociology and anthropology to build these narratives. His textual resources and 'archival' documents are also remarkably wide. He draws upon anthropological research as well as colonial documents and simultaneously deploys his enormous imaginative power to create these narratives of a Bauri past. Here, I briefly refer to Ambedkar's notion of 'missing links' on history to show how neither Ambedkar nor Das followed a straightforward Hegelian or Rankean idea of history in reconfiguring their pasts. The last section of this chapter focuses on the spatial idea of 'Bauriland'. Although this was a colonial term often used by civil servants like Oldham, Bauri writers like Sunil Das infuse a different meaning in it. Das appropriates this colonial term in order to narrate a heterotopic spatial formation that operates as a repository of their past as well as their anti-caste aspirations. What makes it strikingly interesting is how Das never articulates his vision of 'Bauriland' in terms of a sub-nationalist motto.

The next chapter engages with various autochthonic constructions of historical imagination in the cultural texts and political pamphlets of the Mulnibasi movement in the South Western parts of West Bengal and also explores the mythical as well as non-mythical constructions of past in the non-fictional prose pieces and poems by the Dalit writers, activists and poets from the Dom community of Jhargram. This chapter on the Dalit writings of Jungle Mahals begins with a detailed description of how Mulnibasi ideologues articulate their definition of the autochthonous claim of 'Mulnibasi'. Here I show how they deploy several governmental categories like the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes or Other

Backward Classes in order to create a homogeneous autochthonous category of the ‘original inhabitants’ or Mulnibasi. Here I refer to the writings of leaders of the Mulnibasi movement like Dr. Nazrul Islam or Mr. Swapan Kumar Biswas. What makes it an interesting identity formation is its claim about Muslims. This conceptualization, apparently based on creating the binary of ‘savarna’ castes and Dalit Bahujan Mulnibasi masses, incorporates within it the poorer sections in the Muslim community. The Mulnibasi ideologues are of the opinion that these Muslims are mostly converted from various lower sections of the Hindu population as they embraced Islam to get rid of the oppressive clutches of a caste society. These articulations then exploit the history of pre-partition alliance of Muslim League politics with the Namasudra led All India Scheduled Castes Federation (AISCF) in order to justify its political claims. I try to problematize such claims on pre-partition history by comparing it with the post-partition violence, especially during the 1971 partition, wherein Muslims and Namasudras became conflicting constituencies. In such cases, the Dalit identity of the Namasudra groups became undermined by the perception of their Muslim neighbors as necessarily ‘Hindus’. Here I express my concerns about the limitations of such claims of social homogeneity and ideological cohesion among Dalits (especially Namasudras) and Muslims that Mulnibasi ideologues are claiming. Thereafter, I shift my focus on how the Mulnibasi identity formation is not only based on creating a homogeneous autochthonous identity by exploiting governmental categories or a shared socio-political victimhood but also on the basis of deploying an already existing myth i.e., myth of Aryan invasion. Before I explore how this myth of Aryan invasion is appropriated by the Mulnibasi ideologues, I try to offer a brief genealogy of this myth. This brief account on the origin and circulation of the Aryan myth and its resultant Aryan invasion theory of caste starts with references to Voltaire, Montesquieu, early German Romantics like Schlegel, Herder or thinkers like Humboldt. It then refers to its circulation among the British Orientalists like Sir William Jones or E.

Colebrooke and how these orientalist tropes of Aryan myth were later embraced by the Hindu reformist movements of Rammohun Roy, Dayanand Saraswati as well as appropriated by thinkers like Vivekananda and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. Since these Indian thinkers had deep influences on the discourse of Indian Nationalist movement, this Aryan myth was also appropriated by the Indian nationalists in their attempts to construct a Vedic Golden Age. I then try to underscore the fact that deploying such myth of Aryan invasion in order to explain caste in terms of an ideological as well as cultural battle between Aryans and non-Aryans might not necessarily be accommodated within the anti-caste Dalit vision that Ambedkar offers. This also partly explains why the Mulnibasi ideologues often resort to the nineteenth century Marathi social reformer Jyotiba Phule's anti-myths to articulate their vision of the original inhabitants. Jyotiba Phule's 1873 text *Gulamgiri* exploited the Aryan invasion myth to associate the Brahmins with the external invading force of Aryans while identifying the original non-Aryan inhabitants as the ancestors of the modern-day Shudras and Ati-Shudras. Phule did contest the Brahminical origin myths like those of Brahma as the creator of this universe. But he did so only by exploiting another myth i.e., Aryan invasion. Thus, his anti-myth visions become quite conducive for getting used by any anti-caste movement that is based on autochthons claims like that of the Mulnibasi movement. Here, I point out that Ambedkar never entirely subscribed to the Aryan invasion theory by pointing out the similarities in racial features among North Indian Brahmins and North Indian Dalits or Southern Brahmins and Southern lower caste groups. This part of the chapter thus explores this tenuous relationship between Ambedkar's anti-myth and yet imaginatively charged perceptions on the origins of the caste system and the mythical constructions of their collective pasts we discern in the Mulnibasi narratives. This chapter then focuses on an increasingly popular cultural narrative of Asur Smaran that is born out of the ideological frame of the Mulnibasi movement. While Hudur Durga Asur Samaran is observed in other

parts of West Bengal, there is a concentration of this ‘utsav’ or festival in the Jungle Mahal areas of Purulia and Bankura. Based on the writings of Swapan Biswas and Gobardhan Manna, I try to offer various ways through which the ‘original inhabitant’ claims are articulated and mediated in remembering the sacrifice of Hudur Durga Mahishahshur who dies fighting the Aryan Goddess Devi Durga. This section closely looks at how various Puranic tales and Aryan/ Brahminical textual traditions are exploited in order to invert those myths and express an anti-caste anti-myth embodied in Mahishahshur. This cluster of narratives apropos Mahishahshur argue that their claims on the Indian landmass were usurped by the Aryan Brahmins by destroying the honest and righteous king of the non-Aryan original inhabitants and thus his sacrifice has to be remembered and mourned especially during that time of the year when Devi Durga is worshipped among Bengali people. While these narratives exploit the already existing Brahminical myths, they also offer an anti-colonial vision by identifying the rise of Durga Puja as a public celebration with direct colonial patronage during colonial times. The last section of this chapter focuses on the Dalit writings of the Dom community from the same region of Jungle Mahal. Based on my fieldworks and long conversations with the Dom playwrights, essayists and poets of Jhargram, I try to offer a description of anti-caste writings that do not adhere to any mythical articulation of the past in order to execute and articulate an anti-caste politics in the present. Before visiting these villages of Jhargram with a significant social presence of the Dom community, I had read Ranajit Guha’s essay “The Career of an anti-God in Heaven and Earth” where Guha emphasized upon the centrality of mythical narratives in constructing social resistance among the castes put under the rubric of ‘Dom group’ (as described by G. W. Briggs). In this essay he argues that castes such as Mangs, Doms and Bhangis are often associated with the celestial villain Rahu and thus parallelisms are drawn between Rahu’s contaminating shadow and the polluting shadows of such ‘untouchable’ castes. But Guha also points out how these groups

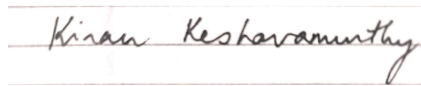
often use and alter these myths in articulating their tendencies of social resistance. In Guha's estimation, myths are not just the socio-cultural repositories of social subordination of groups with low ritual rank but also simultaneously discursive spaces within which these 'low caste' groups like Doms articulate their anti-caste visions. What is significant here is how the present-day Dom inhabitants of the region are almost oblivious to the presence or circulation of such mythical narratives that either legitimise their subordination or explain their 'low ritual rank'. When I asked Soutik Hati, Pitambar Hati, Biswambhar Hati or read Narayan Samat's writings I did not come across any such anti-caste vision that is encapsulated within a corpus of Brahminical ancestral myth. Thus, through this example I underscore why it is important to recognize the multi-faceted nature of the Dalit anti-caste cultural and literary narratives. While it, at times, gets mediated through altered mythical narratives, this anti-caste politics also imagines itself at the limits of such mythographical worlds.

While these three chapters explore different ideas of history and past in the fictional and non-fictional accounts of various Dalit communities in West Bengal, the fifth chapter links their Ambedkarite ideological thrusts with Ambedkar's own imagination of past and how he deploys past and history in his anti-caste politics. More precisely, this chapter attempts to look at the possible discursive connections between Ambedkar as the initiator of the Dalit discourse in India and the conceptions of past that we have come across in the previous chapters and then it puts these two in conversations with various discursive insights developed within postcolonial studies in general and Subaltern Studies in particular. By exploring his intellectual inheritances like American Pragmatist philosophy and Buddhism I try to argue that his intellectual inclinations never entirely surrendered to the philosophies of history that emerged out of the modern Western intellectual traditions of the Enlightenment (e.g., Hegel's philosophy of world history/*die weltgeschichte* or R.G. Collingwood's Viconian ideas of past or a Rankean fetish for objective history). Exemplified in many of his

texts on the origins of untouchability, Ambedkar's idea of history is deeply committed to his complex and ambivalent negotiations with modernity. Echoing Sunil Das' focus on local history and imagined history or Manoranjan Byapari's idea of Bengal's social past in terms of ideological conflicts between Brahminism and Buddhism or the mythical claims of the Mulnibasi movement and the non-mythical articulations of the Dom writers, this chapter on Ambedkar tries to review some of the postcolonial readings of his views on history as well as our reductions of Dalit historical imagination to some essentialized perceptions. This chapter begins by exploring the term 'Ambedkarism' as used by the Bengali Dalit author Manohar Mouli Biswas in order to establish the relevance of Ambedkar's thoughts in the discourse of Bengal's caste question as well as Bangla Dalit writings. This then briefly describes how Ambedkar and in extension, the caste question, has been dealt with in the writings of Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial studies scholars such as Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey. It also engages with Ranajit Guha's book *History at the Limits of World History* in order bring to the fore the discursive disagreements Guha and his Subaltern Studies group members have with the western patterns of historical thinking, especially the Hegelian philosophy of history. This chapter then underscores some gaps in their writings in order to rethink Ambedkar's intellectual inheritances like American Pragmatist philosophies of C.S. Peirce, William James and most importantly John Dewey as well as influences like Buddhism. By looking into his texts like *Buddha and His Dhamma*, *Annihilation of Caste*, *Buddha or Karl Marx* etc. I try to offer a possibility wherein anti-foundational and anti-essentialist philosophical tradition like Pragmatism can speak productively to Indian philosophical traditions like Buddhism and Charvaka in order to engender or anticipate a historical thinking that does not necessarily follow any universalist Hegelian impulse. Jacques Derrida's deconstruction and the similarities it shares with some sections in Buddhist

thought are then exploited to establish the possibilities of such discursive exchange at the limits of postcolonial historiography.

In conclusion, I revisit key terms such ‘Dalit’, ‘Subaltern’ or ‘ambivalence’ in order to imply different possibilities of historical thinking that are not restricted to the essentialized interpretations of Dalit history or Ambedkar’s writings that we otherwise come across in the writings of Chatterjee, Chakrabarty or Pandey. These possibilities are many- post-Marxist, anti-colonialist, statist, anti-statist, pragmatist, hauntological and so on. What this implies then is that the enormous contingency in the anti-caste discourse of Bangla Dalit writings cannot be put neither in terms of universalist, stage-based, transitional pedantic history of Hegel nor a vehemently anti-Eurocentric postcolonial historiography that preempts possibilities of thinking across continents.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Kiran Keshavamurthy", is written on a set of three horizontal lines (top, middle, and bottom) that serve as a guide for the signature's placement and size. The signature is written in dark ink.