Disguises of Shiva

Nationalism and Folk Culture in the Bengal Borderland since 1905

By

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Abstract

This thesis studies the history of a folk theatre form called Gambhira, performed in what is today the northern part of the Indo-Bangladesh border, principally in the districts of Malda and Chapai Nawabganj. On the Indian side, it is performed around the figure of the Hindu god Shiva; people address their complaints and grievances by ridiculing and grumbling to the god. Across the border in Muslim-majority Bangladesh, Shiva has been replaced by a Muslim farmer, the genre of grumbling remaining the same. Lying at the interface of cultural and intellectual history and ethnography and drawing on archival and ethnographic work conducted in India, Bangladesh and England, this thesis traces how various changes in this local, small-scale performance form have occurred in dialogue with broader, structural events of modern South Asian history since 1905, like anti-colonial nationalism, the Partition of India, and the making of postcolonial nation-states. The history of Gambhira acts as a lens to reveal how the idea and practice of the "folk" has remained, throughout the twentieth century, a site of mediation between metropolitan political ideologies and local cultural worlds. I see the concept of the "folk" not as the reflection of a homogenous national spirit, nor as the exclusive domain of subaltern subversion, but as a historically shifting point of contact and negotiation between various metropolitan and borderland ideologies and practices. Consequently, I deploy "mediation" as a theoretical pivot to interpret the change in "folk culture" at certain moments of historical intersections between the nation and its borderlands.

Disguise, I see, thou art a wickedness,
Wherein the pregnant enemy does much.
Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, II.ii.27-8

And Arjuna, the foremost of warriors, said, "I will present myself in Virata's court as a eunuch; I shall entertain the king and his women through singing and dancing…Thus I shall *disguise myself through illusion*, and, *like fire hidden by ashes*, shall live happily in Virata's palace."
Mahābhārata IV.ii.19-27 (Abridged)

O wise, destructive lord, you destroyed India's knowledge,
You destroyed India in the disguise of the British, O Shiva!
Gambhira song, Malda (c. 1942)

To the people of Malda and Chapai,

Across borders but beyond boundaries,

With Gratitude.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

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The ideas that have unfolded in the following pages have brewed for three years in three continents, from settings as varied as antique Palladian cloisters and lush green New England college quads to muddy fields and dusty highways of Bengali towns. Wise people from all over the world have supplied its ingredients. But I am the chef who cooked (or spoiled) them, and must be the only one to be blamed for any complaints regarding taste.

Medford, Massachusetts, 30 March 2016

Abbreviations

AG	*Ādyera Gambhīrā* (1912)
ASPC	Ashim Sarkar Personal Collections, Malda
BDG	*Bengal District Gazetteers*
BSB	*Binaya Sarkārera Baiṭhake* (1942)
BL	British Library
CI	*Census of India*, 1872-1941
CPI	Communist Party of India
GSP	Govinda Seth Papers (1941-44)
INC	Indian National Congress
IPTA	Indian People's Theatre Association
IOR	India Office Records, British Library
ISEHR	*Indian Social and Economic History Review*
MAS	*Modern Asian Studies*
NAI	National Archives of India
JARS	*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*
PSPA	Prasanta Seth Personal Archives, Malda
RR	*Rabīndra Racanābalī* , Complete works of Rabindranath Tagore
SAB	*Statistical Account of Bengal* by W.W. Hunter
TOP	Transfer of Power Documents, 1942-7

Note on Transliteration

Bengali is notoriously difficult regarding matters of transliteration, not least because it is composed of equal proportions of Sanskritic and Persianate words. The problem is compounded since in most Bengali words, the vowel pronounced as *a* in Sankrit, Hindi and Persian is pronounced as *awe*. Thus, *karma* in Bengali is pronounced as *kawrmaw*; therefore no transliteration scheme can do justice to both pronunciation and spelling. Many continue to use the International Alphabet for Sanskrit Transliteration to transliterate Bengali words as well, but this can get tricky for certain characters, and is often inadequate for local dialects.

I have loosely used the American Language Association- Library of Congress Romanization Scheme for Bengali (2012) for this thesis, although sometimes dropping the final "*a*" in common words. I have also used diacritical marks in direct quotes and book titles for ease of cross-reference. I have not used the Romanization scheme for proper nouns with standard English renderings; hence Rabindranath Tagore instead of Rabīndranātha Ṭhakura, and Calcutta instead of Kalikātā. Other Bengali terms frequent in English scholarship, like swadeshi and desh, are also spelled as per convention and not as *sbadeśī* and *deśa*. *Gambhīrā* (pron. *gowm-bhee-raa*) is spelled as Gambhira throughout the thesis.

Introduction

God is One, but the Border Divides Him

Nationalism and Folk Culture in the Bengal Borderland since 1905

God is one, but the border divides him,
O Shiva! Look how nations divide by whim.
For Muslims you are Adam, O father,
To fall at your feet, none will ever falter.
You are the mightiest, we have no doubt,
Now stop smoking hemp, and help us out!

Gambhira song on India and Bangladesh, c. 2015[1]

It all began on a sultry May afternoon in Malda, a small town in West Bengal, India, only a few miles away from the border with Bangladesh. Trudging along the dusty highway lined with trucks, I searched for some shade to cool off after a day's walk from some nearby ruins. Since all trees had fallen for the great cause of road extension, I settled on a squeaking rickshaw. The driver unfurled a blue polythene sheet to act as a parasol, knotting it to the wooden cage with thin jute threads. He smiled, "If you are not in a hurry, I'll take a roundabout route to the station. I have some publicity to do; you may pay me five rupees less." I then noticed a small megaphone in his hand, which he held in his left hand while gingerly balancing the rickshaw with his right. Our chariot dangerously wobbled through roadside ovens with potato flakes crackling in steaming oil and cloth merchants re-opening their stores after the routine noontime shutdown. Small overcrowded buses, carrying tired workers back home, honked exasperatingly to the annoying rickshaw's winding route. "Come all, come all," my charioteer's megaphone cried above the loud honking, "there is a Gambhira tonight at the railway station field."

[1] Collected from English Bazar, 17 August 2015. All translations are mine unless otherwise mentioned.

Figure 1. *Shiva and the farmers.* A Gambhira from the 1950s where three farmers complain to Shiva (left, standing) with their hands raised. Picture courtesy Ashok Gupta, Old Malda.

By the time we reached the railway field, a crowd had already gathered. I had forfeited the five rupee incentive, deciding to stick with my rickshaw puller after this remarkable publicity tour (half of Malda anyway had assumed me to be the new manager of the Gambhira troupe). Gambhira, to my knowledge then, was merely an indigenous theatre form linked to the worship of the Hindu god Shiva. Like in rural theatres or *jātra* throughout Bengal, the audience were seated on three sides of the performance space. After around fifty people had gathered, musicians played an overture and four men entered. One was dressed as Shiva, while three others looked like ordinary farmers (like Figure 1). To my delight, one farmer was none other than my charioteer, who had tied a red cotton towel on his head.

From my little knowledge of *jātra*, I was expecting devotional songs and perhaps the enactment of a legend of Shiva, that mighty destroyer god of the Hindu pantheon. And

indeed, it began with the three farmers singing a devotional hymn to the lord. But the surprise came after the hymn, when Shiva started conversing with the farmers:

Shiva: (to a group of three) Who are you? What is your occupation?

Person 1: We are *testers* of the BPL Company.

Shiva: Wow, BPL is a big company![2]

Person 2: BPL means "Below Poverty Level," Sir. [All three laugh]

Shiva (a little agitated): And what do you mean by *tester* then?

Person 3: Of course we are *testers*, Sir! What else can we be? All pharmaceutical Companies test their new drugs on us. If we live, they sell the drugs. If we die, nobody has any *liability*. Can you get better testers?[3]

The audience applauded and cheered passionately as I, the newly-declared-liberal-arts-major, frantically scribbled fieldnotes following methods learnt from a recent seminar. As the performance went on, more and more serious issues were addressed under the disguise of Shiva. Shiva was variously fashioned as the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Prime Minister of India, and the President of the United States. The three performers ridiculed the god and accused him for their plights. The poor god barely spoke, and generally accepted the accusations. The god being rebuked was a source of great amusement in the audience. By the time a humiliated Shiva left the stage after two hours of grilling, there was a general consensus on Shiva having complicity on a range of affairs from the Indo-Pakistan War to the global financial meltdown.

As the audience slowly dispersed, I shook hands with my new friend the rickshaw-puller. The performance, instructive for anyone complacent of one's urbanity, crushed many assumptions about religion, folklore, village peoples and political spheres. The rickety and serpentine rickshaw journey was the beginning of a two-year quest, through archives,

[2] BPL refers to British Physical Laboratories Group, a very big Indian company headquartered in Bangalore that makes a range of electronic appliances and health care equipment.

[3]Transcribed near Malda Town railway station, 14 May 2014. Italicized words were in English in the original.

libraries and field sites across many borders, to better understand the complex historical dynamics of a folk cultural form in the Indo-Bangladesh borderland.

Gambhira: A Historical Ethnography of Disguise

The concern of this study is not to provide an ethnographic account of Gambhira, but to study changes in a localized folk tradition over a century, in context of broader structural changes in South Asian history. By doing so, it challenges the remarkably persistent notion, among scholars and politicians alike, of folk culture being an autonomous domain removed from greater historical changes. To this end, the role of ethnography in this work is to study how historical changes are manifested in everyday lives, and how people, in turn, make sense of and grapple with such changes.

Integrating archival and ethnographic methodologies in a critical historical framework, this thesis asks two questions: How has the concept of "folk culture" changed in Bengal over the twentieth century with changing socio-political contexts, and how have those historical transformations reshaped Gambhira? How can a localized folk tradition like Gambhira act as a lens for exploring the changing relationships between broader historical events, like anti-colonialism and Partition, and the micro-cultural worlds of people? Performed along the Indo-Bangladesh border among audiences of multiple religions and national identities, Gambhira today is best seen as a complex, multi-faceted practice produced through a series of historical developments. The small, localized nature of the practice, and its century-old dialogue with various aspects of colonial and post-colonial nationalisms, make it an ideal focus to explore these questions.

Rituals of Gambhira are variants of a broader pattern of pan-Bengal low-caste agrarian rites of spring called *Gājan.* In the last month of the Bengali calendar, from mid-March to mid-April, hundreds to low-caste farmers undertake ascetic practices in order to worship Shiva, often to fulfil wishes like curing diseases and getting better harvests. During

this one month, the low caste ascetics are treated as high-caste Brahmins. Following the anthropologist Victor Turner, we may call Gājan a *liminal* phenomenon, an in-between period where social structures are temporarily inverted, and the low becomes the high.[4] The last day of Gājan, and of the year, is called *Charak.* On Charak, these ascetics publicly show their magical abilities acquired over the liminal period, often by "hook-swinging" from poles with hooks pierced into their backs (Figure 2). Charak is full of festivities like processions, pantomimes and theatres were people dress up as Shiva, Durga and various other gods. Gambhira, to some extent, is largely a Malda variant of this broader low-caste practice of performing Shiva.[5]

For Bengali low castes, Shiva is far from the mighty destructive god described in the classical Sanskrit canon. Sanskrit texts depict the god in terms of his uncontainable wrath and penchant for destruction: be it in killing his own son for not following his orders, or in avenging his wife's suicide by plundering his father-in-law's ritual ceremony (Figure 3).[6] The Shiva of the early modern Bengali epic poems, in contrast, is a portly, indolent farmer. He is a hen-pecked husband chastised by his wife, the goddess Parvati, for continually smoking hemp, or for his lecherous calls to the village women.[7] This humble and amusing image of the god, mirroring the lives of his followers, blurs the line between the human and the divine and enables the low castes to have an intimate relationship to the god. Shiva is known as

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[4] See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

[5] The classic ethnographic studies of Gājan include Ákos Östör, *The Play of the Gods: Locality, Ideology Structures and Time in the Festivals of a Bengali Town* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Ralph W. Nicholas, *Rites of Spring: Gājan in Village Bengal* (New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2008); Rebati Mohan Sarkar, *Regional Cults and Rural Traditions: An Interacting Pattern of Humanity and Divinity in Rural Bengal* (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1986). Charak is described in T.K. Niyogi, *Aspects of Folkcults in South Bengal* (Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, 1987), and Aniket De, "'A Barbarous Practice': Hook-Swinging in Colonial Bengal," *History Matters* 11 (2014), 24-43.. The solar worship aspect of these rites has been explored by Amalendu Mitra, *Rādḥera Saṃskṛti O Dharmaṭhakura* (Kolkata: Subarnarekha, 2001 [1972]) and Asutosh Bhattacharya, *The Sun and the Serpent Lore of Bengal* (Kolkata: Firma KLM, 1977).

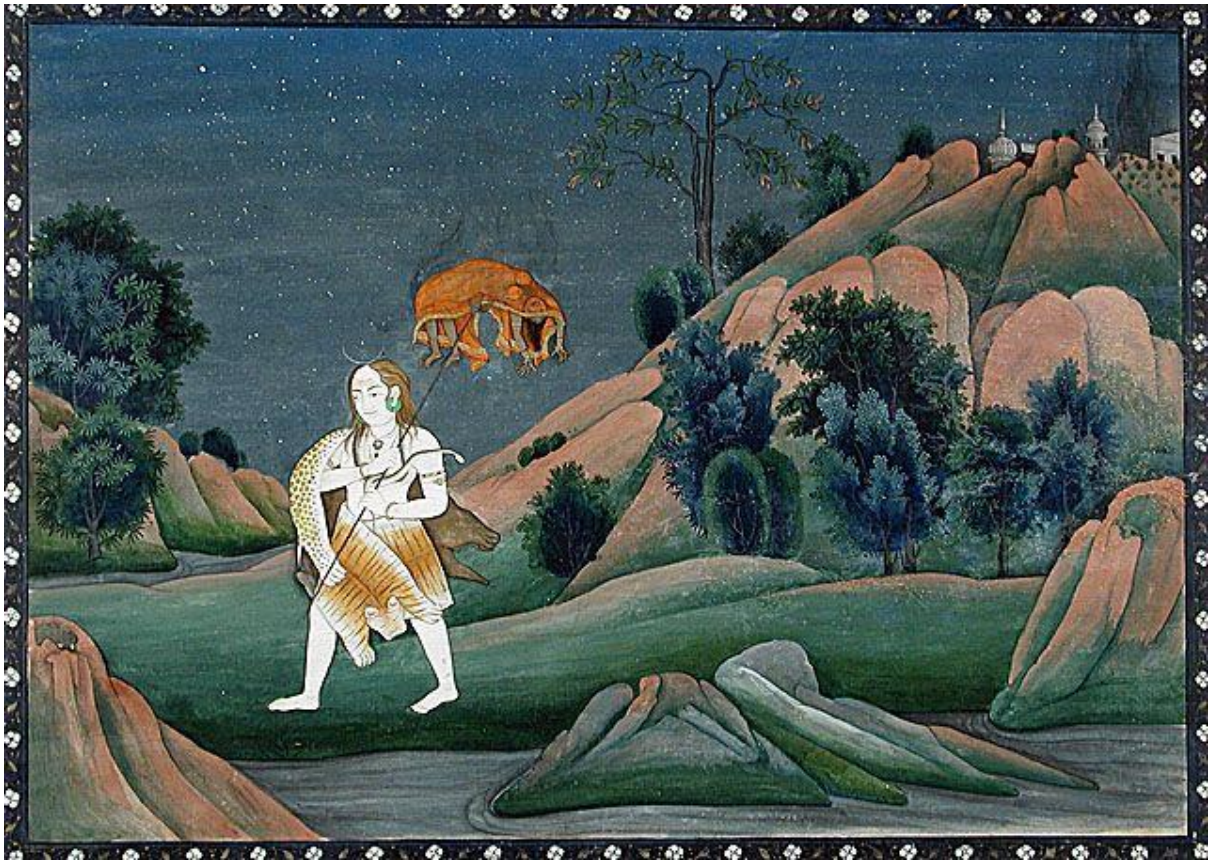
[6] For accounts of the Sanskrit canonical, destructive Shiva, see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Śiva* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), and A.K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973).

[7] The genre of epic poems depicting the Bengali Shiva (c. 17th-18th century) is known as Sivayana. The most famous *Sivayana* was written by Rameshwar Bhattacharya in the 1730s (ed. Jogilal Haldar, Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 2012). See Gurudas Bhattacharya, *Bāṃlā Kābye Śiva* (Kolkata: India Associated Publishing, 1961) for a good survey of depiction of Shiva in Bengali literature.

"Bholanath," the forgetful lord, referring to his careless attitude about the world and his drug addiction. Devotees of the lord, mostly from the low-castes, carry sacred water in earthen pots and walk for miles to reach Shiva pilgrimage sites like Tarakeshwar. Especially during March-April and July-August, they make long processions to the lord's temple to pour the sacred water on the stone *lingam* representing Shiva, in order to get various wishes fulfilled. During these months, roads and trains of Eastern India are rife with endeared chants cheering "Bhole baba" or simply "baba," "our forgetful dad." This cult of the Bengali Shiva might have arisen long before, but has become immensely popular and institutionalized mainly since the late eighteenth century (Figure 4).[8]

Figure 2: "View on the banks of the Ganges with representation of the Churruck Poojah, a Hindoo holiday." Aquatint with etching by and after James Moffat, published Calcutta c.1806 (British Library Asia Pacific and Africa Collections). Accessed 10 November 2013. Note the presence of palanquins and parasols, indicating that the elite took part in the festival, despite their disavowal of anything to do with such intemperate practices of the low castes.

[8] For an account of Tarakeshwar, see Alan E. Morinis, *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition :A Case Study of West Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984); Brian A. Hatcher, "Shiva Travels: Tracking Religious Movement in Early Colonial Bengal," Paper read at Hindu Studies Colloquium, Harvard University, November 18, 2014. For the processes of formation of Shiva cults in Bengal, see Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process: The Puranas and the Making of a Regional Tradition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), Hiteshranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1981).



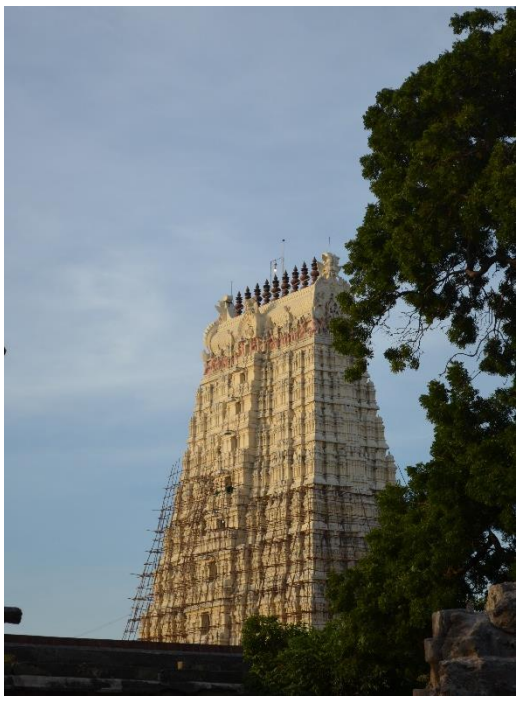


Figure 3. *Mapping the Mighty Shiva in India* (Clockwise from top): The furious Shiva carrying the corpse of his wife Sati on a trident. This mythic episode epitomizes Shiva's destructive potential. From a Himalayan Kangra painting, c. 1800 (Creative Commons); Building large temples to this mighty god was a common expression of political sovereignty in ancient and medieval North and South India: the gateway to the gigantic Shiva temple at Rameshwaram, Tamil Nadu 2014; The black stone *lingam* (Sanskrit "sign", "gender"), representing Shiva's phallus, the most common manifestation of Shiva, here seen finely clad in a white loincloth, Dhanushkodi village, Tamil Nadu, 2014. Photographs by Aniket De.

Figure 4. *In Quest of the Bengali Shiva*. (Clockwise from top). Shiva with his begging bowl before his wife Parvati, who has a bowl of rice in her own hand and therefore worshipped as "Annapurna" (one who fills with food). Bhadreswar, Hooghly, 2014; A lithograph from a nineteenth-century pocket edition of the *Sivayana*, showing Shiva as a farmer in the fields with his wife Parbati (right) and the messenger god Narada (left). Shiva's bull is tilling the field and his trident has is being used as a plough by his nephew Bhim; note the dark representation of the low caste farmer in the lower left-hand corner. From Rameshwar Bhattacharya, *Śiba-Saṃkīrttana* (Calcutta: Saṃvad Purnachandrodaya Yantra, 1853), courtesy British library; An array of earthen pots filled with sacred Ganges water, milk, the three *bel* leaves, the garlands of the purplish-white *akanda* flowers, and petals of an assortment of flowers. These are essential objects of Shiva worship, and the whole concoction is poured on the stone *Shiva* lingam for the fulfilment of wishes. This picture was taken in Tarakeshwar, 2014, the key pilgrimage site for Shiva worship in Bengal, where these pots were sold for about twenty rupees each; Low caste pilgrims (*yatris*) clad in saffron throng in Howrah Station, the main railhead in Kolkata, to avail the train to Tarakeshwar. The wooden sticks on their shoulders are for carrying pots of water from the nearby Ganges to the temple in Tarakeshwar for pouring on Shiva's head; a standard practice in July-August, the month considered to be Shiva's birthday and marriage anniversary. Howrah Station, 2015. Compare these with Picture 2. All pictures by Aniket De.

Rituals of inversion, pilgrimages and the characteristic low-caste image of the god has made Shaivite festivals like Gājan extremely popular among the marginal sections of Bengal society. While the urban educated intelligentsia has regularly scorned at the revelry of the low castes, these festivals have remained for the lowly a crucial space to express their anger with various people in power, as shown in the Gambhira skit disdaining the malpractices of giant pharmaceutical corporates. Gambhira or Shaiva rituals are, however, not at all exceptional in this regard. Throughout South Asia, such affective relationships with the gods are the norm not just in Hinduism, but also in Islam, and in the countless other practices that cannot be placed under such labels. Bengali Islam, particularly, intricately shares rituals, performance forms and even a textual corpus with several Hindu practices. It was this sharing that articulated a particularly Bengali idiom of Islam over the course of the seventeenth century, resulting in the emergence of a Bengali Muslim peasantry in East Bengal.[9] There were also similar traditions by various communities termed "tribals" by the British, communities outside the caste system who never fit into the Orientalist textual paradigms of Hinduism.[10] It is therefore fruitless to label Gambhira as a "Hindu tradition" or a "tribal festival"; the practice and participants of the performance are much more diverse and pervasive than these categories can do justice to. Instead, Gambhira is best seen as one iteration of a broader pattern of affective relationships with divine figures, a linkage established through playfulness, revelry and complaint.

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[9] This elegant argument was proposed two decades ago by Richard Eaton, in *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1206-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), and has remained the widely accepted theory in this regard. Since then, there has been much sophisticated scholarship on Bengali Islam. See, for instance, Tony K. Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter through Translation Theory," *History of Religions* 40.3 (2001): 260-287; Tony K. Stewart, *Fabulous Females and Peerless Pirs: Tales of Mad Adventure in Old Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Thibaut d'Hubert and Jacques P. Leider, "Traders and Poets at the Mrauk U Court: On Commerce and Cultural Links in Seventeenth-Century Arakan," In *Pelagic Passageways: Dynamic Flows in the Northern Bay of Bengal World before the Appearance of Nation States*, edited by Rila Mukherjee (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2011), 345–79.

[10] For recent critical revisions on the colonial ethnological idea of the "tribe," see James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), Ch. 7; Indrani Chatterjee, *Forgotten Friends: Monks, Marriages, and Memories of Northeast India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Figure 5. *Shiva and His Playful Disguises.* A little boy dressed as Shiva seeking alms to commuters on a local train. Picture taken by me near Birbhum, West Bengal, 2014.

Such playfulness, as reflected in the Gambhira performance about the BPL, is established through disguising Shiva in various forms, and playing with acts of concealment and misrecognition. Disguises are nothing uncommon in Sanskritic and Bengali cultural worlds. Myths recount gods entering the human realm disguised as mortal beings, often to test how people treat others around them. The eighteenth century Bengali epic *Annadāmaṅgala*, for instance, recounts a beautiful conversation between Shiva's wife Parvati, disguised as an upper-caste housewife, and a boatwoman who enables her to cross the river. Parvati divulges her identity through riddles with dual meanings; her riddles can mean she is either human or divine. So intricate is the entanglement between divine and human lives that the disguises of the gods are quite successful. Later in the same text, Shiva disguises as a beggar and comes to his wife to beg for food; hence Parvati subsequently gets the name *Annapurna*, one who fills others with food, and gives the name to the text. Such power to disguise is not a monopoly of only Hindu gods. Stories of charismatic *pirs*, legendary figures worshipped by both Hindus and Muslims in Bengal, regularly show them

meeting their devotees in human form. Their true selves are revealed only when they perform superhuman acts of healing and saving people in need.[11] Various kinds of disguise, therefore, are integral to stories of gods, and the ability to disguise as humans is recognized as a defining aspect of divinity.

In contemporary Gambhira, this pervasive idea of the disguise acquires new forms. In Malda, the figure of Shiva embodies and disguises various complaints and accusations of the people. Shiva is seen as the head of a multinational company accused for mixing pesticides in groundwater, or as the local corrupt politician who does not fix the roads. Gambhira is not just performed in Malda, but also in Rajshahi, the adjacent district across the border in Bangladesh. Malda is located in the India-Bangladesh borderland, and a significant part of the district was ceded to East Pakistan, later Bangladesh, during the 1947 Partition. In the Bangladeshi Gambhira, the figure of Shiva is absent altogether, and people's complaints are showcased through conversations between an aged Muslim farmer hailed as "grandfather" (*nana*) and his grandson *(nati*). Despite this critical symbolic change, the overall genre of complaint and grumbling remains unchanged, with people's anger finding a new disguise in the grandfather and grandson.

Such disguise is necessary for people outside the realms of power to voice their dissatisfaction. To follow James Scott, "ideological resistance", in the realms of gossip, rumour, folktales and carnivals, is "disguised, muted and veiled for safety's sake". This art of *disguise*, for Scott, is the most important link between the *public transcript*, open interaction of the powerful and the weak, and the *hidden transcript*, criticisms of power by the weak behind the powerful. Disguise is a crucial tool that enables subordinates to carry out "political dialogue with power in the public transcript", even when they are "outside the safety of the hidden transcript". Scott identifies elementary forms of this disguised language, anonymity,

[11] See the various tales recounted in Stewart, *Fabulous Females and Peerless Pirs.*

euphemism and "grumbling." These disguises are by nature nebulous, incoherent and polysemic, and such ambiguousness of disguise often causes the dominant to be uncomfortable and apprehensive about these performances.[12] As the performances in both India and Bangladesh make clear, the disguises in Gambhira serve key political functions for popular resistance.

The disguising of ideological resistance in Gambhira, however, raises new historical and ethnographic questions on the relationship of the idea of "folk culture" in relation to nationalisms, borderlands and performance. How, and through what historical processes, did the contemporary form of Gambhira, a political theatre enacted in two nation-states, evolve from springtime agrarian rites of Shiva? Taking a somewhat different view from Scott, who argues that such disguises are weapons invented by the weak to counter people in power, I ask: how have such disguises been devised in dialogue with broader political shifts of the time? In other words, how have large-scale historical events, like anticolonial nationalism, mass mobilization, and the Partition of India interacted with the cultural forms of the marginalized? Instead of assuming that resistance, ritual and disguises are inherently linked by some secret theoretical formulation, this thesis examines how different periods have seen different roles of folk culture, especially through the lens of the chequered relationship between nationalism and borderland folk culture.

The Nation and Its Frontiers

Nothing has occluded the study of folk culture more than the ineluctable iron cage of the nation-state. The administrative vocabulary established by the nation-state for the past half century has been so embedded in our conception of culture that it is difficult to even recognize the presence of such categories in our speech. To call Gambhira a tradition of Malda or of Rajshahi is to reinstate the administrative district categories of "Malda" and

[12] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 137-8, xi, 2.

"Rajshahi", and, more dangerously yet, to suggest that the culture of the people there is somehow naturally linked to these categories. On the other hand, to call Gambhira a "borderland" tradition is to search for an autonomous space within the categories of the state, but to accept those categories nonetheless. In both cases, the study of folk culture succumbs to, to follow Michael Herzfeld, "the bureaucratic nation-state's insatiable taxonomic appetite."[13]

The association between nationalism and folk culture is nothing accidental; both ideas have concurrent lineages in Western political thought. Jean-Jacques Rousseau had called for erecting a decorated pole in a square, gathering people round it, and making them "actors themselves," so that "each one may see himself and love himself in all the rest, so that their oneness grows."[14] This feeling of oneness, Rousseau implied, has to be instilled and cultivated by the state. Unsurprisingly, following the French Revolution, the republic instituted an array of festivals which emphasized the continuity of rule from the older regimes. Later, the German Romantic philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) found in the *Volk*, a people with a shared language and culture, the principal legitimate basis of the nation-state.[15] The collection of folklore, under pioneers such as the Grimm brothers, started in nineteenth century Germany under the guiding light of Herder's thought. A century later, Hitler deployed the same ideals to exhume and invent a plethora of festivals and symbols, creating the odious mythography surrounding the "new" German. The concepts of folklore and the nation-state, then, went hand in hand in European political thought.

Postcolonial nation-states, for the past seventy years or so, have modified versions of these ideals to realize their goals. Erstwhile European colonies became sovereign nation-states following the end of the Second World War. The art of the peoples of these colonies

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[13] Michael Herzfeld, *A Place in History: Social and Monumental Time in a Cretan Town* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 6.
[14] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Lettre à d'Alembert* (1758), quoted in Cesare Molinari, *Theatre through the Ages* (Sussex: Littlehampton Book Services, 1975), i.
[15] Michael Forster (Ed.) *Herder's Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

had previously been valued as "authentic primitive art" in ethnographic and art museums of the West. Following decolonization, however, these "primitives" were styled as "indigenous peoples" of new nations. Since it was widely accepted that these people had been in place for millennia, their presence served a very important purpose for the nation-state. These "primitives," along with their material and intangible cultures became a part of a "national heritage." If primitive art was highly priced in Europe since the late nineteenth century, "heritage" was priceless and immovable from the claims of the nation-state. "Because the part of the story of the nation is the story of the unfolding of the modern and of development," Shelly Errington insightfully remarks, "these peripheral peoples and their artefacts tend to continue to occupy the space of the 'traditional' and unmodern."[16]

This space of the traditional is of pivotal importance for the nation-state, as it substantiates what Benedict Anderson called the "subjective antiquity" of the "imagined" nation for nationalists, while belying the "objective modernity" of the state in the eyes of historians. The nation-state needs to present itself as subjectively legitimized by history despite actually being only two centuries old. [17] By the term "imagined," Anderson means that the building of nations does not depend on the ethnic mix of people forming the nation, but on the political and social processes which foster a sense of oneness among people who never meet one another. "A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle," Ernest Renan, Anderson's principal predecessor, had argued as early as 1882, warning strongly against using the then incipient discipline of ethnography to legitimize political nations.[18] Renan was insightful enough, even at the dawn of nation-states and of ethnography, to realize that nationalism had to be understood as a "spiritual" realm. Anderson and Renan rightly stress on "imagination,"

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[16] Shelly Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 160.
[17] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 5.
[18] Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* (Paris: Presses-Pocket, 1992). It was originally a lecture delivered in the Sorbonne on March 11, 1882.

and thereby challenge the claims of the nation-state of having a natural right over the peoples they rule. This imagination, as Partha Chatterjee pointed out in *The Nation and Its Fragments*, almost inevitably leaves "fragments" outside the imagination, depending on who gets the power to imagine the community.[19] Folk culture plays no small role in such fragmentary imagination: both India and Bangladesh, for instance, have established strong institutions for claiming folk traditions as reflections of an imagined national culture. Folk culture not only makes the claims of the nation-state seem natural, but, given their guise of subjective antiquity, make the nation-state seem millennia older than it actually is.[20] The apparent synergy of folk cultures and nationalism, therefore, serves a key political role in legitimizing the historical and cultural claims of the nation-state.

If the grandiose cultural agendas of the nation-state occludes the study of folk culture, so does the strand of Marxist scholarship that views the folk as an autonomous, subversive domain *in opposition to* the state. While Marx himself seems to have had little interest in popular culture, a key intervention on theorizing folk culture came from the writings of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci had distinguished between popular religion (*religione popolare*) and the bourgeois Christianity imposed by the medieval church. Medieval folk culture like buffoonery, Gramsci argued, had threatened the authority of the Church, but the Church was often able to neutralize such threat by channelling them into mainstream religious practice.[21] Gramsci's argument on popular culture being a subversion to hegemonic cultures found a new life in the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin. Writing under the clutches of Stalinist Russia, Bakhtin constructed the "carnivalesque" in Renaissance Europe as a space for "temporary suspension" of all hierarchy, allowing for a "special type of communication impossible in

[19] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); See also Homi K. Bhabha (Ed.) *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).
[20] These institutes include the Bangla Academy in Bangladesh, the Lok Virsa in Pakistan and the Sangeet Natak Academy in India.
[21] Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere, Critical edition of the Istituto Gramsci*, edited by V. Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), 1396-7, cited in John Fulton, "Religion and Politics in Gramsci: An Introduction," *Sociological Analysis* 48.3 (1987): 203, 209.

everyday life."[22] For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque was an autonomous domain of the subaltern, a space where all hierarchies and rituals were dissolved.

Yet, such dissolutions in ritual spaces, several Marxist scholars argued, were ultimately spaces left aside by the elite as "safety valves" for channelizing subaltern dissent. Rituals were but ceremonies where class structures were replicated. Drawing on the work of mid-twentieth century anthropologists like Victor Turner and Max Gluckman, the Marxist "subaltern studies" school of Indian historiography had seen Indian folk cults and rituals as symbolic spaces where hierarchy was reproduced. The subaltern, in turn, sometimes revolted and tried to break free from those hierarchies by destroying the symbols of elite power.[23] There were, then, two parallel and somewhat contradictory strands of Marxist thought on folk culture: the first, following Bakhtin, saw the carnivalesque as a space for subverting elite norms; the second, following Turner and Gluckman, considered popular rituals as a space for the mere perpetuation of hierarchies. Note that their differential interpretations notwithstanding, both lineages conceive of popular culture as a domain removed from normative bourgeois culture.

James Scott provided a rich and spirited critique of the functionalism that pervaded this early subaltern scholarship. Why grant the agency of constructing rituals to elites, he asked, when the mere existence of rituals really did nothing to prevent actual revolts, which were more than common? Returning to the line of Bakhtin, Scott turned the safety valve theory on its head to show that festivals have often served as foils for actual revolt, and were more commonly prohibited rather than facilitated. Once again, "disguise" was a key idea for

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[22] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 10.

[23] Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983) had proposed this classic argument in this incredibly rich book. See also Gyan Prakash, "Reproducing Inequality: Spirit Cults and Labor Relations in Colonial Eastern India," *Modern Asian Studies* 20.2 (1986): 209-230; Gautam Bhadra, *Imān O Niśān: Uniś Śatake Bāṃlāy Kṛshak Caitanyer Ek Adhyāy* (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1994). Much of their theoretical lineage came from Turner, *The Ritual Process*, and Max Gluckman, *Rituals of Rebellion in South-East Africa* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1954), and, for Prakash, the practice theory of Pierre Bourdieu.

Scott. Less interested in questions of origin and function of rituals, he looks at how people use festivals as "arts of political disguise," times when the hidden transcript can interact with public transcript.[24] Scott's view represents the best argued and ethnographically most sensitive among the Marxist views of ritual. At the same time, Scott sees these disguises exclusively as, to quote a beloved phrase of his, "weapons of the weak" for fighting elite ideologies.

Despite accepting his point on folk culture being disguises, one can further probe into what they disguise. Do they only disguise anger and frustration against the elite, and to what extent are these disguises untouched by broader hegemonic ideologies? Furthermore, how do these disguises change over time with changing historical circumstances? For all of Scott's brilliant and humanistic ethnographic insights, his work enshrines a profound ahistoricity that enables a comparison of Renaissance France and contemporary Malaya. The aim of this thesis is to nuance Scott's conception of disguise by undertaking a historical study of the changing disguises of Shiva in the case of Gambhira. Close attention to change and continuity over an extended period of time can reveal aspects of disguise that ethnography in itself cannot. Alongside expanding the temporal scale, this study also stretches the spatial scale to see how Gambhira performers have remained in dialogue with discourses produced about the ritual from Calcutta and Dhaka. There is no reason to suppose that folk performers in a borderland are isolated; performers are, and have been throughout the twentieth century, fully aware of the various historical shifts of their time. The location of Malda in a borderland makes Gambhira a particularly interesting lens to observe such dynamics. What emerges is less a picture of "top-down" force or "bottom-up" resistance, but a significant amount of intermediary juggling between various ideologies and practices. But before we consider the

[24] Scott, *Domination and Arts*, 178.

layers of mediation in Malda, it is important to examine what a historical study of folk culture entails, and why such a study has been especially challenging in the context of South Asia.

The Historical Problem of Studying South Asian Folk Culture

A historical study of folk culture entails two lines of inquiry: how the *practice* of folk performance changed over time, and how the *concept* of "folk culture" has changed with altered historical circumstances. The social practice of a folk performance in a given historical moment cannot be seen independently of what the idea of "folk culture" means, at that moment, for its performers and audiences. The German philosopher of history Reinhart Koselleck has noted the "reciprocal interlacing" of social history, the study of changing intersubjective relationships, and what he calls *conceptual* history, the semantic and discursive change in concepts that people think with.[25] Such a reciprocal interlacing is of particular significance in studying folk culture in South Asia; the idea of the folk has changed over time with altered historical circumstances, and changes in the practice of the folk have always remained in dialogue with broader conceptual changes. This study is particularly attuned to the mediations that result from the "reciprocal interlacing" of the changing forms of Gambhira and the evolving concept of the folk in South Asia.

The study of South Asian folk culture through a conceptual-historical lens, however, poses certain theoretical and methodological challenges. It is perhaps because of these challenges that the literature on South Asian folk culture, though extremely rich and methodologically very sophisticated, has rarely attempted to study the historical dialectic between the concept and practice of folk culture.[26] The problem of studying folk culture

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[25] Reinhart Koselleck, "Social History and Conceptual History" in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 22. *Begriffsgeschichte* is Koselleck's term, from Hegel, for "conceptual history"

[26] South Asian folkloristics in the Anglo-American world began with colonial compilation of folk tales, with Mary Frere's *Old Deccan Days, Or Hindoo Fairy Legends Current in Southern India* (London: John Murray, 1868), being the oldest. The twentieth century scholarly discussion on the topic was overwhelmingly textual, with semiotic and structuralist analysis, often in dialogue with the study of Sanskrit classics. An influential, and historically conscious, text of that period was Milton B. Singer, *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization* (New York*:* Praeger, 1972). A major breakthrough came in

historically results from certain idioms of framing the folk, generated in the nineteenth century, which remain dominant in our thought to this day. I identify three such idioms: the early colonial Orientalist scholarship that constructed India's religion, history and culture as essentially *textual* traditions; the ethnographic projects of the colonial bureaucracy that identified the folk as timeless spaces within the antique historical tradition; and the nationalist preservation of the folk as a romantic, timeless entity that legitimized an imagined antiquity of the nation-state.

The early decades of colonial rule in India (c.1770-1820) witnessed the rise of Orientalist philological scholarship, principally under great textual scholars like Sir William Jones and Charles Wilkins.[27] These scholars learnt several Indic languages, unearthed various textual and material sources of ancient India, and translated hundreds of Sanskrit classics into English. Jones' linking of Sanskrit, Latin and Greek into the same linguistic and mythological family unleashed a new wave of European interest in Indic civilizations. Scholars at Oxford became deeply invested in studying the religion and philosophy of Hinduism, and India, unlike other British colonies, was seen as a great ancient textual tradition.[28] Therefore, despite the racist arrogance of later imperialism, India never became the anthropological

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1986 with the publication of *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), edited by Stuart Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan. The volume had sought for "another harmony" of textual, oral historical and performance studies to study Indian folklore. Since then, several historically attuned and ethnographically sensitive monographs have grappled with the question of studying folklore as oral history. Such works include Ann Grodzins Gold and Gloria Goodwin Raheja, *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Kirin Narayan, *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon: Himalayan Foothill Folktales* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Despite their ethnographic finesse, these works have not linked the local worlds of folktales and performances with the long-term conceptual changes in the idea of the "folk." I thank Frank Korom for a lot of the references in this literature.

[27] "Orientalist" here does not refer to Edward Said's pejorative sense of the term, but to a generation of British scholars who had deep reverence for Indian learning and culture, as opposed to the "Anglicans", who believed in the superiority of England. Said's sense of Orientalism gets full expression only in the mid-19th century.

[28] O.P. Kejariwal, *The Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Discovery of India's Past* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988); Thomas Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773-1835* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969).

laboratory of Europe in a way that the Pacific Northwest, Polynesia, Africa or Central America did. India, in short, was "too civilized to be savage."[29]

At the same time, this vision of India as an antique textual tradition meant that the popular practices of the low castes, with no textual basis on high Sanskrit classics, had no place in the colonial scheme of Hinduism. The Orientalist fetishization of the Sanskrit text, therefore, resulted in non-textual folk traditions being labelled as "deviant" and "non-Hindu," simply because they had no textual basis. Since the Orientalist vision of Hinduism was dominant in the implementation of colonial law, Hindu practices were selectively banned or promoted in the name of textual corroboration. Such legal actions included the abolition of *sati*, or widow immolation, the ban on hook-swinging, and the ratification of widow marriage.[30] The ethical or moral considerations of such legal actions notwithstanding, it is important to note that the legitimacy of Hindu texts came with the delegitimization of folk culture as the non-textual custom of the lowly. If textual Hinduism was a historical tradition akin to classical antiquity, non-textual rituals were ahistorical, deviant and illegitimate. The first difficulty in studying South Asian folk culture historically, therefore, is this divide between historical classical texts and history-less folk rituals, introduced by the Orientalists and still ensconced in academia.[31]

The troubled relationship between folk culture and history was aggravated by bureaucratic action in the mid and late nineteenth century. While India was always marginal

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[29] I owe the phrase to Tom Trautmann and Chris Fuller; personal comments, Madison, 24 October 2015.
[30] Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Aniket De, "'A Barbarous Practice': Hook-Swinging in Colonial Bengal," *History Matters* 11 (2014): 24-43; Nicholas B. Dirks, "The Policing of Tradition: Colonialism and Anthropology in Southern India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39.1 (1997): 182-212; Ishvarchandra Vidyasagar, *Hindu Widow Marriage*, ed. and trans. Brian A. Hatcher (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
[31] In the 1950s, Robert Redfield reformulated the classical/folk dichotomy as a relationship between the "little traditions" of peasant culture and the "great traditions" of priesthoods and texts. See his *Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956). To this day, scholarship on Hinduism follows two parallel lines that meet only very rarely: either the philological study of scriptures, or the ethnographic study of rituals. Compare, for instance, Frits Staal, *Ritual and Mantras: Rules without Meaning* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1996) and Ralph W. Nicholas, *Fruits of Worship: Practical Religion in Bengal* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2003).Only some very new work, like Adheesh Sathaye's ongoing work on folktales in Sanskrit literature, is trying to bridge the gap between these strands.

to debates in British anthropology, an array of colonial soldiers, bureaucrats and political officers were deployed as amateur ethnographers to carry out surveys and censuses about the Indian population. As scores of young Oxford-educated officers waded through muddy hills and forests, it became clear that India, far from being the textual tradition imagined by the Orientalists, teemed with hundreds of pre-literate groups who remained outside the aegis of the Sanskritic culture. Meticulous accounts of these "tribes and castes," as the British liked to call them, came not from marble desks of Calcutta philologists, but from mundane administrative literary genres, like the district gazetteers and, after 1872, the voluminous census reports, penned by such able surveyors as William Wilson Hunter, Herbert Risley, and Edward Gait.[32] Such data were required more for administrative use than for scholarly reflection, since Indologists still preferred critical editions of the Rig Veda to drab census charts.

While colonial ethnology contributed little to anthropological debates of its time, it identified a "non-coeval" space in a tradition otherwise thought to be coeval with the West. The Dutch anthropologist Johannes Fabian had used the term "coevalness" to mean the recognition that so-called "primitive" societies shared the historical trajectory of the West, and not some constructed mythic timeline invented by the anthropologist. Anthropology, as Fabian claimed, in its politically motivated search for timeless, isolated, and non-coeval primitives, therefore had a fundamental anti-historical bias.[33] By labelling the non-literate

[32] The practice of authoring ethno-historical accounts by colonial surveyors began in the early nineteenth century in South India, notably under the botanist and physician Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, and the soldier-antiquarian Colin Mackenzie. The genre reached its peak in the high noon of Empire of late nineteenth century, when the key works were authored: include Herbert Hope Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, 2 vols. (Calcutta: The Secretariat Press, 1891); William Wilson Hunter, *The Statistical Account of Bengal*, 20 volumes (London: Trübner and Co., 1875-1877). Frequently these census directors themselves authored monographs on the regions they surveyed. See Edward Albert Gait, *A History of Assam* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1906), and William Wilson Hunter, *The Annals of Rural Bengal* (New York: Leypoldt and Holt, 1868). Gait was the director of the 1901 census, and Hunter an official surveyor and magistrate.

[33] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 35. Fabian's work belonged to the "critical turn" in anthropology that argued to historicize the primitive. See also Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). James Clifford

groups in India as "tribes," colonial ethnology made them coeval not with the rest of India, but with other "primitive societies" of Melanesia or Africa. What had previously been omissions from the Orientalist vision became legitimized as ahistorical primitives through the scientific-truth claims of colonial ethnology. This construction of the primitive was augmented by centuries-old European accounts of India, in which western travellers and missionaries had conjured a world of Indian art and religion which they thought was grotesque, irrational and aesthetically revolting.[34] The folk was now placed under the category of the "savage," and presented irreconcilable anomalies to the Orientalist framework. The conjunction of Orientalist scholarship and colonial ethnography in India, therefore, defined the non-coeval, timeless "folk" in opposition to the coeval, textual, historical "classical" tradition.

The final problem in the chequered relationship between folk culture and history was posed by the emergence of Indian nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the initial decades, the Indian national movement was led by English-educated men from the upper-middle class of Calcutta. Taught in either western institutions or, sometimes, traditional centers of Sanskritic learning, nationalists idolized the idea of India as a great classical tradition, thereby internalizing the Orientalist discourse on the Sanskrit basis of India's history. While the nationalists passionately called for writing national histories,[35] the folk was rarely central to such historical imaginations. If anything, the Bengali intelligentsia defined themselves as historical subjects and kept the "primitive" tribes in the

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and George E. Marcus (Ed.) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

[34] India was seen, infamously, as a magical place where the "thuggee" dacoits sacrificed children to the dark goddess Kali, burnt women at stake, and swung from poles with hooks embedded into their flesh. See Partha Mitter's excellent monograph, *Much Maligned Monsters: History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), Ch. 1-3, for a history of these reactions. These same stereotypes transpire in Steven Spielberg's 1984 film, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, where the priest Mola Ram (Amrish Puri) runs a secret thuggee cult to sacrifice children.

[35] Chatterjee, *Nation and Fragments*, Ch.5-6.

margins of Bengali society outside the historical genealogy of the nation.[36] With the conceptual definition of the folk being outside the Sanskritic tradition, then, the folk already had a problematic relationship with mainstream nationalism. The nation was Sanskritic, the folk was not; the nation had a history, the folk lacked one; the nation was respectable, the folk was savage. Mass-mobilising nationalism of the early 1900s partially solved this problem, as argued in chapter 1, by reclaiming and redefining the "folk" aesthetically, bringing a metropolitan, romantic idea of folk culture to the forefront of nationalism, while ignoring and erasing aspects of folk culture unsavoury for the nationalist aesthetic.

Therefore, legacies of three conjoined processes- the Orientalist legitimation of high textual traditions against low popular ones, the invocation of a non-coeval popular space through colonial administrative ethnography, and the nationalist creation of a historical national selfhood while preserving the colonial category of the primitive for folk culture-have occluded historical visions of South Asian folk culture. In an attempt to problematize those legacies, this study has two such guiding questions while investigating the history of Gambhira. First, from 1905 to the present day, what has changed in the idea of "folk culture" in South Asia, and what has remained continuous? Secondly, to what extent have these changes been non-coeval, confined to a supposedly closed, ahistorical world, as colonial gazetteers and nationalist literature try to convince us? In other words, how does the apparently "local" world of folklore, rituals and performances, remain in dialogue with the "global" world of broader structural-historical shifts?

The location of Gambhira in Malda and Rajshahi, previously a colonial mofussil and now a postcolonial borderland, offers a vantage point to observe the complex reciprocal interlacing between nationalist ideologies and practices of the metropoles and their hinterlands. This thesis sees folk culture neither as an unproblematic reflection of the nation,

[36] Prathama Banerjee, *Politics of Time: 'Primitives' and History-writing in a Colonial Society* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

nor as an exclusively subaltern domain, but as a space for the interplay of the two. These interplays are of crucial importance in borderland regions like Malda, as nationalisms acquire new significance in the frontier.

The Historical-Ethnographic Setting: Malda and Chapai as a "Borderland"

Malda and Chapai Nawabganj, the two regions where Gambhira is performed, lie in North Bengal, immediately north of the Ganges and south of the Himalayan foothills. Malda (also spelled Maldah or Maldaha) is a district in the Indian state of West Bengal, with a population of roughly four million people. The district is rather unusual in Bengal in having nearly equal proportion of Hindus (47.99%) and Muslims (51.27%), and a significant presence of various tribal communities. English Bazar, a town of about three hundred thousand people, serves as the district headquarters.[37] Lying east of the international border across Malda, is a major administrative division of Bangladesh called Rajshahi, named after the largest and oldest city in the region. The district of Rajshahi where Gambhira is most popular is called Chapai Nawabganj (henceforth Chapai), a district of about one and a half million people immediately east of Malda. Chapai today is a predominantly Muslim district with a small Hindu minority (5%).[38]

Both Malda and Chapai rank distressingly low in development indices of India and Bangladesh, indicating that the general population is quite poor compared to the other parts of the countries. While agriculture is the most prevalent occupation, the soil is not as fertile as the Gangetic delta in the south. Two important crops that flourish in such soil are mango and mulberry. The region harvests a significant proportion of mangoes produced in South Asia; "Malda mangoes" are prized all over north India, while Chapai is hailed as the "mango capital" of Bangladesh. The other major traditional source of income is weaving silk from the abundant crops of mulberry. No wonder, then, that a significant amount of Gambhira

[37] Census of India 2011: http://www.census2011.co.in/census/district/6-maldah.html. 15 April 2016.
[38] Census of Bangladesh 2011: http://www.bbs.gov.bd/Census2011/Rajshahi/ChapaiNawabganj/Chapai%20Nawabganj_C01.pdf. 15 April 2016.

songs complain about a bad crop of mangoes or of pests killing silkworms. It was primarily farmers of Bengal who originally celebrated rites of spring like Gajan and Gambhira, since Shiva was the god of agrarian fertility.

But the region was historically much more than just an agrarian hinterland. Scattered within mango orchards and paddy fields here are the ruins of some of the finest samples of early Muslim art in India. Two capitals of old Bengal, Gaur and Pandua, lie ensconced in often overlooked nooks of Malda and Rajshahi. Gaur was thought to be the capital of both the ancient Hindu and Buddhist kings of Bengal, as well as of the later Turkic and Persianate sultans. The term "Gaur" referred to both the capital city and the whole kingdom of Bengal. The idea of Gaur is so central to Bengali identity that the word "Gauriya" (of Gaur) is often used to refer to aspects of classical Bengali civilisation. Till the mid-sixteenth century, when the Mughals conquered Bengal and shifted the capital eastward to a little forested settlement called Dhaka, Gaur was a center of Bengali culture. Situated at the confluence of the Ganges and the Mahananda, it was a vibrant trading post with rich trade links to both north India and South-east Asia. Several Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim pilgrimage sites lay nearby, ensuring a steady and profitable flow of pilgrims. It is important to take note of this period in Malda's past, since this past was harkened upon by later nationalists in redefining Gambhira as national heritage.

The fate of Malda changed with the Mughal conquest of Bengal (c.1574), when the erstwhile independent kingdom became merely a frontier of the Mughal state centred in Delhi. The Mughals failed to expand any further eastward, so the regions north of Malda remained the eastern edges of the mighty Mughal Empire. These frontiers, however, were only loosely controlled, and faced regular rebellions.[39] The population was a mixture of religious identities, relatively fluid in the sense of focussing on powers of charismatic holy

[39] See Gautam Bhadra, "Two Frontier Uprisings in Mughal India," in Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Ed.) *The Mughal State: 1526-1750* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 474-90.

figures rather than firm institutional structures. In the Mughal period, the forested areas east of Malda also started to have increasing numbers of Muslim settlements, as entrepreneurial charismatic holy *pirs* cleared dense forests and set up agrarian communities, commissioned by the agrarian Mughal Empire which demanded revenue. These *pirs* translated Islam among the masses, giving rise to, as Richard Eaton has argued, an agrarian Islamic population in the eastern Bengal delta.[40] With the emergence of a Muslim peasantry in the east (what is now Bangladesh), and the westward regions of Bihar still remaining quite Hindu, Malda slowly became a kind of a borderland between the large Hindu-majority regions west in Bihar, and the predominantly Muslim areas to the east.

The British colonial state realized this strange location of Malda only in 1872, when the first census was conducted. The East India Company had reached Malda, lured by the silk trade, as early as the 1600s; their earliest settlement gives English Bazar its name. But the early Company state (1757-1857) had largely inherited the Mughal administrative structure and, save agrarian reforms and basic administrative reorganizations, was not too preoccupied with the question of religious and ethnic majorities and minorities.[41] It was the modern bureaucratic imperialist state of the late nineteenth century that took an interest in surveying, enumerating and mapping the land and its peoples. "Curious as it may appear," Henry Beverley, the compiler of the first census of Bengal, had mused, "it is not in the vicinity of the great Mughal capitals that we find the Muhammadans most numerous." While some agrarian districts of Lower Bengal were over three-quarters Muslim, "Maldah, which contained the city of Gour, the Muhammadans form only 46 per cent of the population."[42] Beverley's fine mathematical view of the religious landscape on Bengal quickly observed that regions east of Malda were over 70% Muslim, while regions west were 12% Muslim.

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[40] Eaton, *Rise of Islam*, 140-50.
[41] See Subhajyoti Ray, *Transformations on the Bengal Frontier: Jalpaiguri 1765-1948* (London: Routledge, 2003). Walter K. Firminger, ed., *The Malda diary and consultations (1680-1682)* (Calcutta, 1918), is a wonderful account of the establishment of the trading post of English Bazar in the 1680s.
[42] H. Beverley, *Report on the Census of Bengal 1872* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1872), 132.

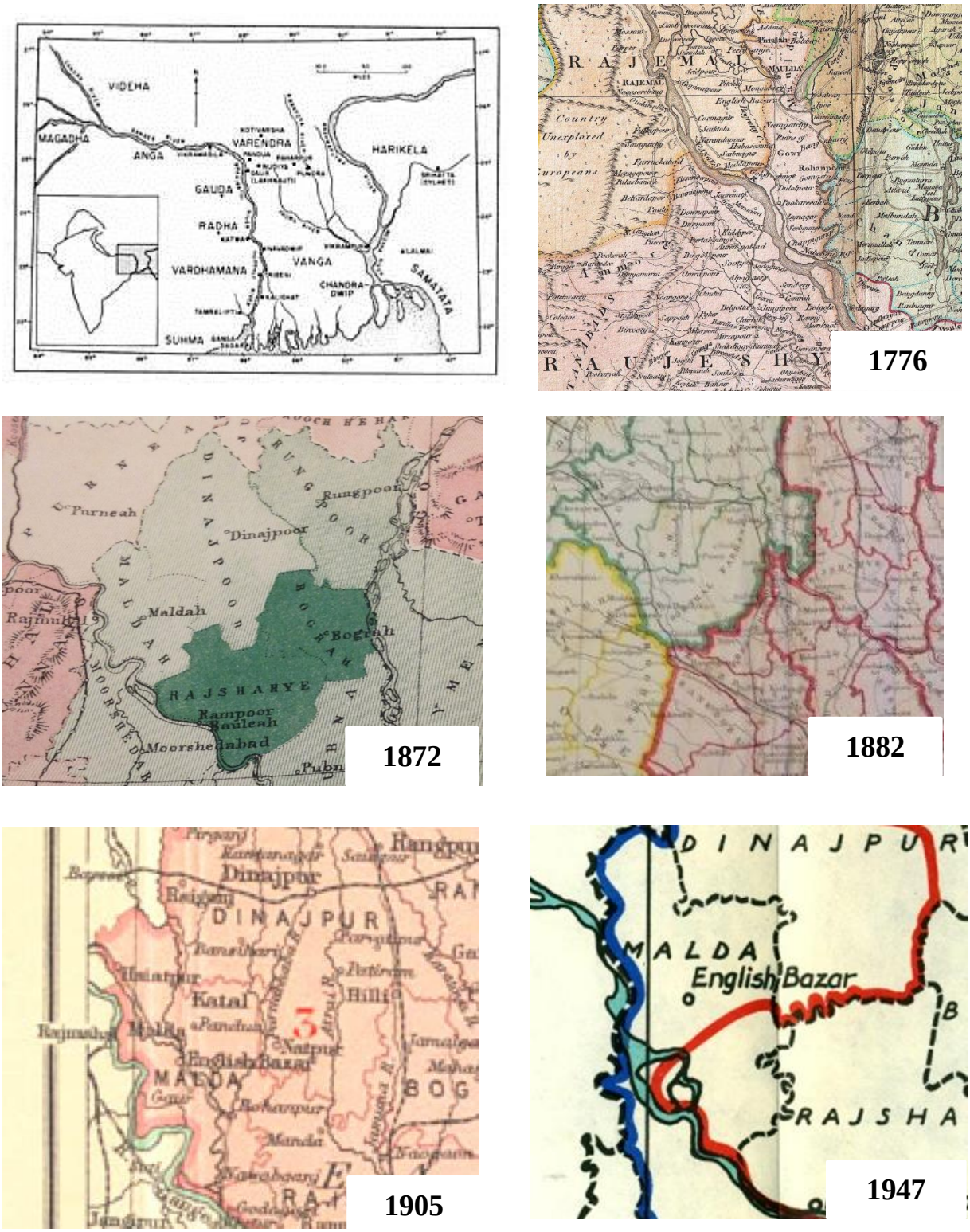


Figure 6. *A Shifting Frontier?* (Left to right from top) The ancient geographical regions of Bengal, from the 8th-10th centuries to the Mughal period. Malda lies in *Varendra*, north of the river. From Eaton, *Rise of Islam*; 1776 Map of Bengal by James Rennell, showing Maldah just at the brink of "territories unexplored by Europeans"; *Census of Bengal* 1872 map showing Maldah, a part of Bengal, (50% Muslim) in light green as a buffer between pinkish Bihar (less than 15% Muslim) and deep green Rajshahi and Bogra (more than 70% Muslim); *Census of Bengal* 1882 map showing Malda as a part of Bihar (green) encroaching into Bengal (pink); 1905 *Partition of Bengal* map showing Malda to be a part of East Bengal and Assam (pink) and not of the rest of Bengal (white) (Creative Commons); Radcliffe's 1947 Partition of India map dividing Malda by the red line between India and Pakistan; the blue line was Mountbatten's original planned assignment of entire Malda to East Pakistan. See Figure 7 for more details on Radcliffe's map.

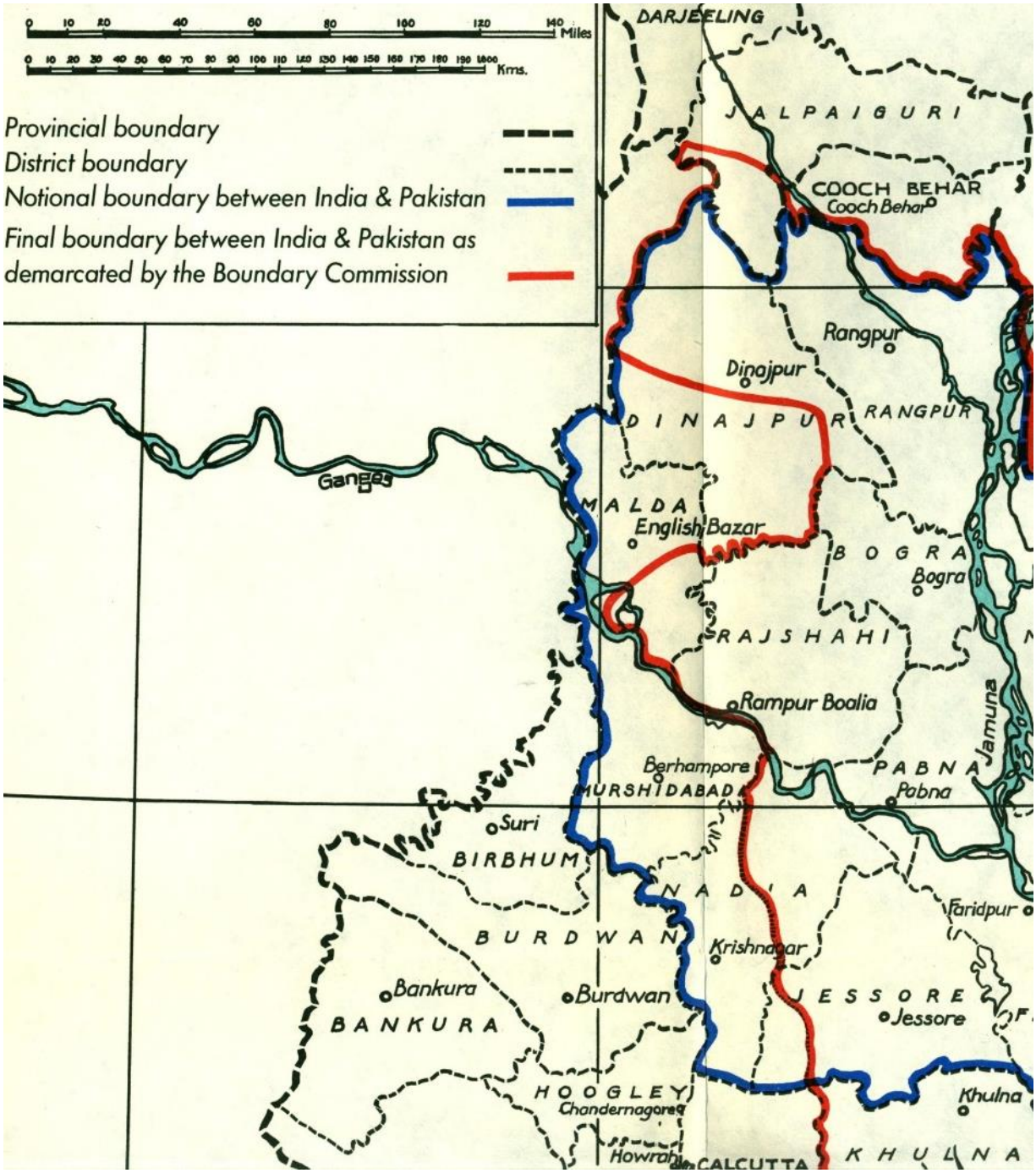
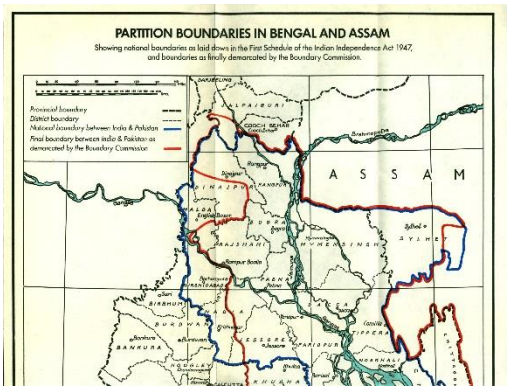


Figure 7. *Radcliffe's Intricate Manoeuvers*. Partition Map prepared by Cyril Radcliffe and released on 17th August 1947 with his "Award." Note Radcliffe's distinction between "national boundary" (blue) and "final boundary" (red). The red line is a fresh line that divides districts based on the calculations of Radcliffe, while the blue line follows district boundaries. It will be noted that the blue line had awarded the whole of Malda to Pakistan, while Radcliffe returned two-thirds of it to India. See the full map in the right corner. Folio supplied with ToP XII.



The borderland character of Malda continued to be a strange problem for the colonial state, which could never make up its mind about the right place for Malda. Soon after the first census, in 1876, Malda was snatched away from the Rajshahi Division, and made a part of the Bhagalpur Division in Bihar. It remained a district of Bihar till 1905, when it was made a part of "Eastern Bengal and Assam," the new province carved out by Lord Curzon during the infamous Partition of Bengal. The Partition of Bengal was seen by Bengali nationalists as a move by Curzon to destroy Bengali unity by separating the Muslim-majority East Bengal from Hindu-majority West Bengal. Malda, with its 46% Muslim population, found a place at the very edge of the new province. The Partition was annulled in 1911 after much nationalist agitation, and Malda returned to undivided Bengal. Partition or not, Malda always remained at the edge of Bengal culture, for the administrators a curious, inexplicable mix of religious populations (Figure 6).

This borderland character of Malda sealed its fate in 1947, when Sir Cyril Radcliffe was entrusted to draw the boundary line between India and Pakistan during the final days of the Empire in India. The Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, had already ordered the transference of Muslim-majority districts to East Pakistan, and Malda, by that decree, had gone to Pakistan. But sifting through census documents that for years had pointed out the borderland character of Malda, Radcliffe had mulled over the question of assigning the whole of Malda to East Pakistan. "Was it right," he wondered, "to assign to Eastern Bengal the considerable block of non-Muslim majorities in the districts of Malda and Dinajpur?"[43] The case was so unusual that he decided to divide Malda finely at the level of police station boundaries (the general practice was to assign entire districts to either India or Pakistan). As a result, Five out of fifteen police stations of Malda- Bholahat, Gomastapur, Nachole, Nawabganj and Shibganj,

[43]Nicholas A Mansergh (ed.), *Constitutional Relations between Britian and India: The Transfer of Power 1942-7, Volume XII: The Mountbatten Viceroyalty: Princes, Partition and Independence, 8 July-15 August 1947* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1983), 751. Henceforth ToP XII.

were awarded to East Pakistan, and eventually formed the district of Chapai Nawabganj. The rest remained in West Bengal, and formed the Malda district in India (Figure 7).[44]

While a hardened international boundary was imposed only after 1947, Malda had therefore been a borderland between cultural and administrative zones well since the seventeenth century. Its borderland character was only exacerbated in the colonial period, since the modern colonial state, even with the best of intentions, had a curiously ordered and schematic way of "seeing like a state," to follow James Scott. In its blind reliance on large-scale institutional records, Scott rightly notes, states forget that categories in census and police records are frequently "artificial inventions" of people who record them. Since for the state there are no facts other than "those that are contained in documents standardized for that purpose," these artificial inventions regularly end up "becoming categories that shape people's daily experience."[45] The shuttlecocking of Malda between Bengal, Bihar and East Bengal, and its final splicing by Radcliffe, are telling examples of how state categories contained in administrative documents have fundamentally changed people's lives in Malda.

Today, English Bazar and Chapai are both small border towns, far away from Calcutta and Dhaka. Like most borderlands, they do not receive fair shares of development compared to the metropoles, and have to endure thousands of dusty trucks, military troops, and border personnel. Malda became an important railhead in postcolonial India, since after the formation of Pakistan it lay along the only road connecting Calcutta to north Bengal and north-east India. Given its strategic geopolitical location, cross-border smuggling abounds in Malda and Chapai. Gambhira today lies no longer at any imagined village community with its agrarian rites and festivals, but in the gritty corners of state highways. Its performers are not only farmers, but shopkeepers, government employees and even some NGO workers. Some people in Malda complained to me that this urban milieu had caused Gambhira to "lose

[44]Mansergh (ed.), ToP XII, 753.
[45] James C. Scott, *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 82-3.

its flavour"; but I am less interested in reviving flavours of an imagined bucolic Gambhira, and more keen or seeing the meaning and practice of Gambhira in the changing lives of Malda throughout the twentieth century, and what "flavours" of Gambhira have been historically produced over this time period.

The extant scholarly literature in Gambhira, mostly in Bengali, have focussed on in-depth ethnographic study of the ritual in some specific sites, either in Malda[46] or in Bangladesh.[47] These books have primarily taken literary or folkloristic angles to the study of Gambhira, often engaging in scathing debates regarding whether Gambhira is a "song" (*gāna*) or "festival" (*utsaba*) or simply "art" (*śilpa*). [48] This study is not concerned with such debates; indeed, it is not even an exercise in local history and ethnography focussed on long-term engagement with a single locale. Rather, this thesis historically locates Gambhira not only in its local context, but within broader conceptual and social-historical shifts in the idea of folk culture. To return to the central question: how can Gambhira act as a lens to understand the changing interactions between large-scale historical events and the local lived experience of grappling with those situations? In doing so, Gambhira as a culture of the borderland is neither seen as a mere reflection of certain assumed imagined and cultural

[46] The oldest book on Gambhira was Haridas Palit, *Ādyera Gambhīrā* (Malda: Māladaha Jātīẏa Śiksha Samiti, 1912), followed by Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *The Folk Element in Hindu Culture: A Contribution to Hindu Socio-Religious Studies* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1917). Since then, there was a long pause on Gambhira scholarship till the 1960s, when Pradyot Ghosh, a professor of Bengali in Malda, began to produce a battery of publications on the subject. These include *Gambhīrā Lokasaṅgīta O Utsaba Ekāla O Sekāla* (Calcutta: Cakra & Co, 1968); "Gambhira: Traditional Masked Dance of Bengal," *Sangeet Natak* 53-54: 53-77; *Lokasaṃskṛti Gambhīrā* (Kolkata: Pustak Bipani, 1982); *Lokasaṃskṛti O Gambhīrā*: *Purnarbicara* (Kolkata: Pustaka Bipani, 2003). Other books include Pushpajit Ray, *Gambhīrā* (Kolkata: Lokasanskriti O Adivasi Sanskriti Kendra, 2000); Phani Pal, *Gambhīrāra Kabi-śilpīdera Jībana-Kathā o Saṃgīta Saṃgraha* (Calcutta: Balākā, 2010). The Balurghat-based journal *Madhuparṇī* had brought out a Malda District Special Issue in 1985 which had several articles on Gambhira. Other than these there are several other books and government publications, but they tend to repeat the arguments of these key works.

[47] The Bangladeshi scholarship has been largely controlled by the Bangla Academy in Dhaka. Key publications include Habib-ul Alam (ed.) *Bangla Academy Folklore Sankalan Vol 67: Gambhīrā Gāna* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1995); Tasaddaq Ahmed, *Nabābaganja Jelāra Lokasangīta Gambhīrā* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1994); Mazharul Islam Taru (Ed.) *Hājāra Bacharera Gambhīrā* (Kolkata: Pratibhas, 1998); Jahangir Selim, *Gambhīrā: Kālera Kaṇṭha* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 2010). Syed Jamil Ahmed's *Acinpakhi Infinity: Indigenous Theatre of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: The University Press, 2000) offers a nice survey of various theatre forms of Bangladesh, and includes Gambhira.

[48] For a review of this literature, see Aniket De, "Our Songs and Their Songs: Constructing Nation and Tradition in the Indo-Bangladesh Borderland," *St. Andrews Historical Journal* IV.3 (2015): 52-57.

identities nor as an autonomous space for borderland subversion, but as a space of *layered, disguised mediations* between various competing ideologies and practices.

Disguises and Mediations: Architecture of the Argument

In exploring Gambhira in relation to the nation and its frontiers, this thesis deploys "mediation" as a critical analytical tool. The literary theorist Mary Louise Pratt had proposed that "cultural mediation," across lines of difference, becomes possible in "contact zones," spaces where "cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths."[49] Pratt and later scholars have deployed the concept mainly to study the "clash" in context of power relations.[50] In studying Gambhira, however, I am less interested in such clashes and more keen on exploring the various levels of mediation that become possible in a contact zone like Malda. Malda, in its older identity as a colonial mofussil or the contemporary form of a postcolonial borderland, is not an edge of a culture supposedly centered in Calcutta, or an isolated island of borderland culture. Instead, it is a site of mediation between metropolitan political ideologies, like colonial and postcolonial nationalisms, and the local cultural and economic worlds. The history of Gambhira for the past hundred years is an exceptional lens to see how such mediation has changed its guises over time with changing historical circumstances.

The first chapter, "From Revelry to Nation Building: Small Towns and Folk Culture in Swadeshi Bengal, 1907-1914," notes a fundamental change in the attitude of the educated middle class, the *bhadralok*, towards folk culture around 1905. Throughout the nineteenth

[49] Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1990), 34, 40. Pratt later developed the idea of the contact zone in her classic *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).
[50] The concept found particular traction in museum studies, especially in the work of Jim Clifford, who saw museums as contact zones showing possibilities of cultural exchange. See James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), Ch.7. Later scholars have moved away from Clifford liberating vision of the contact zone, and have focused on the tensions arising from it. See Philipp Schorch, "Contact Zones, Third Spaces, and the Act of Interpretation," *Museum and Society* 11.1 (2003): 68-81. Anna Tsing explores how the local and the transnational come into contact zones of friction in matters of natural resources in *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

century, the bhadralok had dismissed folk culture as the intemperate revelry of the lowly without any aesthetic value. During the *swadeshi* movement of 1905, the first moment of anti-colonial resistance led by the Calcutta bhadralok, this attitude changes fundamentally.[51] Folk culture, centered in an imagined rural setting, became fundamental to national identity. Even low-caste rituals like Gambhira were hailed as national tasks valuable for society. The chapter focuses on Malda intellectuals Benoy Sarkar and Haridas Palit, who re-structured Gambhira as a theatre form from its older ritualistic guise. I call the work of Palit and Sarkar "contact mediation," since they worked in contact with the worlds of both Calcutta and Malda, producing a new, theatrical form of Gambhira in the contact zone of Malda. At this stage, Gambhira as a theatre form was beloved of the bhadralok as national treasure, and, at least till Sarkar's departure from Malda in 1914, was largely under the influence of bhadralok nationalist politicians.

Chapter 2, "Performing the Proletariat: Mass Politics and a Fragmented Language of Popular Protest, 1920-1945" looks at the next two decades in Malda. The interwar decades were decades of political and economic turbulence, corresponding to the rise of anti-colonial mass politics led by various political factions. The swadeshi vision of one homogenous nation which reflected itself on its folk had fragmented with the rise of various groups demanding political autonomy. In the midst of this political turbulence, folk culture was reconfigured, under heavy influence of Marxist intellectuals, as "people's culture," a subversive domain not belonging to the whole nation, but to the lower classes. Unlike the swadeshi period, there were no bhadralok mediators between Malda and Calcutta, and Gambhira performers themselves became public political figures. Songs from this period of "fractured mediation" launch sharp attacks on the government and the bureaucrats and face censorship and police

[51] 1905 is a rather conventional point to begin nationalist narratives, and it is true, as later scholarship has hinted, that *swadeshi* was the product of a long and chequered lineage. But it remains true that the swadeshi "moment" of 1905 was of immense importance, if only discursively, to spread this notion of nationalism. Further, the Calcutta *bhadralok's* interest in Gambhira is ignited only after the movement starts. Hence I have decided to put 1905 as the point in which to begin this study.

crackdown, as the bhadralok distanced themselves from a tradition they cherished as "national task" only two decades ago.

"Divided Songs, Altered Gods: Partition and the Making of a Borderland Folk Culture," the final chapter, focuses on Gambhira in the aftermath of the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan. The older district of Malda was now divided into India and East Pakistan, later Bangladesh, resulting in massive movements of peoples. Muslim Gambhira performers who travelled to Bangladesh refigured Gambhira as a non-Hindu tradition for a Muslim audience, putting a Muslim farmer and his grandson in place of Shiva and the farmers. The non-Hindu Gambhira went on to be a "national tradition" of the newborn nation of Bangladesh, while Gambhira in West Bengal, remained a comparatively lesser known tradition at the edges of postcolonial India. 1947, therefore, inaugurated new phases of "borderland mediation," a negotiation between cross-border exchanges of previously undivided cultural worlds and the increasing pressures from nation-states to solidify national identities. Such mediation was, to an extent, merely another iteration of the mofussil-metropolis dialogue ongoing since the swadeshi period, but one with new, stronger forces from postcolonial nation-states.[52]

The epilogue, "Disguised Mediations, Mediated Disguises: How to Write History from the Middle?" uses the history of Gambhira to search for a history focused on the middle ground between top-down and bottom-up models of South Asian historiography. As the story of Gambhira indicates, the changing idea of "folk culture" was produced over the years through different kinds of complex mediations between broader, structural changes and local

[52] I have chosen to see 1947 and 1971 as the last two critical moments in the emergence of Gambhira in its current form. The only other moment worthy of consideration would have been 1991, with the liberalization of the Indian economy, when global multinational corporations funded NGOs to package Gambhira as heritage. Frank Korom has written about this moment insightfully in "Civil Ritual, NGOs, and Rural Mobilization in Medinipur District, West Bengal," *Asian Ethnology* 70.2 (2011), 181–195. While "mediation" remains a key aspect post-1991, focusing on that moment merits a new set of questions outside the scope of this study. Hence while the thesis continues till the present day, it does not substantially focus on the dialectic between Gambhira, the state, and the NGOs post-1991.

ways to grapple with them. Giving primacy to metropolitan ideologies like nationalist writings of Calcutta intellectuals does not do justice to the crucial role played by the mofussil in defining itself. In turn, treating "folk culture" or "mofussil worlds" as isolated and autonomous overlooks that folk performers and their audiences are fully knowledgeable of the world outside, and indeed create and perceive their arts in dialogue with their awareness of and connections to the historical changes of their times.

Instead of constructing folk culture as a reified category, this thesis examines the myriad conceptual strands that entwine to produce changing ideas and practices regarding popular culture. Seeing folk culture as an art form that disguises various levels of mediations helps us to get beyond such models which set up insurmountable distinctions between the high and the low, the center and the region, history and timeless culture. A history from the middle, in turn, foregrounds how people actively produce cultural forms by mediating between various worlds. The disguises of Shiva over the past century have been fine instances of such mediations.

Chapter 1

From Revelry to Nation-building

Small Towns and Folk Culture in Swadeshi Bengal, 1907-1914

> This act is performed by…generally the lowest castes and most dissipated characters. The ceremony which was called an act of piety is converted into an occasion of dissipation, drinking, gambling, and acts of immorality.
>
> Ram Comul Sen on *Charak*, a variation of Gambhira (1829)[53]

> Gambhira is not just about three days of revelry in some localities; it is the site of a national task. Gambhira of Malda is a principal way to build Bengal's ideals, Bengali intellect, Bengali language and literature, and Bengali civilization.
>
> Benoy Kumar Sarkar (1914)[54]

In 1872, the British political agent G. H. Damant described the "Gambhira" festival of North Bengal, in which "the head of a dead man is taken, or if that cannot be procured, a skull which is painted to resemble life and offered before the goddess with singing and dancing." With latent horror, Damant inferred that the Gambhira, celebrated by the Páli tribe of Dinajpur, was a tribal version of "the festival of goddess Durga."[55] Yet, the Páli Gambhira was everything Durga Puja was not. The worship of Durga, the most important Hindu festival of urban Calcutta, was celebrated by rich landlords in extravagant palaces, with expensive food and ornaments being offered to the goddess. Damant's Gambhira, in contrast, consisted in offering the head of a corpse or a painted skull to an idol in mud shrines along the riverbank. The social locations of the two festivals were far apart.

The nineteenth-century gentlemanly elite of Calcutta, the *bhadralok*, would have agreed with Damant. They would have further argued that Gambhira was a deviant practice

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[53] Ram Comul Sen, "The Charak Puja and Hook-Swinging in Lower Bengal," *Journal of the Asiatic Society* 24 (December 1833): 610. The speech was given four years earlier in the Asiatic Society.
[54] *Gambhīrā* 1.1 (April-June 1914): 1-3. All translations from Bengali are my own, unless noted otherwise.
[55] G. H. Damant, "Some Account of the Pális of Dinajpur," *Indian Antiquary* 1 (November 1 1872): 340.

that had nothing to do with their Durga Puja. The Gambhira of North Bengal and its South Bengal versions like Charak and Gājan were continually dismissed by the bhadralok. For Ram Comul Sen, the Native Secretary of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Charak was nothing but the "dissipation" of the "lowest castes." Such low-caste "acts of immorality," Sen pleaded to his British audience in 1829, should not be used as a charge "against the whole body of Hindus."[56] The Hinduism of the elite, his argument implied, was a spiritual tradition that had nothing to do with immoderate practices like Charak. Sen exemplified the nineteenth century Calcutta elite, who cautiously kept away from popular rituals. Often educated and employed by the colonial state, they extolled European ideals and aesthetics regarding religion.[57] Seeing themselves as "the sentinels of culture," the bhadralok cautiously guarded their culture from what they saw as the intemperate revelry of the lowly.[58]

By 1914, however, the bhadralok attitude to Gambhira had changed radically. Rather than being disdained in lines of Sen and Damant, Gambhira was now glorified as heritage in Malda, a district in North Bengal. From 1907, English Bazar had become the hub for research and debate on Gambhira. The Malda antiquarian Haridas Palit, in his 1912 monograph *Ādyera Gambhīrā,* adulated Gambhira as the remnant of the Grand Buddhist and Hindu heritage of ancient India.[59] Calcutta periodicals were rife with praises of Palit's book. From 1914, a well-circulated academic journal named *Gambhīrā* started being published from Kaligram in Malda. The journal's epigram quoted the sociologist Benoy Kumar Sarkar, who said that Gambhira was not mere "revelry," but the site of a "national task" (*jātira kāja*).[60] The scope of Sarkar's own tasks, however, was not restricted by national boundaries. His

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[56] Sen, "Charak Puja," 610.
[57] Such ideals included the Protestant notion of religion being based on scripture and individual belief rather than bodily ritual. A key argument of Sen against Charak was that it was not sanctioned by religious texts. See Sen, "Charak Puja," 610-11. See Brian A. Hatcher, *Bourgeois Hinduism, or Faith of the Modern Vedantists: Rare Discourses from Colonial Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) for bhadralok religious ideals.
[58] Tithi Bhattacharya, *The Sentinels of Culture: Class, Education, and the Colonial Intellectual in Bengal 1848-85* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005) offers a rigorous analysis of the concept of bhadralok identity.
[59] Haridas Palit, *Ādyera Gambhīrā* (Malda: Māladaha Jātīỳa Śiksha Samiti, 1912). Henceforth *AG*.
[60] *Gambhīrā* 1.1 (1914):1.

lectures on Indian religion and philosophy, focusing often on Gambhira, were lauded throughout Europe and the United States.

The performance and audience of Gambhira had also changed significantly. Damant's "singing and dancing" was now a form of scripted political theatre, which began a dialogue between the small "mofussil" town of Malda and the metropolis of Calcutta (Figure 1.1).[61] In stark contrast to the head-severing worshippers, it was the bhadralok who enjoyed Gambhira plays. Consider the following Gambhira play on a conversation between a farmer and a graduate about the failure of urban politicians in reaching out to the masses:

Graduate: Let go of my BA, MA! I shall take up a loom and weave;
Nothing is to be gained out of slavery under the British.
Farmer: The gentlemen have taken up looms; can broken China ware ever get whole?
Their promises shall fast degrade; they are using threads to chain an elephant.
Will they eat coarse rice like us, that they will awaken the nation?[62]

Calcutta intellectuals were pleasantly surprised to hear such trenchant and graphic political critiques like the bhadralok being called "the broken China ware." Previously deemed by the bhadralok to be a ritual of illiterate philistines, Gambhira was now enthusiastically praised by Calcutta periodicals for inculcating political acumen and intellect among the masses. Having jettisoned older charges of decadence and imprudence, Gambhira had found a central place in the metropolitan nationalist imagination. This change from revelry to nation-building was a pivotal shift in the conception of folk culture in Bengal at the turn of the twentieth century.

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[61] The Anglo-Indian term "mofussil" means small towns in the hinterland of Calcutta. The Hobson-Johnson dictionary defines mofussil as "the rural localities of a district as contra-distinguished from the *sudder* or chief station." Sir Henry Yule, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive,* ed. William Crooke (London: J. Murray, 1903), 570.

[62] Kumudnath Lahiri, "Māladahera Kabi O Gāẏakagaṇa," *Gṛhastha* 4.9 (June-July 1913): 615. The song was written by the prodigy Muhammad Sufi.

Figure 1.1. *From Revelry to Nation-building.* (Left) Masked dance, a key feature of the revelry in older Gambhira. (Right) The new Gambhira, with four farmers talking politics to god Shiva. Pictures from the 1940s. From Pradyot Ghosh, *Gambhīrā Lokasaṅgīta O Utsaba Ekāla O Sekāla* (Calcutta: Cakra & Co., 1968).

Why did folk culture suddenly become central to nation-building after facing decades of disdain from the bhadralok as dissipation and revelry? How, and through which historical processes did such a modern folk culture emerge? A new idiom of Gambhira was produced in the early twentieth century as a result of mediation by Malda intellectuals between a new metropolitan romantic ideology of the folk and the cultural worlds and political agendas of the hinterland. In 1905, the anti-colonial *swadeshi* ("of one's own country") movement, the first attempt of mass mobilization by the bhadralok, challenged the divisive colonial partition of Muslim-majority East Bengal and Hindu-majority West Bengal.[63] The reconstitution of Gambhira, along lines of the swadeshi ideology that grounded national identity in village life, refigured of the place of folk culture in the rubric of national identity and a negotiated the relationship between Calcutta and the mofussil.

Drawing on Mary Louise Pratt's work, I see mofussil towns as "contact zones" and sites of "cultural mediation" between two cultural realms, the urban world of Calcutta and the

[63] I follow the 1905-1914 periodization of swadeshi by Leonard A. Gordon in *Bengal: The Nationalist Movement 1876-1940* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), unlike Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973).

rural world of the hinterland, focusing on the processes which made the mofussil a "zone" for mediation between various worlds.[64] These processes enabled intellectuals like Benoy Sarkar and Haridas Palit to mediate between the urban, romantic idea of the folk and the local meanings of Gambhira in Malda. While the distant swadeshi Calcutta intellectuals found in the folk a romantic reflection of their imagined nation, Sarkar's and Palit's work was what I call "contact mediation." Such mediation, based on active contact with both Gambhira performers and urban ideologies, changed both the local meanings and the metropolitan significances of Gambhira. Malda, therefore, was neither a marginal recipient of metropolitan ideologies, nor an island of unique small-town culture, but a site of contact mediation between two ideologies.

Placing Gambhira under critical historical analysis challenges the binary of high and low culture, a persistent conceptual bias in the historiography of colonial India. In historiography, the domain of the popular or the "subaltern" has often been assumed to be autonomous from and antithetical to the interests and ideologies of the elite.[65] Such an assumption partly derives from an overemphasis on writings by colonial and Calcutta authors, and a corresponding profound neglect of the rich intellectual culture of the mofussil. Focusing on writings of mofussil intellectuals reveals the changing interactions between so-called high and low cultures, and the political agendas that shaped such interactions. Intermediary mofussil intellectuals like Sarkar and Palit, who traversed both bhadralok and subaltern worlds with ease, cannot be categorized in distinct categories like "subaltern" or "elite." Studying the mofussil town as a contact zone, therefore, dismantles assumptions like the high/low dichotomy and the idea of folk culture being autonomous and unchanging, while unveiling a range of mediations between various cultural and intellectual worlds.

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[64] Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991): 34.

[65] The Subaltern Studies Collective, a dominant strand of Indian historiography since the 1980s, had, despite many valuable theoretical contributions, often been unable to free itself from dichotomies like the high/low and elite/ popular. Studies of folk culture also regularly assume this dichotomy. See Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1989).

The first section provides a historical overview of the shift in metropolitan ideology of the folk from the nineteenth century to swadeshi. Adopting Pierre Bourdieu's differentiation between elite "taste of reflection" and popular "taste of sense," the section argues that the swadeshi bhadralok developed a "reflective" taste for a romantic, timeless, decontextualized idea of the folk, while still ostracizing its "sensual" qualities.[66] The longer second section examines the intellectual and political environment of swadeshi Malda as a "contact zone," and argues that modern Gambhira can be seen as a conversation between the mofussil and the metropolis. The "contact mediation" of Sarkar and Palit negotiated with the hegemonic ideology of the metropolis using the cultural worlds of the mofussil. The second section ends with a discussion of Sarkar's extension of the urban-rural mediation to a global conversation. The swadeshi years between 1907, when Sarkar and Palit started their endeavors, and 1914, when Sarkar left Malda and the World War ushered in a new paradigm of anti-colonial politics, were crucial years for the reconstitution of Gambhira.[67]

Swadeshi, Folk, and the Metropolitan Imagination

The nineteenth century Calcutta bhadralok enacted a posture and a set of material practices, which, they asserted, had nothing to do with popular forms of enjoyment. Educated in newly-established colonial universities, the bhadralok strove for a taste thoroughly informed by European aesthetics. Such a taste appreciated western artistic forms like the novel, oil paintings and the proscenium theatre, looking down upon folk rituals like street processions. Sumanta Banerjee has therefore aptly termed the divergence of elite and popular cultures as a difference between "the parlour and the streets."[68] The bhadralok idea of

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[66] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 7.

[67] Throughout this essay, I have used the term "folk," to denote the non-elite popular rituals and festivals of mainly the lower orders of society. There was no clear Bengali category for "folk" during the swadeshi period. Such a categorization began during swadeshi, and was complete only in the 1930s, when *loka* became the standard term for "folk." Similarly, Benoy Sarkar drew upon Johann Gottfried von Herder's idea of the *Volk* as "a people" or "a nation."

[68] Banerjee, *Parlour and Streets*, 198-9.

colonial modernity materialized in the new colonial drawing room. The drawing room, meant for an outsider audience, was composed with order, temperance and decoration influenced by European aesthetics, often with bookshelves, paintings and a piano.[69]

The parlor and the streets, however, were not as isolated as the bhadralok proclaimed them to be. An 1862 account describes a Charak festival sponsored by a bhadralok, in which a low-caste ritual participant "trudged over the spotless carpet of the parlor with his muddy feet," and blessed the bhadralok.[70] Ram Comul Sen's public dismissal of Charak notwithstanding, the bhadralok had regularly funded and participated in such rituals, not completely severing older caste and communitarian links. Similarly, folk culture also interacted with various aspects of colonial modernity. Songs of the *kartābhajā* sect, for instance, deployed rich metaphors of the colonial marketplace, mint, credit, and labour to articulate a theological worldview.[71] Further, small printing presses nourished a booming book-trade on folk tales, romances and salacious novels. Despite public scorn, such books were widely read within bhadralok society, and heavily influenced Bengali literature.[72] The elite/popular dichotomy therefore overlooks how deeply the parlor and streets were entwined. The bhadralok disavowal of popular culture was more rhetoric than reality.

In the turn of the twentieth century, however, bhadralok rhetoric on the folk saw a stark reversal. Instead of the colonial parlor, the bhadralok idolized a village home, and embraced a romantic idea of folk culture. Such a transformation reached its zenith during the swadeshi movement. The movement was against the 1905 colonial decision to carve a new

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[69] See Rosinka Chaudhuri, *Modernity at Home: A Genealogy of the Indian Drawing Room* (Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, 2011). For bhadralok literary tastes, see Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Invention of Private Life: Literature and Ideas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
[70] Arun Nag ed., *Satīka Hutoma Pyāṅcāra Naksā*, (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2008 [1862]), 12.
[71] Hugh B. Urban, *The Economics of Ecstasy: Tantra, Secrecy and Power in Colonial Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 37-9.
[72] Such cheap prints, known as *Baṭatalā* books after the area in Calcutta where the presses were located. Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society, 1778-1905* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), 107-52; Gautam Bhadra, *Nyāṛā Baṭatalāẏa Yāẏa Ka'bāra?* (Calcutta: Chhatim Books, 2011); Sripantha, *Baṭatalā* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1997); Sukumar Sen, *Baṭatalāra Chāpā O Chabi* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1984). *Baṭatalā* editions of the eighteenth century epic *Annadāmaṅgala* was one of the most popular books of the nineteenth century.

province out of Muslim-majority East Bengal, dividing it from Hindu majority West Bengal, an act that the bhadralok perceived as a threat to national unity. Leaders of the movement encouraged people to use indigenous goods and institutions, boycotting British ones publicly.[73] Swadeshi was the culmination of anger against colonial culture since the 1870s, when various colonial economic reforms had started going against bhadralok interests. Such anger slowly caused a rejection of a colonial urban culture, and a turn towards the village and the folk as the heart of the nation. *Desh*, the word for one's village home, eventually came to mean country or "nation," ultimately naming "swadeshi" itself: *desh* of one's self (*sva*).[74]

In envisioning a nation, swadeshi bhadralok discourse created a romantic notion of the village and its people, a notion that was far removed and purposefully decontextualized from the lived realities of villagers. Calcutta intellectuals and swadeshi enthusiasts like Rabindranath Tagore and Dinesh Chandra Sen idealized a timeless world of folk literature, which, they thought, reflected the national spirit.[75] Tagore's early essays on folk literature (1907) continually remark on "naturally permanent" folk tales remaining unchanging for centuries.[76] The pure village was the ideal nation for Tagore, because it was supposedly unaffected by the interventions of the colonial state. Such an ideal village, of course, did not exist, especially because Bengali peasants were indeed the driving engines of colonial capitalism. The bhadralok idealization of folk, therefore, meant a romantic appropriation of folk forms, without any substantive engagement with folk livelihoods.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's differentiation of "taste of sense" and "taste of reflection" is useful in understanding the swadeshi relationship with folk culture. Bourdieu, in his ethnography on social taste in France, suggests that elites establish social distinction by

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[73] See Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement*; Peter Heehs, *The Bomb in Bengal: The Rise of Revolutionary Terrorism in India 1900-1910* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993).
[74] See Sumit Sarkar, "Renaissance and Kaliyuga: Time, Myth and History in Colonial Bengal," in *Writing Social History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 186-215.
[75] See Dipesh Chakrabarty's excellent essay, "Romantic Archives: Literature and the Politics of Identity in Bengal," *Critical Inquiry* 30.3 (2004): 660, on Romanticism and Dinesh Sen's ideology of national literature.
[76] Rabindranath Tagore, "Lokasāhitya," in *Rabīndra Racanābalī*, vol. 3(Calcutta: Vishwa Bharati, 1991), 750.

enjoying a "taste of reflection," a "pure pleasure, pleasure purified of pleasure," as opposed to the popular "pleasure of the senses." "Taste of reflection" means an enjoyment of rarefied pleasures like high art or literature, with meanings inaccessible to the uninitiated masses. "Taste of sense" is sensual, "natural enjoyment" of commoners, like popular music or street festivals. "Taste of reflection" means "to believe more in the representation-literature, theatre, painting-more than in the things represented," as opposed to popular taste, which is "to believe 'naively' in the things represented."[77] The taste of reflection therefore engages more in artistic representations than in the realities of what is represented.

Bourdieu's theory can be developed further. Elites have a positional superiority over the folk, and therefore have the power to appropriate certain aspects of the folk within their "reflective" tastes, without really taking part in the "sensual" aspects of folk culture. In other words, elites are able to selectively incorporate folk elements in their hegemonic discourses like folkloristics, ethnography and literature. In this way, elites express a taste for decontextualized representations of folk culture, despite keeping away from actual participation in "sensual" folk culture. Similarly, Calcutta intellectuals selectively appropriated aspects of folk culture in imagining the swadeshi nation. Bhadralok recovery of wandering ascetic *bāuls* as national figures and the creation of a timeless fairy-tale *desh* through village folk tales were products of such a reflective taste.

The swadeshi attitude to the *bāuls*, wandering ascetics who practiced esoteric bodily practices, demonstrates how the sensual aspects of folk culture were symbolically transformed through elite representation. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the colonial state and the bhadralok viewed wandering ascetics with suspicion, since such itinerant ascetics had frequently come into armed conflict with the state. The state also questioned the secret bodily practices of the *bāuls*, which defied easy categorization into

[77] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 5-7. The sense/ reflection distinction is a key feature of Kantian aesthetics.

colonial categories like caste and sect. [78] The bhadralok, though not enamored of the *bāul* way of life in the nineteenth century following the British attitude, slowly cultivated a reflective taste for the mystical, impassioned songs of the *bāul*, which often spoke to ideas on the body, the soul, and death. By the end of the nineteenth century, the figure of the wandering *bāul* had emerged as an escape from the fetters of urban colonial modernity and as a mode of self-assertion for the bhadralok.[79] Indeed, the very "figure" of the *bāul* was itself a bhadralok construction: as later ethnographies have repeatedly shown, such mystics have various layers of sect and gender identity, and rarely call themselves "*bāul.*"[80]

The figure of the *bāul* came to the forefront of swadeshi discourse when the poet Rabindranath Tagore framed the *bāul* as the mystical soul of the nation. Tagore used *bāul* melodies extensively in his swadeshi songs. One of the main characters in his quintessential swadeshi novel *Gorā* feels a sudden urge to note down the lyrics of a song hummed by a roadside *bāul*.[81] The figure of the blind *bāul*, a character in Tagore's play *Phālgunī* once played by Tagore himself, was , in Jeanne Openshaw's words, "characterized by his remoteness" and devoid of "specific social context of any kind." Tagore's engagement with *bāul* songs and theology rarely referred to the esoteric sensual practices of the *bāul.*[82] Yet, Tagore's reflective depiction of the mystical *bāul* was so influential that Tagore himself was later hailed as "the greatest of the Bāuls of Bengal."[83]

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[78]William Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 125-144.

[79] The story of the great reformer Vidyasagar being moved by the *bāul Akhiladdin* appears in an early biography of Vidyasagar. Chandicharan Bandyopadhyay, *Bidyāsāgara* (Calcutta: De Book Store, 1987 [1895]). See Brian A. Hatcher, "Akhiladdin's Song" in *Vidyasagar: The Life and After-life of an Eminent Indian* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2014), 31-2.

[80] Jeanne Openshaw, "The Web of Deceit: Challenges to Hindu and Muslim "Orthodoxies" by "Bāuls" of Bengal," *Religion* 27.4 (1997): 297-309; Lisa I. Knight, *Contradictory Lives: Baul Women in India and Bangladesh* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[81] Rabindranath Tagore, *Gorā* (Calcutta: Vishwa Bharati, 2010 [1910]), 7.

[82] Jeanne Openshaw, *Seeking Bāuls of Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 32-5; Jeanne Openshaw, "The Radicalism of Tagore and the Bāuls of Bengal," *South Asia Research* 17.1 (1997): 20-36.

[83] Edward C. Dimock Jr. "Rabindranath Tagore-'the Greatest of the Bāuls of Bengal'," *Journal of Asian Studies* 19:1 (1959): 33-51. The phrase originated in Shashibhusan Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults as a Background to Bengali Literature* (Calcutta: Firma KL Mukhopadhyay, 1946), 215.

The artist Abanindranath Tagore's impressionist painting of Rabindranath Tagore as the *bāul* in *Phālgunī* (Figure 1.2, left), as a saintly, formless, and rhythmical figure with an angelic hue, corroborated such praises. Abanindranath's painting stood in stark contrast to colonial photographs of mystics with their pipes, torn sheets, and beads (Figure 1.2, right). Colonial photography portrayed *bāuls* as unruly Oriental mystics who needed to be disciplined. The bhadralok recovery of the *bāul* as a spiritual figure was, then, also a form of resistance to colonial knowledge. Abanindranath's portrayal of Tagore, the most respected bhadralok of his time, as a *bāul* directly challenged the colonial mode of knowledge that denigrated the wandering mystics.[84] Such a recovery, at the same time, removed the figure of the *bāul* from a rural context and placed it in a romantic domain. Tagore, Calcutta's preeminent bhadralok, being labelled as the "greatest" *bāul*, shows how deeply the bhadralok had come to believe in the decontextualized representation of the *bāul* over the actual *bāul*.

Figure 1.2: *Meaning and Context*. (Left) Abanindranath Tagore, "Poet's *Bāul* -Dance in Phālgunī" (1916). Rabindranath Tagore as blind *bāul* with an *ektārā* instrument in his right hand. Watercolor. Rabindra Bharati Society, Calcutta. Reproduced in Openshaw, Bāuls of Bengal, 34. (Right) "Portrait photograph of holy man, Sadhu Faqir holding a pipe." Eastern Bengal. Photo 124/2. File C13571-11 N.A. Early 1860s. British Library Image Collection.

[84] Painting in the swadeshi period, principally Abanindranath's painting, strove for a new idiom of "Indian" art. See Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New "Indian" Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Decontextualization of folk culture reached its zenith in the domain of folk tales, where the ideal *desh* was articulated as a fairy tale land. Under the guiding light of Tagore and Dinesh Sen, as Giuseppe Flora has argued, a repertoire of folk tales and songs from village Bengal emerged in the metropolitan imagination of swadeshi Calcutta.[85] Folklorists like Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar and Chandrakumar De, under Sen's directions, combed the villages of Dhaka and Mymensingh to record songs and stories from peasants. Stories in Dakshinaranjan's extremely popular collection of folk tales for children, *Ṭhākumāra Jhuli* ("Grandma's Trove," 1907), were set in a mythical land of heroes and imaginary beasts (Figure 1.3), and subtly suggested that the legendary qualities of those heroes were ideals the nation should strive for.[86] Children, being impressionable subjects for socialization, were, as Shibaji Bandyopadhyay has shown, prime targets of such a political project. To follow Bandyopadhyay, fairy tales like *Ṭhākumāra Jhuli* not only recovered "national fairy tales," but simultaneously created a "fairy-tale nation."[87]

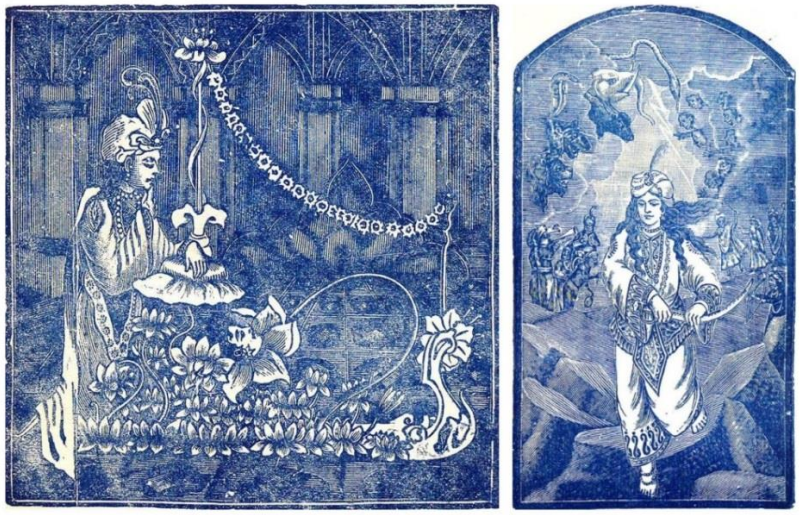

Figure 1.3: *A Fairy Tale Land*. Woodcuts from *Ṭhākumāra Jhuli* by Dakshinaranjan (1907), depicting imaginary places in which the princes kill demons and rescue princesses. The stories rarely mention their geographical or historical provenances. From Mitra Majumdar, *Ṭhākumāra Jhuli*.

[85] Giuseppe Flora, *On Fairy Tales, Intellectuals and Nationalism in Bengal (1880-1920)* (Pisa, Roma: Instituti Editoriali E Poligrafici Internazionali, 2002).
[86] Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, *Ṭhākumāra Jhuli: Baṃlāra Rūpakathā*, 60th ed. (Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh 2003[1907]). See also Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Eastern Bengal Ballads Vol I Part I: Mymensingh* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1923).
[87] Shibaji Bandyopadhyay, "Deśera Rūpakathā, Rūpakathāra Deśa*"* in *Gopāla-Rākhāla Dbandba Samāsa: Upanibeśabāda o Bāṃlā Śiśusāhitya* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1991), 38-77.

That fairy-tale nation was born out of a romantic idea of the folk, one that decontextualized literature completely from the actual village, yet saw folk literature as a reflection of an undifferentiated national spirit. "Even this treasure trove of stories, this ultimate swadeshi product," Tagore lamented in his laudatory preface to *Ṭhākumāra Jhuli*, "was previously coming to us through Manchester, packaged as English fairy tales." Tagore used an economic vocabulary of historical production in villages to describe the origins of the folk tales, yet maintained that the stories of *Ṭhākumāra Jhuli* flowed "timelessly through rebellions and changing rulers."[88] By placing folk literature in an autonomous, ahistorical domain, Tagore constructed a *desh* unaffected by the colonial extraction of resources. Further, Tagore saw the tales as the heritage of the whole of Bengal, and not of the individual villages the tales were collected from. Politically, a pan-Bengal rhetoric was strategic, as swadeshi was a nationalist response to the division of Hindus and Muslims within Bengal.

Such pan-Bengal rhetoric, however, was predominantly a product of the Hindu imagination, with little desire to integrate popular Muslim culture. While reading Dinesh Sen's Mymensingh ballads or the stories of *Ṭhākumāra Jhuli*, with themes drawn predominantly from Hindu epics and myths, one gets no inkling that these tales were collected from a land whose peasantry was predominantly Muslim. Bengali Muslims always had a vibrant coterie of folk tales and romances, a literature that had no place in the swadeshi imagination.[89] The overwhelming Hindu bias in the swadeshi imagination of the folk points to the deep contradictions within swadeshi ideals and partially explains why swadeshi did little to bridge the gap between Hindu bhadralok and Muslim peasant. Tagore, initially the standard-bearer of swadeshi, slowly realized the biases and limitations of the nationalist

[88] Rabindranath Tagore, preface to *Ṭhākumāra Jhuli*, i-ii. Andrew Sartori has suggested that Tagore's "culture" moved completely to a rarefied domain in the post-swadeshi period. See Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), Ch. 6. See also Chakrabarty, "Romantic Archives" for a genealogy of literature and the national spirit.
[89] Sufia Ahmed, *Muslim Community in Bengal 1884-1912* (Dacca: Published by the author and distributed by Oxford University Press Bangladesh, 1974), Ch. 5, offers a good survey. Tony K. Stewart, *Fabulous Females and Peerless Pīrs: Tales of Mad Adventure in Old Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

project, and ultimately turned against it. His novel *Ghare-Bāire* (*The Home and the World*, 1916) was a strong anti-swadeshi statement, showing how swadeshi leaders devastated Muslim peasants following an ideal that was ultimately fragmented, biased and unfair.[90]

The metropolitan swadeshi imagination, therefore, removed folk culture from its rural context and projected it as national heritage. In contrast to the nineteenth-century denigration of the folk, the swadeshi bhadralok adulated an idealized and decontextualized representation of the folk. Having explored changes in the metropolitan imagination, we now turn to the mofussil town of Malda, and investigate how the mofussil, the object of swadeshi imagination, mediated between the metropolitan imagination of the ideal *desh* and the cultural and ideological worlds of mofussil life. Malda, with its own intellectual and political agendas, was a different vantage point for constructing discourses on culture and nation.

Swadeshi and the Small Town: Malda and Gambhira 1907-1914

The mofussil town is a highly misunderstood and poorly theorized subject in the historiography of colonial India. Most key works on swadeshi, past and present, focus exclusively on texts, intellectuals and events of the colonial metropolis, ignoring the mofussil almost completely.[91] If noticed at all, the mofussil is seen as a passive recipient of urban ideologies. Giuseppe Flora and Satadru Sen, for instance, see Benoy Sarkar and Haridas Palit merely as "obscure enthusiasts" of the ideologies of Tagore and Dinesh Sen.[92] Such a blunt argument returns to the historiographical bias of the metropolis, and robs the mofussil of any agency. On the other extreme, some recent works have studied small towns in impressive depth and richness, but have ultimately seen them as "locales" with a "distinctive culture,

[90] For Tagore's chequered relationship to the swadeshi movement, see Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement;* Sartori, *Bengal Concept History*, Ch. 5-6; P.K. Datta, ed., *The Home and the World: A Critical Companion* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003). Later historiography is increasingly coming to terms with the ramifications of the exclusion of Muslims and low-castes from the ideal nation. Neilesh Bose, *Recasting the Region: Language, Culture, and Islam in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[91] Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement*; Sartori, *Bengal Global Concept*.
[92] Flora, *On Fairy Tales*, 42-5. The phrase "obscure enthusiasts" is from Satadru Sen, *Benoy Kumar Sarkar: Restoring the Nation to the World* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2015), 66.

both unique and a microcosm of the larger national life."[93] Seeing the mofussil as distinctive or unique spaces, however, ignores the constant material and intellectual exchanges between the mofussil and the metropolis.

Mofussil towns are best seen as "contact zones." Marie Louise Pratt defines contact zones as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power."[94] Pratt and later scholars have deployed the concept mainly to study the "clash" in context of power relations like colonialism and slavery.[95] In studying the mofussil town, however, I am less interested in such clashes and more keen on exploring the various levels of mediation that become possible in such a contact zone. The intellectual climate of Malda, as a contact zone, offered unique vantage points for mediation between metropolitan and rural cultural and ideological worlds. I call such mediation, exemplified by Sarkar and Palit, "contact mediation," since, unlike the distant Calcutta bhadralok, they mediated through contact with both worlds. I follow Tariq Ali in seeing mofussil towns as nodal spaces of encounter between urban and rural ideologies through routes like railways and rivers.[96] At the same time, theorizing the mofussil as nodes of contact is fruitful only if we recognize the agency of mofussil people in actively operating upon different worldviews, instead of being mere passive recipients of urban thought. The concept of "contact mediation" appreciates such agency of mofussil intellectuals.

This section focuses on the intellectual climate of English Bazar, headquarters of Malda district, as a site for the contact mediation of Sarkar and Palit and for the emergence of a new Gambhira. English Bazar, as the name suggests, had been an East India Company

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[93] M. Raisur Rahman, *Locale, Everyday Islam, and Modernity:* Qasbah *Towns and Muslim Life in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7.
[94] Pratt, "Arts of Contact Zone," 34.
[95] James Clifford sees contemporary museums as contact zones where once colonized peoples encounter their representations in the display case. Anna Tsing explores how the local and the transnational come into contact zones of friction in matters of natural resources. James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), Ch.7; Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).
[96] Tariq Omar Ali, "The Envelope of Global Trade: The Political Economy and Intellectual History of Jute in the Bengal Delta, 1850s to 1950s" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2012).

trading post since the late 1600s.[97] The town, on the banks of river Mahananda, was a small municipality of 1500 acres and about 12,000 people in 1872.[98] Malda had been made a district in 1813, and English Bazar, throughout the nineteenth century, saw the establishment of hallmarks of colonial urbanity like government schools, road networks, and a municipality. In 1905, swamps, orchards, small villages, and tribal settlements in forested areas surrounded this little urban space.[99] The town had its own bhadralok society, with many literary societies and associations of enthusiastic local antiquarians. Such a society not only included the indigenous intelligentsia, but also administrators from Calcutta and other towns, who came to English Bazar on temporary appointments. The bhadralok society in Malda thrived in close proximity to the large low-caste and tribal societies around the town.

Benoy Kumar Sarkar (1887-1949) grew up in Malda bhadralok society, mingling with tribal and low-caste populations. Though originally from Bikrampur in East Bengal, Sarkar spent his childhood in English Bazar, and considered himself a local of Malda all his life. [100] Later a renowned political thinker and sociologist, Sarkar was a brilliant student in the University of Calcutta and one of the youngest teachers at the National College.[101] He was in Calcutta from 1900 to 1907, and was inducted into swadeshi ideals by the educationist Satish Chandra Mukhopadhyay. In 1907, Sarkar returned to Malda to lead the Malda National Educational Council, a part of the swadeshi program of "National Education," which encouraged students to leave colonial educational institutes for swadeshi ones.[102] The swadeshi-trained sociologist in Sarkar quickly saw the potential of Gambhira in spreading

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[97] Walter K. Firminger, ed., *The Malda diary and consultations (1680-1682)* (Calcutta, 1918), is a wonderful account of the establishment of the trading post of English Bazar in the 1680s.
[98] W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, vol. 7(London: Trübner and Co., 1876), 49.
[99] G.E. Lambourn, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Malda* (Calcutta: Secretariat Press, 1918), 1-30.
[100] Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *Binaẏa Sarkārera Baiṭhake*, ed. Haridas Mukhopadhyay, vol. 2 (Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 2003 [1942]), 242. Henceforth *BSB*.
[101] For studies on Benoy Sarkar, see Bholanath Bandyopadhyay, *The Political Ideals of Benoy Kumar Sarkar* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1984); Giuseppe Flora, "Benoy Kumar Sarkar: An Essay in Intellectual History" (PhD diss., Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1993); Sen, *Benoy Kumar Sarkar*.
[102] Haridas and Uma Mukherjee, *The Origins of the National Education Movement* (Calcutta: National Education Council, 1957), 121-5; Ashim Kumar Sarkar, "Charting the Terrain of Early Nationalism: Maldah 1905-1916," *Vidyasagar University Journal of History* 1 (2013-2014): 137-58.

swadeshi ideals. From 1907 to 1914, Sarkar and the newly established Malda National Educational Council spent a considerable amount of energy in encouraging Gambhira performers and villagers to spread the swadeshi cause, as well as in writing historical accounts of Gambhira.

Before the swadeshi period, as we know from Sarkar's own accounts and other sources, the word "Gambhira" largely referred to popular festivities accompanying springtime agrarian cults. Gambhira was celebrated only in the months of April and May, on a few dates scheduled for solar rites. The Koch, the Páli, and the large low-caste population were the main participants of the festival.[103] The budget of the festival was gathered by the election of small village councils (*mandals)* who gathered donations from villages. Many *mandals* often got together to fund a bigger Gambhira.[104] The rituals of Gambhira consisted in building a mud house for the god Shiva, and then decorating it to worship the deity. Masked dances, small skits, songs, and dances would continue throughout the four-day festival. The songs and dances were sources of much fun, often making fun of the folk form of god Shiva in a spirit of playfulness. Of the few pre-swadeshi Gambhira songs that have survived, many ridicule Shiva's hemp-smoking habits, a signature attribute of the God in his worship in Bengal:

> He shreds hemp, and blows his horn. Sleepily at night he grinds the hemp leaves,
> And then he puts them in his mouth. Oh Shiva, how tasty must that be![105]

Such songs, often performed at night outside designated shrines, elicited roars of laughter from the audience. Often people would obliquely make fun of local elites through these songs, causing even more laughter and fun. The rituals and associated festivities in Gambhira were annual events whole villages looked forward to, and thronged to attend.

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[103] Damant, "Pális of Dinajpur"; Lambourn, *Gazetteer Malda*, 32.
[104] Palit, *AG*, 34.
[105] Song by Harimohan Kundu (d. 1907) compiled in Phani Pal, *Gambhīrāra Kabi-śilpīdera Jībana-Kathā o Saṃgīta Saṃgraha* (Calcutta: Balākā, 2010), 63.

Sarkar remained deeply attached to Gambhira since his childhood. Unlike Tagore's relationship to the *bāul*s, his attachment to Gambhira was far from a mere elite "taste of reflection." Rather, he had, as a child, fully immersed himself in the "sensual" experiences of dancing and singing. Even as an internationally reputed scholar nearing sixty, Sarkar fondly recollected how he had great fun as a child running to the Gambhira gatherings near his house, singing and dancing with his friends from "thirty six castes combined." All his life, Sarkar said, he could run out to dance in Gambhira as promptly as he would listen to Schubert and Beethoven at home.[106] Sarkar's childhood was full of fascination for the humor and revelry in folk performances like Gambhira. Such enjoyment, based on actual participation in popular festivities, was tangibly different from the metropolitan child's fascination with the fairy tales of *Ṭhākumāra Jhuli.*

Sarkar's attachment to Gambhira shows why Flora's and Satadru Sen's model of seeing Sarkar as a Malda version of Tagore and Dinesh Sen is not an accurate one. Sarkar was not merely interested in a romantic fairy-tale land of Gambhira. He had a deep longing for actual participation in the festival, and a great deal of respect for the *mandal* system, calling it an early manifestation of democracy.[107] Speaking Malda dialects fluently and being well immersed in the symbolic world of Gambhira, Sarkar was much closer to actual Gambhira performers than Tagore or Dinesh Sen were to the *bāuls* and the Mymensingh farmers. At the same time, as his comment on Schubert and Gambhira suggests, Sarkar took to heart several elements of European aesthetics. When indoctrinated in metropolitan swadeshi ideals, he logically turned to his own *desh*, Malda, as a site of political activism. Further, being an educated bhadralok gave him added authority in Malda. Sarkar's contact mediation was possible not only because he was trained by great swadeshi leaders, but also because he was thoroughly familiar with the mofussil cultural world as a local.

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[106] Sarkar, *BSB 1*, 242.
[107] Sarkar, *BSB 1*, 239-40.

Figure 1.4 *The Gambhira Team*. (Left) Benoy Sarkar, from the 1917 issue of the *Hindustanee Student*. (Right) Baladevananda Giri, from *Gauṛadūta,* 2 April 1953. Ashim Sarkar Personal Collections.

Between 1907 and 1910, Sarkar formed organized groups of Gambhira performers and trained them in workshops on swadeshi ideology and literature, encouraging them to incorporate swadeshi messages within their performances. Sarkar's pedagogical skills were well known, and since many Gambhira performers were his childhood friends, it was easy for him to organize the groups. In this project, he was aided by a swadeshi leader and Dasnami monk of Malda named Baladevananda Giri (Figure 1.4). Sarkar and Giri took charge of separate Gambhira groups. They organized Gambhira competitions in order to identify the best talents in the town, and then trained those talents. [108] The new Gambhira performers performed increasingly in urban public spaces like roads and playgrounds, presenting serious issues on education, government and social reform. Sarkar and Giri had radically altered the meaning and context of the performance in a span of only two to three years.

The swadeshi reconstitution of Gambhira caused three main changes in the performance, which continue to this day. First, the annual rite and generic performance were, once and for all, separated. Gambhira was now performed round the year, and not only on

[108] Phani Pal, "Māladahera Gambhīrā O Baladebānanda Giri," in *Māladaha Carcā,* vol. 1, ed. Malayshankar Bhattacharya (Malda: Baṅgīya Prakāśaka O Pustaka Bikretā Sabhā, 2011), 257-261.

ritually prescribed days. Secondly, Gambhira took place in urban spaces, for instance on roads, makeshift stages and auditoriums, instead of its earlier confinement to fields and shrines marginal to the town. Finally, the swadeshi period saw the emergence of the professional Gambhira "artist." Actual names of performers and songwriters, like Saracchandra Das, Harimohan Kundu, Satishchandra Gupta, Gopalchandra Das and Muhammad Sufi were lauded and their songs compiled and printed. This professionalization brought new conceptions of authorship and creativity in the tradition.

Sarkar and Giri preserved yet reworked the older idiom of maintaining a jocular relationship with Shiva. In doing so, they mediated between a bhadralok ideology and an idiom familiar to and beloved of the mofussil audience. A telling example is the following song by Saracchandra Das, an important Gambhira artist trained by Giri. The song (c. 1908) takes the older and much beloved theme of hemp-smoking to a different end:

> Thinking that you consume hemp (*siddhi*),
> We became a country of drug-addicts;
> O Shiva, is this why we sing Gambhira?
> Your son Ganesha grants success (*siddhi*) in good deeds,
> We forget the real success (*siddhi*) by embracing the drug (*siddhi)*![109]

The word *siddhi* in Bengali can mean "success" as well as "hemp." The poet's pun presents a message of reform, implying that the real *siddhi* (success) is the establishment of swadeshi goals. If we compare it to the previous song on hemp, it is clear that this song has a clear bhadralok stamp: the bhadralok had long frowned on the low-castes for addiction and dissipation. Yet this bhadralok message is articulated through an idiom familiar to the audience. In this way, the reconstruction of Gambhira enabled Sarkar to mediate between a

[109] Compiled in Pal, *Gambhīrāra Saṃgraha*, 109-10.

bhadralok swadeshi ideology and a popular medium. It was such a mediation that Sarkar referred to when he called Gambhira a "potent factor of mass-education."[110]

Sarkar's engaged with Gambhira performers principally in order to indoctrinate the people of Malda in swadeshi ideology. A key theme of such a political and pedagogical agenda was the idea of national recovery from colonialism. Under Sarkar's influence, the older genre of complaining to Shiva about grievances was sharpened into prayers for national recovery. The following song by Gopalchandra Das (c. 1912) is a prime example:

> Princes have become beggars in our land,
>
> Shiva, old man, are you still blind?
>
> You counselled Japan to recover their motherland,[111]
>
> Teach us, similarly, to love our brothers!
>
> Sing, all, Gambhira songs- to save this degrading society![112]

While preserving the paradigm of complaining to Shiva, the song addresses issues beyond the local context. The invocation of Japan's victory against Russia and the overall nationalist tenor certainly came from Sarkar's training. But the poet here also makes a stronger claim: that communication through Gambhira is the only cure for the continually degrading society. This self-referential quality of Gambhira songs became increasingly common:

> Sing Gambhira songs, uplift society powerfully,
>
> Sing Gambhira tunes of righteousness, law, and education,
>
> All will join, and all evils shall pass away![113]

Songs such as these not only articulated a call for social change, but simultaneously bolstered the status of Gambhira by calling it a fundamental instrument of social change. For a low-

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[110] Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *The Folk-Element in Hindu Culture: A Contribution to Socio-Religious Studies in Hindu Folk-Institutions* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co, 1917), 14.
[111] Refers to the Battle of Tshushima (1905) in which Japan defeated Russia. The defeat of a European power by an Asian country was a great source of inspiration for swadeshi leaders.
[112] Compiled in Pal, *Gambhīrāra Saṃgraha*, 74.
[113] Written by Gopalchandra Das, compiled in *ibid*, 240.

caste ritual mocked by the bhadralok, gaining such a status was no mean feat. Along with the actual reconstitution of Gambhira, Sarkar needed a change in the discourse on Gambhira.

Sarkar was not working in a vacuum. Alongside his contact mediation between Gambhira performers and swadeshi politicians, there were tectonic shifts going on in the region around Malda and Rajshahi in reconstructing new histories of the mofussil in relation to the metropolis. Through a number of mofussil antiquarians and institutions, and a burgeoning print and reading culture, Gambhira acquired a historical narrative that elevated its status from a low-caste ritual to a focal point in national history.

Antiquarians, Institutions and a History for Gambhira

During the swadeshi period, a number of intellectuals in and around Malda were getting invested in the region between the rivers Mahananda and Karatoya. This distinctive region, known as "Varendra" in ancient times after the unique laterite soil, was home to the fabled old cities of Bengal.[114] Ruins of the ancient capitals of Gauṛa, Pandua and Pundravardhana, as well as a huge Buddhist stupa at Paharpur suggested the importance of the region in the pre-colonial period (Figure 1.5, left).[115] Hunter notes how Gauṛa and Pandua, despite being "almost level to the ground" and "overgrown by dense jungle," still showed "sufficient traces of their former magnificence" in the 1870s.[116] By the swadeshi period, however, intellectuals of Malda and Rajshahi had started taking a deep interest in reclaiming archaeological evidence to assert the antiquity of their region. Intellectuals of the region formed the Varendra Research Society in Rajshahi in 1910, and eventually started the Varendra Research Museum to showcase the excavated Hindu and Buddhist artefacts.[117]

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[114] F. J. Monahan, "Varendra," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 46.1 (January 1914): 97-105.
[115] See Dilip K. Chakrabarti, *Archaeological Geography of the Ganga Plain: The Lower and the Middle Ganga* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 58-99.
[116] Hunter, *SAB7*, 51.
[117] See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Calling of History: Sir Jadunath Sarkar and his Empire of Truth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 39-44, for the popular origins of historical research in these societies.

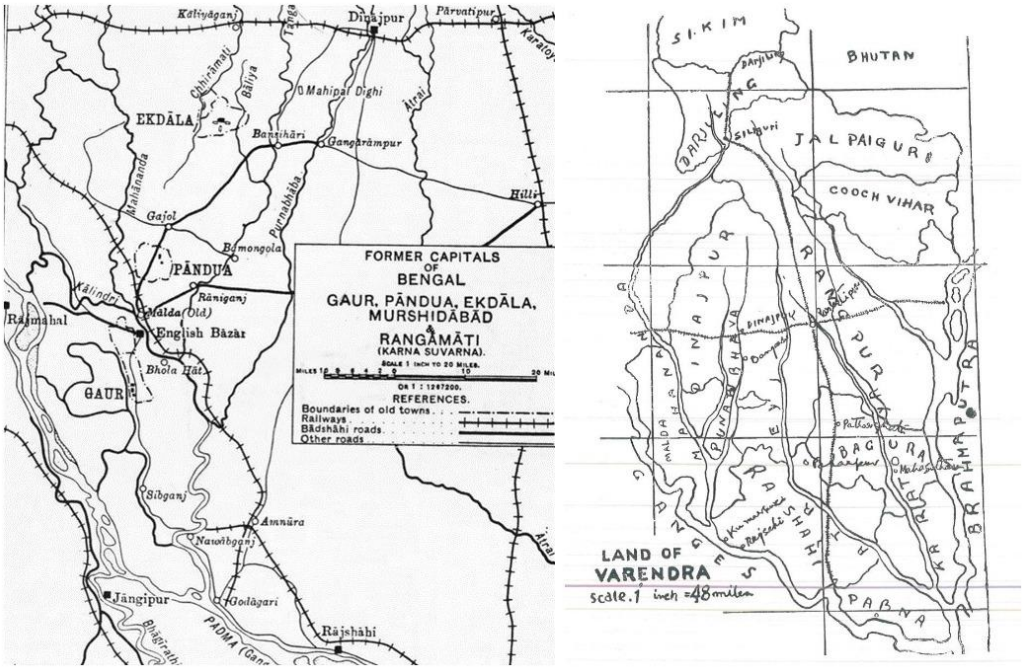

Figure 1.5. *Remapping the region.* (Left) Map of archaeological sites around Malda by H.E. Stapleton (1932). Reproduced in Chakrabarti, *Archaeological Geography*, 68. (Right) Map of the "Land of Varendra" by Akshay Kumar Maitreya, in Maitreya, *Monuments of Varendra.* Note how Maitreya's map sees the region as a close-knit space enclosed by rivers, while Stapleton notes the diffused distribution of archaeological sites.

Under the patronage of Sarat Kumar Roy, the landlord of Rajshahi, the Society received enthusiastic support from British officials as well as Calcutta intellectuals. It became a meeting ground of important intellectuals like historians Akshay Kumar Maitreya and Ramaprasad Chanda, and archaeologist Rakhaldas Banerjee. It published a number of papers and monographs on the history of the region, commissioned translations of Sanskrit texts, and led field expeditions to the plethora of ruins near the towns (Figure 1.6). Indeed, the excavations of the stupa at Paharpur, the largest stupa in East India, were begun by the Society. The overall agenda of the Society was that Varendra was not simply the site of old ruins, but the original heartland of Bengali Hindu and Buddhist culture. The abundance of Hindu and Buddhist archaeological ruins bore testimony to such an argument.[118] Akshay

[118] Akshay Kumar Maitreya, *The Stones of Varendra* (Rajshahi: Varendra Research Society, 1912), and *The Ancient Monuments of Varendra* (Rajshahi: Varendra Research Society, 1949); Ramaprasad Chanda, *A Guide-book to the Exhibition of Relics of Antiquity and Manuscripts on the Occasion of the Visit to Rajshahi of His*

Kumar Maitreya's map of Varendra shows the region almost naturally knit by rivers, despite the colonial drawing of borders (Figure 1.5, right). Articles on Varendra discussed the geology of the area extensively, arguing how the red-soiled Varendra was far older than the areas in the east full of alluvial silt inhabited by Muslims.[119] Given that the Varendra region went to Muslim-majority East Bengal during the 1905 Partition of Bengal, such an argument of Hindu antiquity had significant political implications in terms of relations to the nation. The region's political agendas, therefore, differed from those of the metropolis.

Malda intellectuals not only joined the Varendra Society, but also formed their own institutions. The antiquarian and historian Radheshchandra Seth (1864-1911) had been involved in founding a number of local periodicals like *Kusuma* (1890), *Gauṛabartā* (1896), *Gauṛadūta* (1896), and *Māladaha Samācāra* (1897). Radheshchandra founded printing presses in Malda to disseminate the history of the region (Figure 1.7).[120] Just like Rajshahi intellectuals used the term "Varendra," the ancient name of Rajshahi, Radheshchandra revived the term *Gauṛa*, referring to the old capital of Malda, to name his newspapers *Gauṛabartā*, "news of Gauṛa," and *Gauṛadūta*, "messenger of Gauṛa." The term *Gauṛa* was also used as a term to refer to ancient Bengal, and referring Malda as *Gauṛa* implied calling it the center of pre-colonial Bengali culture. The Sanskrit pundit Rajanikanta Chakrabarty fully used the potential of the term when he authored his 1909 local history of Malda. Titled *Gauṛera Itihāsa*, meaning both "local history of Gauṛa ruins" and "history of Bengal," the book implied that the local history of Malda was coterminous with national history.[121] Benoy Sarkar, therefore, found himself in the context of a range of mofussil institutions and intellectuals which negotiated the position of Malda in the history of the Bengali nation.

Excellency Lord Carmichael Governor of Bengal (Calcutta, 1912), along with a handwritten note from Chanda, in Vincent Smith Papers, (IND) 97 E2, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

[119] Monahan, "Varendra."
[120] Haridas Palit, *Māladahera Rādheśacandra* (Calcutta, 1911), 10-12. See also Ashim Kumar Sarkar, *Changing Profile of a Bengal District*: *Malda, 1932-1953* (Calcutta: Classique, 2008), 1-25.
[121] Rajanikanta Chakrabarty, *Gauṛera Itihāsa*, vol. 2 (Malda: Khan Abid Ali Khan, 1909).

Figure 1.6 *Recovering the Region.* "Exploration Party of the Varendra Research Society, Rajshahi," sometime in the early 1910s, in search for archaeological sites. From Maitreya, *Monuments of Varendra.*

Figure 1.7 *The Mofussil Press.* (Left) Radheshchandra Seth, from his obituary (*Gambhīrā* 1.1, 1914); (Center) *Gauṛadūta* Press and (Right) *Māladaha Samācāra* Press, English Bazar. Pictures by Aniket De, August 2015.

Benoy Sarkar mobilized these intellectual and material resources of Malda to instigate a "historical investigation" of Gambhira. "Historical investigation was a prestigious term in the swadeshi years," Sarkar recounted later, "I got excited to get a history of Gambhira written."[122] The construction of a national past, as Partha Chatterjee and Andrew Sartori have highlighted, was a cornerstone of the swadeshi search for selfhood.[123] Deeply embedded in such swadeshi ideals, Sarkar called for a history of Gambhira. In the November 1907 and June 1908 issues of *Māladaha Samācāra*, he anonymously announced a stipend and a

[122] Sarkar, *BSB 1*, 239.
[123] Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, 95-100. Sartori, *Bengal Global Concept*, Ch. 5-6.

twenty-five rupee prize for an essay on the history of Gambhira. While most people had laughed at the advertisement, within a year Sarkar received a remarkable essay from Haridas Palit, an antiquarian and homeopath who travelled widely in Malda villages.[124]

Born into a low-caste family of Burdwan in lower Bengal, and having grown up amidst much oppression from high-caste village elites, Palit had come to Malda in his youth.[125] In Malda, he became a part of the late-nineteenth century intellectual world led by Radheshchandra, and developed a great talent for preparing facsimiles of manuscripts. For two decades, he travelled extensively in Malda, collecting artefacts and maintaining fieldnotes.[126] His essay on Gambhira was published in the 1909 *Sāhitya Parishat Patrikā,* the premier journal of the Bengal Academy of Letters in Calcutta, and received much bhadralok acclaim. In 1912, the Malda National Education Council published Palit's book *Ādyera Gambhīrā*, now four times the original essay in length (Figure 1.8). Palit's book, a product of the intellectual climate that saw Gauṛa and Varendra as the heartland of Bengali culture, saw Gambhira not as a tribal festival, but as a palimpsest of the ancient heritage of Bengal.

For Palit, Gambhira was the last remnant of the grand syncretic Hindu and Buddhist traditions of Bengal. The masked dances and processions of Gambhira, he argued, descended from the Buddhist festivals described by Chinese travelers Xuanxang (7th century) and Fa-Xian (5th century), where nobles dressed as Hindu gods in a spirit of revelry. Rejecting Damant's idea of Gambhira as a tribal rite, Palit saw Gambhira as the festival of the kings and nobles, and dismissed the tribal practices as meaningless "ghost worship." The Buddhist syncretic element linking Shiva and Buddha, beginning with Harsha and culminating in the Palas of Bengal (8th to 12th century), Palit maintained, was the true origin of the festival. Since the capitals of these kings were near Malda, the Gambhira of Malda was the most

[124] Haridas Palit, preface to *AG*.
[125] Haridas Palit's autobiography, *Baṅgīya Patitajātira Karmmī* (Calcutta, 1915), 1-50, gives detailed and moving descriptions of his tortured childhood.
[126] Tusharkanti Ghosh, "Lekhaka Haridāsa Pālita-era Saṃkshipta Paricaẏa," in Haridas Palit, *Ādyera Gambhīrā*, ed. Phani Pal (Calcutta: Balākā Publishers, 2013), 13-18.

"original" festival in Bengal, preceding all other similar festivals like Gājan and Charak, which were supposedly derived from it. [127]

The question of origin was of great significance for Palit. He further argued that Gambhira, though originating from Malda, had eventually "conquered the world." The masked dances of Tibetan Lamas and Sinhala festivals, for him, were derived from Gambhira. Even festivals of Bacchus in ancient Greece and those of Osiris in ancient Egypt were, he argued, extensions of Gambhira.[128] In this project of linking Malda to Tibet, Palit had followed the "Buddhist Bengal" and "Greater India" paradigms of the Sanskrit scholar Haraprasad Shastri, which claimed that the oldest samples of Bengali literature and culture could be traced in the Buddhist literature of Nepal and Tibet.[129] Significantly, Palit's book was prefaced by Sarat Chandra Das, a scholar and traveler in Tibet, for whom Gambhira showed that Bengal is "the great teacher of half of Asia."[130] Palit, then, not only claimed the centrality of Gambhira for Bengal, but ambitiously placed Malda at the center of the globe.

Palit's careful mediation between mofussil and metropolitan ideologies gives rise to many apparent contradictions in the text. In giving Gambhira a glorious lineage from ancient India, for instance, he provided an enviable genealogy for low-castes. At the same time, the text is written in chaste Sanskritic Bengali, far from low-caste dialects, suggesting yet another aspect of mediation in terms of audience.[131] Palit even significantly downplays the low-caste basis of the festival, and writes off the tribal participation as deviant. Similarly, the text focuses almost exclusively on the Hindu heritage of the festival, and is completely silent on

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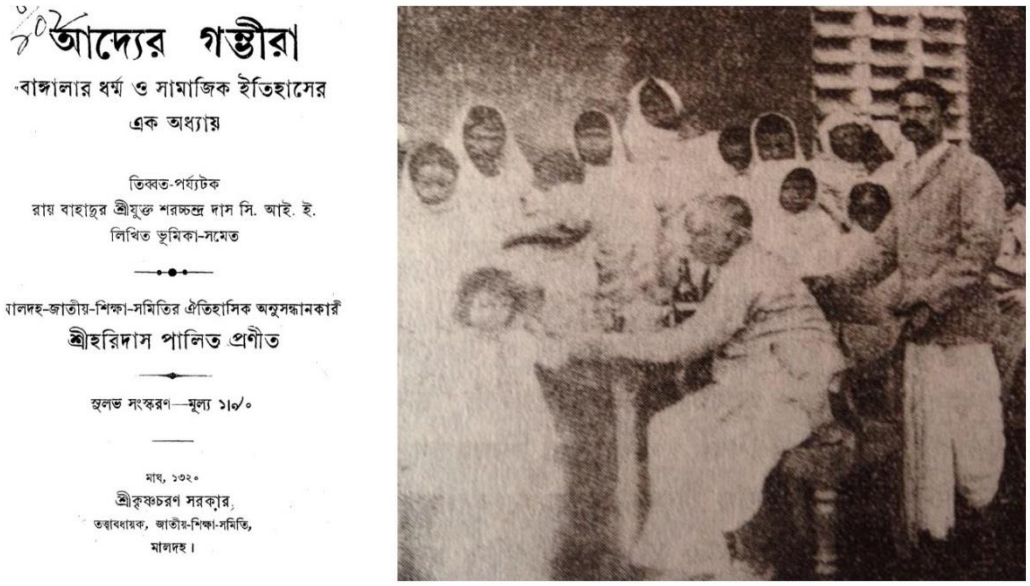
[127] Palit, *AG*, 91-95, 58-9, 150-1, 180-2, 32.
[128] Palit, *AG*, 79-80, 110.
[129] Flora, *Fairy Tales*, 42-5. Haraprasad Shastri ed., *Hājāra Bacharera Purāṇa Bāṅgālā Bhāshāẏa Bauddhagāna O Dohā* (Calcutta: Baṅgīẏa Sāhitya Parishad, 1916) and *Beṇera Meẏe* (Calcutta: Chatterjee and Sons, 1919).
[130] Sarat Chandra Das, foreword to Palit, *AG*. See also his *Indian Pandits in the Land of Snow*, ed. Nobin Chandra Das (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1893).
[131] His autobiography, a low-caste political manifesto, is also written in chaste Bengali. See Palit, *Patitajātira Karmmī.* I thank Shubho Basu for this particular insight.

the Muslim sultans of Bengal. Yet, Palit's work was applauded in Malda for making Gambhira "a national property of both Hindus and Muslims."[132]

These apparent paradoxes become explicable when we note Palit's emphasis on Gambhira's integral relationship to Malda. Despite using labels like "Hindu" or "Buddhist," Palit repeatedly describes "Gambhira of Malda" as "a chapter in the socio-religious history of Bengal" (Figure 1.8).[133] Palit attributed the ownership of Gambhira to Malda not out of mere sentimental affection, but as a political strategy of negotiating relationships with the metropolis. Palit and his colleagues linked Malda with greater Bengal and invoked ancient histories to reclaim the region from its marginality in the Calcutta nationalist imagination, which had always avoided any substantial engagement with the mofussil. Caste and religious distinctions were downplayed in order to represent an undifferentiated, elevated "Malda" selfhood before Calcutta. Palit's language and tone clearly show that the Calcutta bhadralok was his intended audience; he saw *Ādyera Gambhīrā* as a mode of a mofussil self-assertion before dismissive metropolitan intellectuals.


আদ্যের গম্ভীরা
বাঙ্গালার ধর্ম্ম ও সামাজিক ইতিহাসের
এক অধ্যায়
তিব্বত-পর্য্যটক
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লিখিত ভূমিকা-সমেত
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শ্রীহরিদাস পালিত প্রণীত
সুলভ সংস্করণ—মূল্য ১৷৵০
মাঘ, ১৩২০
শ্রীকৃষ্ণচরণ সরকার,
তত্ত্বাবধায়ক, জাতীয়-শিক্ষা-সমিতি,
মালদহ।

Figure 1.8. *The Text and the Author*. (Left) Cover Page of *Ādyera Gambhīrā* (1912), announcing the preface by Sarat Das. (Right) Haridas Palit treating patients in Kaligram, from *Māladaha Carcā vol. 1*.

[132] *Gambhīrā* 1.1 (1914).
[133] Palit, *AG*, 1,32,35,26.

Palit's mode of self-representation makes *Ādyera Gambhīrā* what Pratt calls an "autoethnographic text," a text of the contact zone, in which "people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them."[134] In contrast with western ethnography, which studied "other" societies to construct the "primitive" or the "savage" as a mirror to western society, Palit studied his own culture.[135] His work was also an early response to metropolitan representations. In granting a low-caste practice a historical genealogy to kings of Bengal, he responded to decades of disdain, as exemplified by Ram Comul Sen and Damant.[136] The Malda intelligentsia bolstered Palit's response by endorsing him as a "renowned historian," as an early advertisement of his book show (Figure 1.9). History, the reigning discipline of swadeshi years, validated the knowledge produced in Palit's autoethnography, and attracted scholarly audiences. Pratt suggests that autoethnographic texts have an indeterminate audience, from both the metropolis and the author's own community. Palit had this dual audience in mind. His autoethnography, along with the work of the research societies, altered the self-perception of his Malda readers, while changing the power dynamics between Malda and Calcutta.

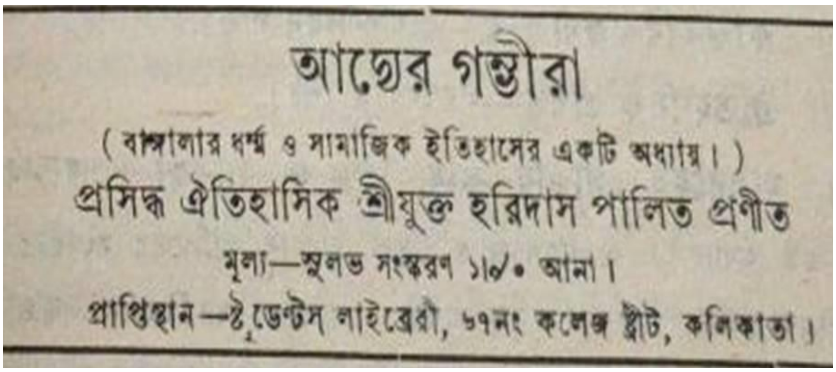

Figure 1.9. *Advertising Culture.* Advertisement of a cheap edition of Palit's *Ādyera Gambhīrā* in *Gambhīrā* (1915-6). The advertisement reads: "*Ādyera Gambhīrā* (A chapter in the socio-religious history of Bengal), authored by renowned historian Haridas Palit." The edition was available, significantly, in College Street, the central intellectual district and book market of Calcutta. Courtesy Bharati Bhavan Library, Kaligram.

[134] Pratt, "Arts of Contact Zone," 35.
[135] See Henrika Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion* (London: Routledge, 1988), for the principal aims of European ethnography.
[136] Palit mentions his sadness when people laughed at the idea of a history for Gambhira. Preface to *AG.*

The changing power dynamics were apparent in the sudden interest of the Calcutta bhadralok, after years of neglect, for the cultural history of Malda. Following the enthusiastic reception of Palit's book, Calcutta grew curious about Malda.[137] Sarkar, always the energetic organizer, lost no time in taking advantage of this interest. Along with Palit and other intellectuals like the sociologist brothers Radhakamal and Radhakumud Mookherji, he hosted at least two large literary conferences in Malda between 1911 and 1913. Hosting such conferences was a matter of great prestige for mofussil towns. The literary conferences saw, for the first time, a galaxy of Calcutta intellectuals travelling to Malda. The conference venues were often several hours of boat rides away after a day's journey from Calcutta. Nonetheless, the audience included distinguished people like the historian Jadunath Sarkar, Sanskrit pundits Amulyacharan Vidyabhusan and Bidhushekhar Shastri, and the poet Karunanidhan Bandyopadhyay. The guests travelled extensively, and Palit even prepared a booklet on the ruins of Gauṛa and Pandua for the visitors. The principal attraction, however, was Gambhira, performed in the conference venues. Gambhira was showcased and appreciated as a signifier of Malda and as a remnant of the antique heritage of Bengal.[138]

The role of Gambhira as a signifier of Malda and ancient Bengal became most apparent when in 1914, Krishnacharan Sarkar of Kaligram, a compatriot of Sarkar and Palit, started a bimonthly academic journal and named it *Gambhīrā.* Krishnacharan, supervisor of the National Educational Council, was an erudite man with a wide range of interests, and spent so much in philanthropy that he was fondly called the "Penniless (*fakir*) Sarkar."[139] Krishnacharan's journal had little to do with Gambhira, or with folk culture. It mainly contained meditations on Western science and philosophy, and some notes on history and literature. Yet Krishnacharan stated in the first issue that he could think of no other name but

[137] The extensive reviews of the book by Calcutta notables were compiled in a pamphlet titled "Opinions" and appended to Palit, *AG*.
[138] Phani Pal, "Māladahe Sāhitya Sammelana Prasaṅge Kichu Kathā," in *Māladaha Carcā,* vol. 2, ed. Malayshankar Bhattacharya (Malda: Baṅgīẏa Prakāśaka O Pustaka Bikretā Sabhā, 2011), 199-205.
[139] Interview with Goswami Family, Kaligram, 14 August 2015.

Gambhira for the journal. “Haridas Palit has discovered that Gambhira of Malda is the national property of Hindus and Muslims,” he wrote, “hence we name our journal after the universally popular festival to connect Malda to the literary flows of the whole of Bengal.”[140]

Gambhira, as Krishnacharan insightfully identified, not only connected the local to the global, but signified a diverse range of meanings. First, Gambhira was a symbol of Malda and its heritage. For Malda audiences, the word meant a connection to the land, a connection more tangible and affective than abstract terms like *desh* and swadeshi.[141] Secondly, Palit’s work had simultaneously made Gambhira the “national property” of Bengal, in Krishnacharan’s words, or a “national task,” in Sarkar’s terms. Through the contact mediation of Palit and Sarkar, Gambhira had acquired new meanings, both particular to Malda and universal to swadeshi Bengal. Their mediation was not limited to Calcutta; the charismatic Sarkar used Gambhira to converse with worlds well beyond national borders.

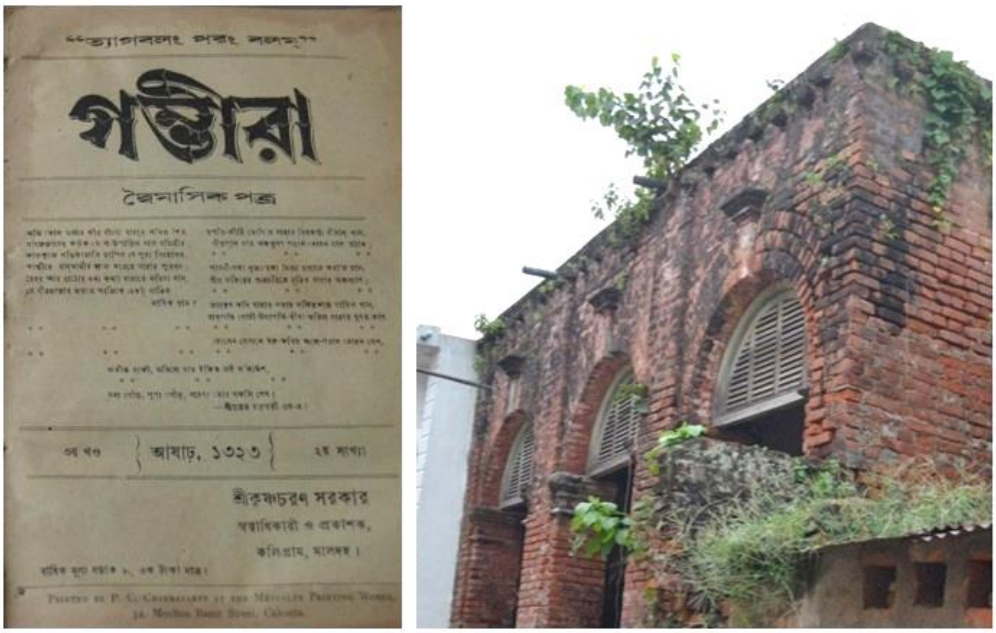

Figure 1.10. *Old Words, New Worlds*. (Left) Cover of the *Gambhīrā* 3.2 (June-July 1916), with the name of Krishnacharan Sarkar as the editor. Courtesy Bharati Bhavan Library, Kaligram. (Right) Krishnacharan Sarkar’s house today, from where the journal was published. Picture by Aniket De, August 2015.

[140] *Gambhīrā* 1.1 (1914).
[141] As Chris Bayly had suggested, such connections of land and community long preceded the middle-class nationalism of colonial India. C.A. Bayly, *Origins of Nationality in South Asia: Patriotism and Ethical Government in the Making of Modern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

The Travels of Benoy Sarkar

Palit had a profound influence on Benoy Sarkar. Sarkar was exhilarated to receive Palit's initial essay and took a major role in publishing the book. He popularized the book by commissioning reviews in numerous periodicals, and even co-authored some articles with Palit.[142] Sarkar's 1917 book *The Folk Element in Hindu Culture*, published from New York and instantly lauded in the western academia, was largely a translation of *Ādyera Gambhīrā*.[143] The book was a special one for him. "Whenever I saw that book praised in the west," he said, "my heart throbbed. It was the international victory of Palit, and victory of my hundreds of brothers from the low-castes."[144] Such a victory meant successful contact mediations between local and global realms, realms through which Sarkar travelled extensively and seemingly effortlessly. Sarkar's very idea of the folk, drawing upon the German Romantic thinker Johann Gottfried von Herder, was a product of such mediation.

Herder's idea of the *Volk* as a people, for Sarkar, connected swadeshi to anti-colonial movements beyond the British Empire. Herder (1744-1803) was known for his idea of the *Volk*, or a group of people united by linguistic and cultural homogeneity, which formed the basis of a nation and legitimized a state. Herder's ideas had a great influence in early German folklorists like the Brothers Grimm.[145] Herder's Romantic ideology of a people united by language and culture was comparable to the swadeshi imaginations of an undifferentiated *desh*. "I saw that Herder was the earliest forefather of the kind of task Palit and I did," Sarkar recounted, "following Herder's path, many nations of the world had captured the fortress of

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[142] Benoy Kumar Sarkar and Haridas Palit, "Studies in the Festival of a People," *The Collegian* 5 (Oct-Dec 1913); Benoy Kumar Sarkar and Haridas Palit, "Processions, Musical Parties and Social Gatherings in Indian Literature," *Vedic Magazine* 6.10-11 (1912/3): 833-52.

[143] See B. Laufer, review of *The Folk-Element in Hindu Culture* by Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *American Anthropologist* 21.3 (1919): 301-303.

[144] Sarkar, *BSB 1*, 243.

[145] Johan Gottfried von Herder, *Herder's Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (London: Hogarth Press, 1976); John H. Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

swadeshi, *swaraj* [self-rule] and independence." Between 1907 and 1909, he had rejuvenated his childhood engagement with Gambhira, had read Herder in Calcutta University (1908-9), and had received Palit's essay. The polymath easily connected the three: "as Palit's book had the seeds of the *Volk*, I decided to present it to the world."[146] His translation of Palit had an overt Herderian tenor, as his book title, unlike Palit's, claimed to study the "Folk Element." "The reconstruction of Indian history," Sarkar wrote, had to take into account "the influence that the masses of the country have ever exerted in the making of its civilization."[147] This Herderian concern with the "Folk Element" and the role of people in building civilizations remains the key theme in Sarkar's book.

Sarkar's later Herderian concern, however, should not eclipse his deep childhood attachment to Gambhira. As his book mentions, Gambhira had been "a matter of personal knowledge to the author for the last twenty years."[148] He used Herder merely as a tool to recast his knowledge of Gambhira for a broader audience. From this perspective, Satadru Sen's idea of Sarkar being interested in Gambhira because Gambhira was "rural, nocturnal, Dionysian, hidden, lost…overtly physical and an occasion of racial confusion" looks quite idiosyncratic. Sarkar's fond recollections of Gambhira, or his high praises on its democratic and educational potential, certainly do not highlight such dark qualities. Sen also rather naively thinks that the "obscure" Palit "introduced" Sarkar to Gambhira, which was a "specific interest" of Palit, when ironically it was Sarkar's advertisement that encouraged Palit to work on the essay. Being overly determined by the metropolitan idea of "An Indian Race," Sen's work ignores Sarkar's childhood fondness for the festival and his active engagement with Gambhira performers.[149] Sen's mistakes and idiosyncrasies show how seeing multi-sited, layered thinkers like Benoy Sarkar solely through a metropolitan gaze

[146] Sarkar, *BSB* 1, 241.
[147] Sarkar, *Folk-Element,* vii.
[148] *Ibid,* xiii.
[149] Sen, *Benoy Kumar Sarkar*, 66-8.

obscures their complex mediations between the local and the global. Like Palit's book, *Folk-Element* is also an autoethnographic text validated by disciplinary vantage points. Despite drawing upon diverse theoretical and political tools in his repertoire, Sarkar acknowledges, like Palit, that he studies his own culture. Unlike Palit, however, his contact mediation extended to worlds much beyond Calcutta, and even beyond the British Empire.

Sarkar left for Germany and the United States before the War broke out in 1914. He travelled with his friend and patron, the nationalist Raja Shivaprasad Gupta of Banaras, to Egypt and Aden, eventually reaching London.[150] The two met the premier Congress leader Lala Lajpat Rai in London, and they all sailed to New York. In America, Sarkar had contacts in the Ghadar Party, a revolutionary group that fought for Indian self-rule from outside India. He tried to act as a link between the Ghadar Party and Lajpat Rai. Rai, however, was determined to keep away from armed revolutionaries, and described Sarkar as "a mystery to us, as he never let us have a peep into his doings."[151] This "mystery" stemmed from Sarkar's mediation with worlds seemingly at odds with one another. He was in contact with revolutionaries as well as Congress leaders like Rai. Simultaneously, he personally knew the British Prime Minister Ramsay Macdonald, who once released Gupta's passport following a letter from Sarkar.[152] Sarkar's activities demonstrate his ability for an astounding range of mediations in a range of socio-political circles, from Gambhira singers to the British Prime Minister.

Sarkar's contact mediations, however, were most substantial in academic circles. He knew many important scholars in America, notably George Sarton (1884-1956), the Harvard

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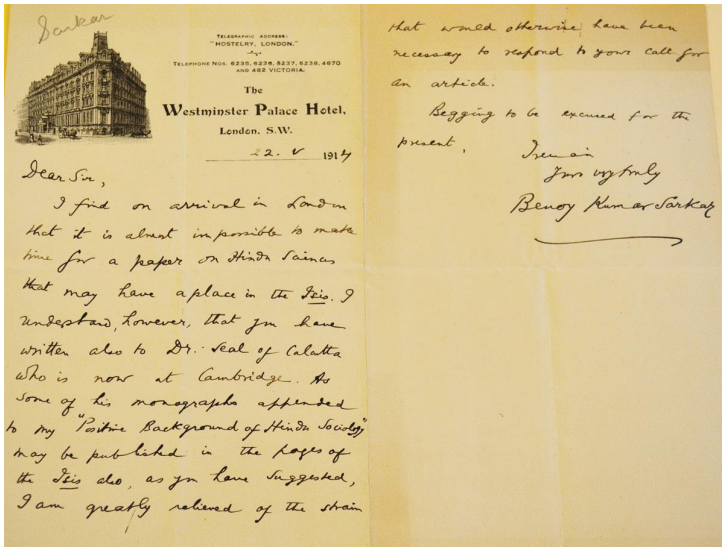
[150] The story of Benoy Sarkar's friendship with Shivaprasad Gupta is wonderfully recounted in Giuseppe Flora's unpublished essay, "Babu Shiva Prasad Gupta and Benoy Kumar Sarkar." I am indebted to Sumathi Ramaswamy for sharing this essay. See Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *Kabarera Deśe Dina Panera* (Calcutta: Gṛhastha, 1915), for his travels in Egypt.

[151] Lala Lajpat Rai, "Manuscript: Recollections of His Life and Works during his stay in U.S.A. and Japan," 1914-1917, National Archives of India, accession No. 912, 1. Cited in Flora, "Shiva Prasad," 8.

[152] See Flora, "Shiva Prasad," 8-16. When the British were prepared to deport Sarkar from America, Sarkar travelled for years in Korea, Manchuria and China, before returning to India in the mid-1920s.

historian of science and founder of the journal *Isis*, the philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952) and the economist Edwin Seligman (1861-1939). Sarkar's letters to Sarton, written from Aden, London and New York (1914-18) indicate that the two had been touch well before Sarkar reached America. Sarton had invited Sarkar to contribute an essay on the Hindu Sciences for *Isis*. Though Sarkar did not have time for the essay, he sent abstracts of his work to Sarton, using his research on Hindu sciences to converse with global scholarship on the history of science (Figure 1.11).[153] Such conversations became easier after Sarkar's book was published in 1917. Dewey and Seligman wrote an open letter commending the work of Sarkar, "a distinguished Indian scholar," and encouraged various universities to arrange Sarkar's lectures. The letter acknowledged his deep knowledge on "both oriental and occidental subjects," and even certified that his message would not be political, since "he is interested in the cultural rather than the political side of life."[154] Sarkar, at least overtly, seems to have kept his anti-colonial and academic mediations distinct in America.


Sarkar

TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS: "HOSTELRY, LONDON." TELEPHONE NOS. 6235, 6236, 6237, 6238, 4870 AND 482 VICTORIA.

The Westminster Palace Hotel, London, S.W.

22. V 1914

Dear Sir,

I find on arrival in London that it is almost impossible to make time for a paper on Hindu sciences that may have a place in the Isis. I understand, however, that you have written also to Dr. Seal of Calcutta who is now at Cambridge. As some of his monographs appended to my "Positive Background of Hindu Sociology" may be published in the pages of the Isis also, as you have suggested, I am greatly relieved of the strain that would otherwise have been necessary to respond to your call for an article.

Begging to be excused for the present,

I remain
Yours very truly
Benoy Kumar Sarkar

Figure 1.11. *Global Mediations.* Sarkar to George Sarton, May 22 1914, from London, regarding an essay in *Isis* and his ongoing work on the Hindu sciences. George Sarton Additional Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

[153] Benoy Sarkar to George Sarton, 2 April 1914, 22 May 1914, 23 October 1918, George Sarton Additional Papers (1901-1956)/MS Am 1803/File 1271, Houghton Library Archives, Harvard University.
[154] Edwin Seligman to A. Lawrence Lowell, January 3, 1918, and Lowell to Seligman, January 9, 1918, Harvard University President's Office, Records of the President of Harvard University, Abbott Lawrence Lowell (1909-1933)/UAI 5.160/Box No. 135/File 1991, Harvard University Archives. Lowell ultimately could not organize Sarkar's lecture.

Sarkar's mediation crossed not only geographical but also linguistic boundaries. Within a few years, Sarkar was fluent in at least three languages: French, German and Italian.[155] In these foreign languages, he dexterously delivered complex lectures on Indian philosophy, culture and mythology for over ten years.[156] As the endorsing letter of Seligman and Dewey show, his lectures gained popularity even among undergraduates in American universities. With unending energy and an incredible capacity for languages, Sarkar mediated between the local and the global seemingly with ease and effortlessness. His correspondence with Sarton suggests that his contact with western academia had begun years before he left India, quite possibly from his days in Malda.

Indeed, in the swadeshi years, Sarkar sent many of his students from Malda to universities in the United States and Germany, and had even commissioned Gambhira songs on village youth travelling abroad to get educated. One skit by Muhammad Sufi went:

> First villager: I'll go to America to get trained.
>
> Second villager: I'll go to Germany to fulfill my dreams!
>
> Third villager: I'll go to Japan, and satisfy my heart's desire!
>
> Fourth villager: I'll go to England, come who'll come with me!
>
> All: O brothers, we will get a good education and return to our country![157]

The "dream" and "desire" in these songs refer not to material pleasures, but self-cultivation through "good education" and training. Sarkar's National Educational Council gathered funding for the education of many young people of Malda.[158] His contact mediation, then,

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[155]His German wife Ida Sarkar fondly recalled how lucidly he explained to her the culture and politics of Bengal during the early days of their courtship. See her *My Life with Benoy Kumar Sarkar*, trans. Indira Palit (Calcutta: Prabhat, 1977), 4-35.

[156]Giuseppe Flora, *The Evolution of Positivism in Bengal: Jogendra Chandra Ghosh, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Benoy Kumar Sarkar* (Napoli: Supplemento n. 75 agli Annali Vol 53.2, 1993); Giuseppe Flora, *Benoy Kumar Sarkar and Italy: Culture, Politics and Economic Ide*ology (New Delhi: India Italian Embassy Cultural Centre, 1994); For Sarkar's philosophical treatises, see *The Positive Background of Hindu Sociology*, vol.1 (Allahabad: Panini Office, 1914).

[157] Compiled in Pal, *Gambhīrāra Saṃgraha*, 72.

[158] Phani Pal, "Jātīẏa Śikshābyābasthā O Māladahe Tāra Saphala Praẏoga," in *Māladaha Carcā,* vol. 1, ed. Malayshankar Bhattacharya (Malda: Baṅgīẏa Prakāśaka O Pustaka Bikretā Sabhā, 2011), 209-226.

went both ways: while he discussed Gambhira with Seligman, Sarton and Dewey, Gambhira performers trained by him sang about American education.

Sarkar belonged to the group of young people whom Kris Manjapra called the "swadeshi avant-garde," who set out "to imagine autonomous communities that erupted out of the temporal linearity of colonial universalism."[159] Such communities were forged in colonial contact zones, by mediators like Sarkar who facilitated material and intellectual connections beyond the nation-state. For Sarkar, Herder and the idea of the *Volk* was one way to imagine commonalities and communities beyond India, despite remaining grounded to the autoethnography reflected in *Folk Element.* The lens of the avant-garde indeed lets us see swadeshi not simply as a turn to an inward nationalism, but "as the invention of an anti-colonial internationalism based on an intellectual connection with the wider world."[160] Germany providing such an intellectual resource for Sarkar is also unsurprising, as Bengali and German intellectuals had been engaged in conversations beyond the Empire since the 1880s.[161] Much like the leftist leader M.N. Roy, Sarkar, despite being politically more conservative than Roy, was an epitome of the avant-garde.

I am reluctant, however, to use Manjapra's label of "interstitial thinker" to describe Sarkar.[162] Manjapra deploys the concept to describe M.N. Roy as "an intermediary between many worlds," and to argue that the interstitial location has contributed to both the nation and the broader communist world "forgetting" him. As the root word *interstitium* suggests, thinkers who are "interstitial" are necessarily located in gaps between two worlds. The term

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[159] Kris Manjapra, *M.N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010); Manjapra's essay "From Imperial to International Horizons: A Hermeneutic Study of Bengali Modernism," *Modern Intellectual History* 8.2 (2011): 327–39, discusses the new idea of "youth" in the swadeshi period.
[160] Kris Manjapra, "Knowledgeable Internationalism and the Swadeshi Movement, 1903-21,"*Economic and Political Weekly* XLVII.42 (Oct 20, 2012): 61.
[161] Kris Manjapra, *Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals across Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). Andrew Sartori, "Beyond Culture-Contact and Colonial Discourse: 'Germanism' in Colonial Bengal," *Modern Intellectual History* 4.1 (2007): 77-93.
[162] Manjapra, *M.N. Roy*, xv. See also Dilip M. Menon, "A Local Cosmopolitan: 'Kesari' Balakrishna Pillai and the Invention of Europe for Kerala," in *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas*, ed. Sugata Bose and Kris Manjapra (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 131-58.

also ironically implies fixity in an argument that demonstrates the movements of ideas. Such a location attributes a liminal quality to them: betwixt and between, they ambiguously belong to neither of the worlds they supposedly stand between.[163] Sarkar was not such a liminal figure. He freely moved in both worlds, "Schubert as well as Gambhira," as he liked to say. He never separated the local and the global very clearly, but mediated between the two with zest and aplomb. Neither is he "forgotten," at least in the place which he loved most. English Bazar today boasts of a marble bust of Sarkar along a road named after him (B.S. Road). A collection of his essays was published by Malda Zilla School, his alma mater, celebrating his 125th birth anniversary in 2012. His portrait hangs beside other national heroes in the Malda District Library, and his works are still used as textbooks in sociology courses in India (Figure 1.12). He lives on as a legend in Malda, and Gambhira performers and local antiquarians recount how the man, well-suited and just arrived from Europe, effortlessly hugged and laughed with his low-caste childhood friends.[164] The contact mediator is far from being lost in oblivion; the very tools he worked with have enshrined his memory.

Figure 1.12 *A Hero, Remembered.* (Left) Marble Bust of Benoy Sarkar on Benoy Sarkar Road (B.S. Road), English Bazar. (Right) Benoy Sarkar's portrait in the Malda District Library Reading Room. Pictures by Aniket De, August 2015.

[163] Manjapra, *M.N. Roy*, xv. See Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between" in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93-111, for an early exposition of liminality.
[164] Interview with Gambhira Performer Ashok Gupta, Old Malda, 15 August 2015.

Conclusion: The Emergence of a Modern Tradition

In the years between 1907 and 1914, Gambhira, previously derided by the bhadralok as the intemperate revelry of the lowly, came to be seen by them as a principal tool for building the ideals of a nation. This shift had been quick, radical and significant: later anti-colonial thinkers, notably the revolutionary Subhas Chandra Bose, continued to find in Gambhira the soul of Bengal and its culture.[165] Such a profound change was possible not only because of the rise of a metropolitan swadeshi ideology that embraced folk culture, but also because of a diverse array of contact mediations by mofussil intellectuals, who constantly moved between the mofussil and the metropolis. Benoy Sarkar, who steadily crossed local, national and imperial boundaries, inaugurated new horizons of such mediation.

The story of swadeshi Gambhira gives us unique glimpses into the checkered history of Indian nationalism. Nationalism, as Palit's and Sarkar's endeavors suggest, consisted of complex processes of contact mediation between the center and the region, the local and the global. Metanarratives of Indian nationalism that focus only on key metropolitan politicians and thinkers cannot capture the rich complexities of mediations that took place in villages and mofussil towns in order to reconcile different cultural and ideological worlds.[166] "Nation" and "culture" are anything but holistic concepts: they are convergences of countless mediating processes between competing ideologies and political agendas. Indeed, these mediating processes have persistently influenced the practical enactment of such ideologies: the reconstitution of Sarkar and Palit fundamentally changed the form of Gambhira, and produced an idiom of the performance which continues today.

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[165] Bose enthusiastically wrote about Gambhira to his friend, the musician Dilip Kumar Roy, and encouraged him to visit Malda. Subhas Chandra Bose to Dilip Kumar Roy, October 9 1925, cited in Sugata Bose, *His Majesty's Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India's Struggle against Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 62.

[166] Andrew Sartori's broad overview on the turn towards "culturalism" in swadeshi Bengal from the "liberalism" of the nineteenth century is a perfect example of such a metanarrative. Despite his brilliant theoretical insights, Sartori remains embedded to "culture" as a monolithic, undifferentiated entity: he does not explore the variegated threads that entwine and disentangle to compose the complex fabric of culture. See Sartori, *Bengal Concept History*, Ch. 1.

Further, focusing on mediation as an analytical tool reveals historical processes of change and continuity, avoiding ahistorical and theoretically unsophisticated concepts like "elite" and "popular," or "high" and "low." A figure like Sarkar, who continually avowed his attachment to Gambhira while being a transnational traveler and scholar, defy easy categorization into such groups. Categories like "elite" and "popular" were labels discursively produced by the elite to distinguish themselves from the masses, and were always more rhetoric than reality. Uncritically using such discourses as scholarly analytics is inaccurate and unproductive. The concept of contact mediation, on the other hand, not only highlights the deep connections within such categories, but also recognizes the agency of the energetic, charismatic mediators who moved between these worlds. The story of Gambhira is only one micro-level instance of such mediation, and can act as a lens to explore many other similar processes in the colonial and post-colonial worlds.

The years of swadeshi Gambhira were short yet momentous. By 1916, Sarkar, Palit, and their key collaborators had either left Malda or were dead, and the *Gambhīrā* was already complaining of Sarkar's training having made Gambhira overly monotonous and predictable. The First World War ushered in a new paradigm of politics that shifted from swadeshi ideals, and Calcutta had largely forgotten Gambhira's centrality in the swadeshi imagination by the 1920s. Yet, the contact mediation of Palit and Sarkar had created a "modern tradition," a Gambhira that had a historical genealogy, as well as a use for the present. "Tradition" and "modernity," as historians have long pointed out, are not monolithic, mutually exclusive categories with permanent and universal definitions, but sets of processes that acquire different meanings in different historical and cultural contexts.[167] Gambhira as a modern

[167] Lloyd I Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), was a pioneering text in exploring political modernity in Indian villages. A "modern tradition," however, is not necessarily a tradition "invented" for modern agendas. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, ed., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), had argued for traditions "invented" for modern political purposes. Rather, the structure of rituals like Gambhira, not dictated by texts and a product of everyday lives, were flexible enough to allow reconstitution.

tradition was a product of the contacts between modern ideas of nationalism and mofussil worlds of ritualistic symbols. Such interaction of tradition and political modernity, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's words, "fundamentally pluralizes the history of power in global modernity."[168]

Pluralized modern traditions do not exist outside of time. If culture patterns, as Clifford Geertz memorably said, are "systems or complexes of symbols," then such symbol systems change meanings over time with changing political agendas and mediating processes.[169] Just as swadeshi had recast Gambhira as national heritage, Gambhira performers changed Gambhira into a sharp weapon for anti-colonial politics in the 1930s and 1940s. The shift in Gambhira from revelry to nation-building, then, inaugurated a series of contact mediations and symbolic changes that continued well into the next two decades.

[168] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 14.
[169] Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 92.

Chapter 2

Performing the Proletariat

Mass Politics and a Fragmented Language of Popular Protest, 1920-1945

O forgetful Shiva, if we get freedom,

We will give you good, sweet bananas,

Or else rotten, seedy ones.

Gambhira song by Muhammad Sufi, Malda, c. 1942[170]

In July 1945, the Calcutta-based Communist Party newspaper *Janajuddha* ("People's War") reported that the District Magistrate of Malda had outrageously banned all songs of the popular Gambhira singer Govinda Seth, and parts of songs of Dr Dharanidhar Saha. Seth had even been permanently forbidden from public performances. The report explained:

> The banned songs, which every roadside person knew by heart, all reflected the sharp hatred of the people against the corrupt bureaucrats and racketeers. Local racketeers terrified by the songs trumpeted that the Gambhira this year has been full of obscenity and *ad hominem* attacks. Soon, a Government order summoned the notebooks of all Gambhira performers, and then came this shocking ban…May the whole country rise in protest against this imperialist attack on a key folk performance of Bengal.[171]

The reporter, a communist poet, recalled that bureaucratic revenge had often tried to silence Gambhira, by means of arrests and confiscations, throughout the 1920s and 1930s. He also wondered, noting that swadeshi Congress leaders like Radheshchandra had brought "political consciousness" into Gambhira, why the post-swadeshi nationalist Congress and the Muslim League seemed to have forgotten Gambhira.

The enthusiasm of the communists, the discomfort of the colonial state and the reported indifference of the Congress all hint toward a profound change in the political

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[170] Asutosh Bhattacharya, *Bāṃlāra Loka-Sāhitya,* vol. 3 (Kolkata: Calcutta Book House, 1965), 250.
[171] Subhas Mukhopadhyay, "Gambhira Gāner Upar Nishedhājñā," *Janajuddha* 4.10 (July 1945).

meaning of Gambhira since the swadeshi years. Swadeshi leaders like Benoy Sarkar had indeed brought "political consciousness" to Gambhira, but that politics was limited to the contact mediation between mofussil and metropolitan worlds, at best a pedagogical motive stamped with bhadralok ideology. Even colonial sources of the 1910s see the festival as a cherished historical heritage of a nation, far from being dangerous enough for a police crackdown.[172] By the 1940s, however, communists were seeing the art form as a subversive autonomous domain of the proletariat. Curiously echoing the political theorist James Scott's description of folk arts as "weapons of the weak," the *Janajuddha* described it as a "social weapon (*sāmājika astra*) to stir the masses," one developed not by Sarkar and Palit but by the poor town-dwelling performers of Malda.[173] In a span of only two decades, Gambhira was seemingly owned by the proletariat rather than by the nation (Figure 2.1).

What happened in these two decades which changed the political meaning and role of Gambhira so quickly and so profoundly? For a historian, this question leads to a bigger question: when and how does such a "weapon" start belonging to "the weak"? This is an important question, since anthropological thinking of the past century, from Mikhail Bakhtin and Victor Turner to James Scott, has regularly seen festivals as subversive realms of the weak, an exclusive space for inverting elite rules. Scholarship on Gambhira has followed this paradigm even more ardently, with folklorists lauding those who fearlessly sang subversive songs and deriding those "bought" by various political parties.[174] Marxist scholars have consequently seen Gambhira having an innate connection to subversion, resulting in a religious theatre morphing into a secular performance.[175]

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[172] *BDG Malda*, 55-6.
[173] The performers, were "inspired by the great social reformers Vidyasagar and Rammohun Roy", unmediated by the contact mediators. Radheshchandra is invoked only in the very last line, that too to lampoon current Congress leaders. Mukhopadhyay, "Gambhira Gān." James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
[174] Pal, *Kabi-Shilpi*, 133.
[175] Sumanta Banerjee, "Look What They've Done to My Song!" *India International Centre Quarterly* 24. 2/3 (1997): 151-162.

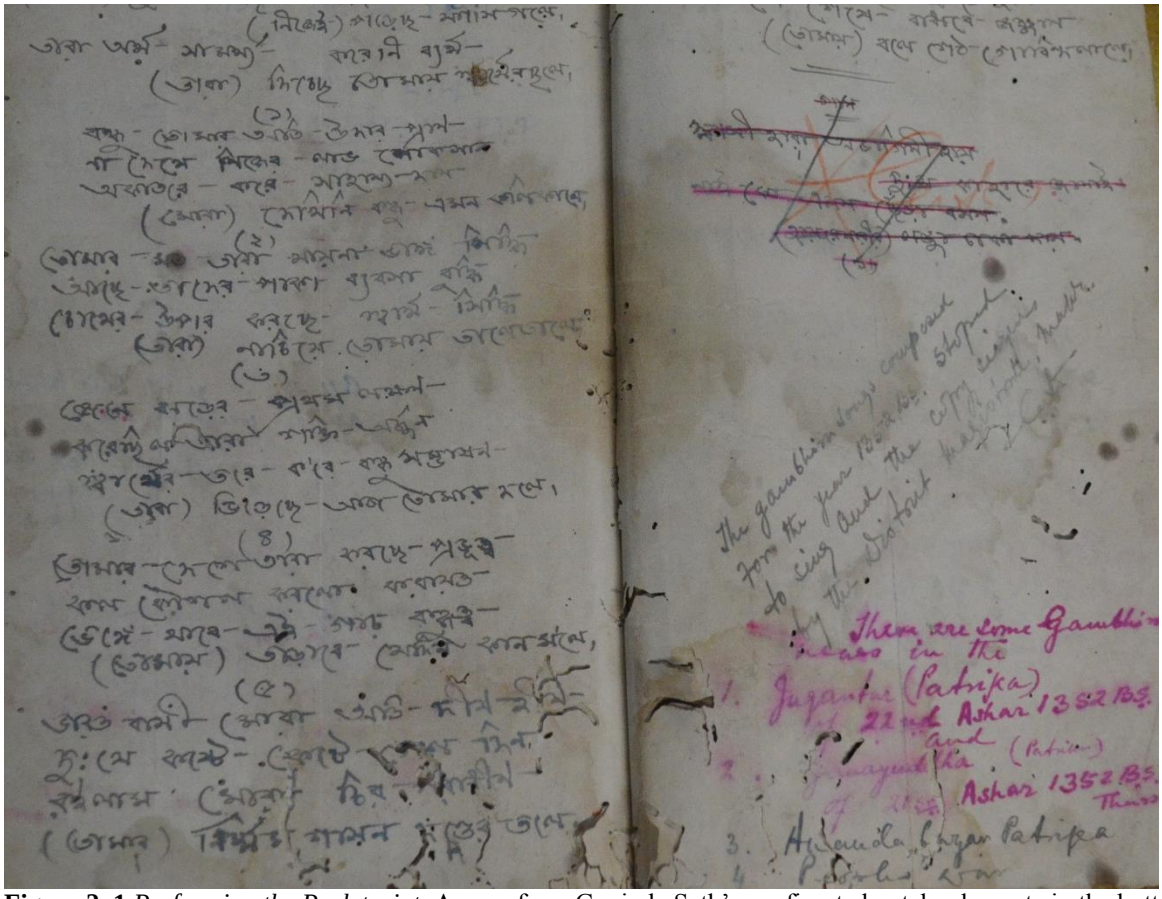

Figure 2. 1 *Performing the Proletariat.* A page from Govinda Seth's confiscated notebooks; note in the bottom-right corner he has made note of the *Janajuddha* article. GSP, PSPA, Malda.

Yet, the connection between Gambhira and popular subversion was not innate, but *historical*. Swadeshi Gambhira, nourished by the bourgeois ideology of Sarkar and Palit, was far from being subversive, a reason why later Marxist scholars rarely referred to these early mediators. The performance truly emerges as a subversive domain only in the 1930s, in the context of broader shifts in the conception of folk culture with changing paradigms of anti-colonial politics. Performances are complex and dynamic ethnographic settings, and no simplistic linking of ritualistic subversion and subaltern autonomy can explain them. Examining the changes in Bengal during 1920-45, this chapter offers a historical critique of anthropological thinking about festivals, arguing that rituals become weapons of the weak only as a product of many multifaceted historical processes.

The years between 1920 and 1945 saw what I term the "fracture" of the swadeshi idea of the folk. With the rise of Bengali regional politics and a Bengali Muslim intelligentsia, the

Hindu bhadralok's romantic ideology of a homogenous nation became fragmented. The simultaneous rise of anti-colonial mass mobilization needed to reach out to the masses with a vocabulary intelligible to them. To this end, Marxist intellectuals reworked the idea of folk culture as a secular "popular culture," and fashioned it as a social weapon of the weak, as the *Janajuddha* article demonstrates. This idea of a people's culture needed no bhadralok figure like Sarkar or Palit to mediate between the mofussil and the metropolis: rather, Gambhira performers like Seth were themselves seen, by people in both Malda and Calcutta, as the true inheritors of a subversive tradition. As a result of this "fractured mediation" between the center and the region, performers operated in relative autonomy, speaking to audiences in their localities. Unlike the swadeshi contact mediation of Sarkar and Palit, there was no agenda to represent Malda before a bhadralok audience. Performing people's culture through folk forms was possible only because the idea of one people united through language had fractured, and folk culture could be said to belong to the "people," rather than to the whole of an abstract nation.

The first section places the idea of "fractured mediation" in context of the theoretical literature on festivals and subversion. The second section follows the historical changes of 1920-45 which resulted in the *loka- saṃgīt,* "folk song" being morphed into the new political form of *gaṇa-saṃgīt*, "people's song." The last section analyses the notebooks of Govinda Seth to explore how these fractured mediations were played out in the actual domain of the performance in Malda.

Symbolic Subversion and Subaltern Autonomy

A dominant strand of anthropological thought has seen festivals as a symbolic realm to invert elite rules. As early as the 1930s, the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin had introduced the concept of the "carnivalesque" as a sphere for symbolic subversion. Studying the writings of François Rabelais, Bakhtin discovered a medieval world of the carnival,

aesthetically and politically distinct from bourgeois public occasions, which saw a "temporary suspension" of all hierarchy, allowing for a "special type of communication impossible in everyday life." These types of communication, which he described variously as the "grotesque," the "language of the marketplace," and the "banquet for all the world", gave the lowly a unique public sphere for subverting bourgeois hegemonic structures.[176] Bakhtin purposefully conjured the utopian carnival to contrast the openness of Rabelais' world with the clutches of Stalinist Russia. While the fluidity and abstractness of the carnivalesque has appealed to many anthropologists, the analytic is useful only when we see it as a utopian political statement which is not meant to be a direct map for understanding the complex sites of festivals.

Mid-twentieth century anthropologists, in turn, produced ethnographic models of rituals as sites of rebellion which remarkably conformed to the foundational ideas of Bakhtin. Notable in this regard were Africanists Max Gluckman and, more importantly, Victor Turner. Gluckman saw in Zulu political ceremonies rituals which emphasize potential rebellion from various factions. These rituals could have actually been sources of strength for the state, since kingship of these societies depended on careful negotiations between many factions. The "rituals of rebellion," for Gluckman, ultimately preserved the existing structures of power.[177] Gluckman's student Victor Turner took his cue from his teacher's work but produced a far more coherent theory of ritualistic subversion. He exhumed the work of the early twentieth century French folklorist Arnold van Gennep, who had seen *rites of passage* as having three parts: separation from the rest of society, a *liminal* or in-between phase, and then re-aggregation to society.

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[176] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 10. Though written in the 1930s, the book was not translated in English till the early 1960s.
[177] Max Gluckman, *Rituals of Rebellion in South-East Africa* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1954), 22-3.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among the Ndembu, Turner focussed on the "liminal" phase, an ambiguous in-between region where people seemed to acquire magical properties due to a "blend of lowliness and sacredness." He argued that the liminal phase created an undifferentiated *communitas*, markedly different from the structured society. In this *communitas*, much like the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, there remained no hierarchies or hegemonies, and even princes and beggars were equal. Like Gluckman, he saw these liminal spaces almost as safety valves which sustain societies: "Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed," he wrote, "and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low."[178] His reading of rituals as a political safety-valve for subaltern discontent, influenced Ranajit Guha, who argued that Hindu rituals sacralised the Indian rural elite.[179]

Turner's later works grew increasingly poetic, nebulously decontextualized and sometimes downright anti-historical. He became convinced that "social drama," the dialectic between structure and anti-structure, was a part of human nature, "behind specific historical and cultural developments."[180] Similarly, he expanded the idea of communitas to make sweeping generalizations on large-scale complex social processes. Pilgrimages, for instance, were for him "liminoid," or "quasi-liminal" phenomena, sites where structure dissolved.[181] If anything, these generalizations about a universal human subject harmed the initial analytic potential of his older articulation of liminality, which had paid close attention to contextual details of power and authority. As a result, scholars of religion challenged Turner by arguing that pilgrimages were far from being the undifferentiated communitas he conjured. Pilgrimages like the Quyllur Rit'i in Peru, for instance, are better seen as spaces for

[178] Turner, *Ritual Process*, 96-7.
[179] Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 30-3.
[180] Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 33, 198.
[181] Victor and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Approaches* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 35. Victor Turner, "The Center out There: Pilgrim's Goal," *History of Religions* 12. 3 (1973): 191-230.

expressing hierarchies rather than dissolving them, with class and ethnic identities being a continuous source of conflict and competition. Ethnographic details repeatedly showed that social processes like pilgrimages and festivals were far too complex to be generalized into a vision of undifferentiated communitas.[182]

Many leftist scholars too were uncomfortable with Turner's functionalist suggestion of communitas being coded into social processes, which implied that festivals had given, programmed purposes. In his ground-breaking work on popular resistances to power in a Malay village, James Scott argued that carnivals were instead best seen as complex ritual sites of "various forms of social conflict and symbolic manipulation, none of which can be said, prima facie, to prevail." This "symbolic manipulation" gives the low an opportunity to "disguise" anger and resistance against people in power. For Scott, disempowered people disguised their resistance through rumour, signs and gossip, and not open protest. He termed these acts *hidden transcripts*, what people actually thought about the powerful, as opposed to the *public transcript*, their apparent obedience before those in power. Carnivals and rituals, then, were meeting spaces of the two transcripts: the hidden frustrations, otherwise too dangerous to voice, could be made public, disguised and made anonymous during these social occasions. "If it is disguised," Scott writes, "it is at least not hidden; it is spoken to power," an important enough achievement for dominated peoples.[183] Such rituals, then, were potential "weapons of the weak," forms of everyday resistance for many oppressed peoples.

But Scott's dichotomy between the bodily and performative public transcript and the mental, private and autonomous hidden transcript still retains an inherent ahistoricity. Tim Mitchell had rightly questioned: if Scott's hidden transcript could so easily undermine the hegemonic ideology, then why would power structures use that ideology at all? Does that do

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[182]Michael J. Sallnow, "Communitas Reconsidered: The Sociology of Andean Pilgrimage," *Man, New Series* 16.2 (1981): 163-182; Michael J. Sallnow, *Pilgrims of the Andes: Regional Cults in Cusco* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 235-42.

[183] Scott, *Domination and Arts of Resistance*, 178, 181, 166.

justice to the role of ideology in the complex exercise of modern power? Scott's reply, that the ideological dimension of power was useful only before the great socio-economic changes in Malaya of the 1970s, is unconvincing for want of rigorous investigation of this point.[184] Mitchell's theoretical questioning is also implicitly a historical critique of Scott's theories: *when* and *why* do hidden transcripts act as critiques of power? Unlike Scott or Mitchell, I am here not interested in questions of the effectiveness of such resistance against the dominant ideology of power. My question is of a smaller scope: How does what Scott calls "symbolic manipulation" change over time, and how do languages of protest emerge? What symbols are amenable for manipulation at certain points in time, and which historical processes render such symbols open to manipulation?

The historical change in Gambhira from a national heritage of the 1910s to a social weapon of the 1930s is illuminating in thinking about this question. The large-scale political shifts in interwar India fundamentally changed the very idea of what "folk culture" means, as elaborated in the next section. It is this "fracture" in the idea of the folk that carved out a niche for the folk to belong to the "masses," the weak in face of the structures of power, rather than the symbols belonging to an abstract, romantic nation. This is not to say that the performers had no role in executing the change in Gambhira. On the contrary, the folk solely became the domain of the performers themselves, and no longer of bhadralok figures like Sarkar and Palit. In the new equation of the folk, performers themselves had to take up the role of political leadership in their performance, since they were the "people" and the folk belonged to them. It is therefore helpful to view these changes as "fractured mediations," another mediation between metropolis and mofussil born because of the fracture in the idea of the folk, and resulting in the fragmentation of a conceptually separate people's domain.

[184] Timothy Mitchell, "Everyday Metaphors of Power," *Theory and Society* 19.5 (1990): 551-2.

This single case cannot, and does not intend to, provide a grand theory to replace its glorious predecessors, but it proposes two correctives to two dead ends in the study of festivals and politics. First, it challenges the ahistoricity of the idea that subversive symbols have always been subversive; Gambhira was far from a subversive performance in the swadeshi period, but became so in the 1930s. The key ideas for the study of politics and performance, like carnivalesque, liminality, or hidden transcript, are useful only when seen as outcomes of specific socio-historical processes, and not, as in Turner's later works, as an inherent feature of human nature. Secondly, it axes the idea of festivals being autonomous domains of the subaltern, an idea cherished from Bakhtin to Scott. Precisely for this reason, it is important to pay heed to the large-scale as well as small-scale changes in the concept and practice of folk culture. Mediation between the high and the low continues in complex ways, and even the idea of the folk being autonomous is itself not free from such mediation.[185]

Fractured Mediations: From Folk Song to People's Song, 1920-45

The term "fractured" refers to two concurrent processes of conceptual fissures in the years between 1920 and 1945. First, the swadeshi nationalism of Tagore and Dinesh Sen, one that saw a homogenous, pervasive national spirit, began to disintegrate. This disintegration was due to the replacement of a single *desh* by multiple political audiences, defined by axes of region, religion and language, with their varying claims of sovereignty and autonomy. Secondly, this fracturing of swadeshi ideals in turn problematized the idea of a single national folk culture along the lines of Benoy Sarkar and Palit. Consequently, many political parties created new meanings of the idea of folk culture, a domain they claimed which belonged to specifically the masses rather than to the whole nation. Following Marx religiously, the communists in Bengal constructed folk culture as secular, but in sharp contrast to the Hindu

[185] Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), for instance, gives a good example of such mediation between great and little traditions in the Muslim world.

swadeshi iconography. These parallel fractures recast swadeshi *loka- saṃgīt*, "folk" song, into a new, so-called secular political tool of *gaṇa-saṃgīt*, "people's song."

The years between 1920 and 1945 saw the emergence of Bengal as a new kind of region, seeking a vernacular identity in relation to broader patterns of national politics. The capital of India had shifted to Delhi from Calcutta in 1911, and the Calcutta bhadralok, once in the helm of the swadeshi movement, found themselves marginalized in a frontier province miles away from the capital. The bhadralok became even less hegemonic in Bengali politics, principally with the rise of an educated Muslim middle class in East Bengal, who claimed their own cultural heritage and political agendas. [186] The swadeshi idea of folk culture reflecting a uniform national spirit had little currency with these political developments. It is no wonder, then, that both Dinesh Sen and Tagore faced intense criticism from Bengali intellectuals in this period. The linguist Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay, for instance, criticized Sen's adulation of a Bengali nation and culture by reminding him that Bengal was ultimately a "part" of India and "Indian culture," and that "there is no Bengali culture opposed to the latter."[187] The political equations had changed so drastically since the swadeshi period that the romantic nationalism of Sen had been quickly eclipsed by a new set of concerns.

Methods of political agitation, too, changed correspondingly. From the early 1920s, India saw an unprecedented range of mass participation in anti-colonial politics. An important strategist in this regard was Gandhi, who in the years between 1920 and 1942 led a series of successful mass movements several times larger in scale than swadeshi ever imagined to be. Gandhi took full advantage of the severe socio-economic problems of interwar years, the "gloom and stagnation" in all industries, which largely led to the successes of his movements and gave the Congress, previously an elite organization, a firm base among

[186] Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal 1920-1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), Ch.1 "Reinventing Bengal: The 1920s"; Bose, *Recasting the Region*, Ch. 3-4.
[187] Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay, "Bṛhattara Baṅga" in *Bhārata-Saṁskṛti* (Calcutta, 1939), 155-75, cited in Chakrabarty, "Romantic Archives."

the masses.[188] The Great Depression of 1929 only worsened the economic situation, upsetting existing rural debit-credit relationships between landlord and peasant, giving rise to a lot of supposedly "communal" conflicts between Hindu landlord and Muslim peasant.[189] Gandhi was only one of the actors who exploited fertile ground for mass agitation in the interwar years; there was a range of actors, from factions determined to create solidified "Hindu" and "Muslim" identities to meet political ends,[190] to the burgeoning Communist Party of India (CPI) marshalling peasants for resistance against landlords, intent on organizing large numbers of people in the countryside. For these factions, folk culture signified not the undifferentiated swadeshi nation, but the culture of a particular fragmented category, be it a "Bengali" folk, a "Bengali Muslim" folk, or even a Marxist "people's" folk.

Amidst this crowded field of political actors, an impetus for a "Bengali" folk culture, as a sub-category in an "Indian" folk, came mainly through the efforts of the civil servant Gurusaday Dutt (1882-1941; Figure 2.2). In 1932, he started the widely successful *Bratacārī* ("vow-taking") movement, modelled on the Boy Scouts, which taught young people folk dances and songs in a nationalist spirit. Dutt's "dancing", Benoy Sarkar later recounted with characteristic jauntiness, had made the scholarly theory of *Folk Element* an "applied anthropology."[191] This application of Sarkar's Herderian theory, for Dutt, meant seeing folk culture as specifically Bengali. Consequently, all *Bratacārī* initiates took three vows: "1) I am a Bengali 2) I love the land of Bengal and 3) I shall serve Bengal."[192] Dutt argued that

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[188] Rajat K. Ray, "Masses in Politics: The Non-cooperation Movement in Bengal 1920-1922" *IESHR* 11.4 (1974): 343. Chris Bayly's early work, *The Local Roots of Indian Politics: Allahabad 1880-1920* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), explores the local processes that helped the Congress gain supremacy in Allahabad.
[189] Sugata Bose, "The Roots of 'Communal' Violence in Rural Bengal: A Study of the Kishoreganj Riots, 1930" *MAS* 16.3(1982): 463-491.
[190]Pradip Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999) shows how "communal ideology" mobilized Bengali villages in the 1920s. Unlike Datta, I have refrained from using the term "communal" to describe these events, as the word has its own troubled genealogy in South Asian historiography that is quite tangential to this chapter.
[191]*BSB I*, 239.
[192] Frank J. Korom, "Inventing Traditions: Folklore and Nationalism as Historical Process in Bengal" In *Folklore and Historical Process*, Ed. D. Rihtman-Augustin and M. Povrzanovic (Zagreb: Institute of Folklore Research, 1989): 74-5; Sankar Sengupta, *Folklorists of Bengal* (Calcutta: Indian Publications, 1965), 136.

folk culture followed "racial instead of political divisions"; an enthusiasm for a "general type of Indian" culture, he warned, should not obscure the remarkable achievements of Bengali artists.[193] Frank Korom has therefore aptly termed Dutt's activities as "vernacular nationalism," since his Bengali regionalism was not essentially anti-Indian, but rather a search for a unique regional possibility within the broader national framework.[194]

Figure 2.2 *The Revivalist Gaze.* Gurusaday Dutt watches Mataru Chitrakar painting. From Dutt, *Folk Crafts.*

Figure 2.3 *A Martial Dance.* Representations of "Charak Gambhira Dance" in the writings of Gurusaday Dutt. Note the neat order of dancers and vigorous physical movements. From Dutt, *Folk Dances of Bengal.*

[193] Gurusaday Dutt, "Folk Art and Its Relation to National Culture" In Gurusaday Dutt, *Folk Arts and Crafts of Bengal: The Collected Papers.* Ed. Samik Bandyopadhyay (Calcutta: Seagull, 1990), 9.
[194] Frank J. Korom, "Gurusaday Dutt, Vernacular Nationalism, and the Folk Culture Revival in Colonial Bengal" In *Folklore in Context: Essays in Honour of Shamsuzzaman Khan*, Ed. Firoz Mahmud (Dhaka: The University Press, 2010): 257-73.

This search for positionality was a political act, and Dutt used folk culture as a vantage point to challenge common stereotypes of Bengalis. The clerical bhadralok had long been fashioned by the British as weak and effeminate; by the early 1900s such stereotypes were quite popular all over India.[195] Dutt responded to these claims by showing "folk dances of Bengal" like Gambhira and *Rai-Beshe* as "robust in character and entirely wanting in the melting softness of movement [of] 'oriental' dance". These dances constituted, therefore, a central element in the national character of Bengal, with a "pronounced democratic base" for "solidarity, unity and fellowship." Dutt's Gambhira, therefore, was rife with motifs of "war, play, commemoration, fitness and propitiation": his illustrations of Gambhira make no reference to the ritual or art, but instead depict acrobatics of well-built men.[196] Gambhira did not mean Sarkar's "national task," but signified physical vigour and fitness as a political response to British and North Indian stereotyping of Bengali effeminacy (Figure 2.3).

The regional politics of folklore extended far beyond Dutt's dances. By the 1930s, a new generation of literary scholars had redefined Tagore and Dinesh Sen's term "loka-sāhitya" (folk literature) to legitimize a particularly *Bengali* literary tradition. Scholars like Sushil Kumar De and Asutosh Bhattacharya excavated a distinct literary tradition in Bengali, drawing principally from the pre-colonial Hindu literary sources like Vaishnava literature and vernacular epic poems *maṇgal kābyas*.[197] These works, as De remarked, had "great contemporary relevance" in introducing readers to "the deep consciousness and feelings of the past on which the present rests."[198] This past was slightly different from the swadeshi past insofar as it saw the past of a well-defined cultural region, unlike the swadeshi idea of a

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[195] See Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); the classic theoretical exposition in this regard is).
[196] Gurusaday Dutt, *The Folk Dances of Bengal* (Calcutta: The Estate of Late Sri Gurusaday Dutt, 1954), 17, 19-21, xi.
[197] S. K. De, *Early History of Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta: Firma KLM 1961 [1942]). Asutosh Bhattacharya, *Bāṃlā Maṇgalkābyer Itihās* (Calcutta: Published by Dipankar Bhattacharya, 1939).
[198] Sushil Kumar De, "Paricāyikā" in Bhattacharya, *Maṇgalkābyer Itihās*, 12.

nebulous *desh*. Given the altered centre-region relationships of the 1930s, it was no longer possible to speak of a homogenous, culturally unified *desh*.

The fractures went deeper. A Bengali Muslim intelligentsia had been burgeoning since the 1910s, and grew substantially by the 1930s. Despite having many respected literary figures, the Muslim intelligentsia found itself marginalized in Calcutta. Bengali literature and its search for pre-colonial roots were both still predominantly Hindu projects. The search for a Muslim selfhood therefore recast folklore studies as part of a "specifically Bengali Muslim literary culture." [199] The two erstwhile students of Dinesh Sen, the poet Jasimuddin and the linguist Muhammad Shahidullah, led this project, especially, as Neilesh Bose has shown, in the pages of the Calcutta-based journal *Bulbul* (1933). The antiquarian Abdul Karim Sahityabisharad tirelessly toiled through villages to set up an astounding collection of manuscripts, of medieval Bengali Muslim authors like Alaol, Daulat Kazi, Syed Sultan, and Jainuddin, creating a textual corpus to envision a Muslim literary past, and to unearth a specifically Bengali idiom of articulating Islam.[200] Contrary to Neilesh Bose's suggestion, these scholars did not merely continue swadeshi folkloristics;[201] rather, the creation of a separate sphere of Muslim "folk culture" was in itself a response to the romantic swadeshi notion of a holistic *desh* ultimately shaped by a Hindu worldview. Pre-modern Muslim literary cultures enabled Bengali Muslims to carve out their own identity from the hegemonic Hindu discourse on Bengali literature.

For Hindu and Muslim folklorists alike, the collection of manuscripts was the key strategy to assert a place in the literary history of Bengal; such a textual focus, however,

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[199]See Bose, *Recasting the Region*, Ch. 2 "Ideological Traffic in Calcutta" and Ch. 3 "Literary Publics in Dacca".

[200] Bose, *Recasting the Region*, Ch. 3; Gautam Bhadra, "Jātiyatābāder Puṃthi-Pāṭh: Ābdul Karim Sāhityabiśārad" *Bāromās* (2003): 20-35; Gautam Bhadra, *Munsī Ābdul Karim Sāhityabiśarad O Ātmasattār Rājnīti* (Dhaka: Samhati Publications, 2007); Ābdul Karim Sāhityabiśarad (Ed.) *Ālāoler Padmābatī* (Chittagong: Bangla Sahitya Samiti, 1977); Muhammad Saidur Rahman (Ed.) Ābdul *Karim Sāhityabiśāradke Nibedita Prabandha Saṃkalan* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1994).

[201]Bose, *Recasting the Region*, 149.

poorly mapped with actual performative practices and audiences. A practice like Gambhira was performed by both Hindus and Muslims; but the Hindu folklorists confined themselves to collecting the handful of Gambhira songs with explicitly scriptural references, while the Muslim scholars ignored it altogether. But when Gambhira performers wrote songs, they addressed both Hindu and Muslim audiences, eclectically drawing upon mythography and practices common to both groups, as well as local events which touched everyone's lives. As a result, there continued a rift between the philologists intent on constructing respective national pasts with texts and the audiences of both Hindu and Muslim performers. The breakdown of the folk along linguistic and religious axes not only displaced the swadeshi rhetoric of folk being a reflection of the common heritage, but also fissured the discourse on textual folklore and performative practices. Taking advantage of these fractures, the communists, determined to use folk culture as a tool of mass mobilization, constructed a new "secular" domain of popular culture; folk songs, they claimed, were, after all, people's songs.

The boundaries of "religious" populations and a "secular" folk culture were negotiated by the anti-colonial poet Kazi Nazrul Islam in the early 1920s. Nazrul's early popularity came not as a Muslim literary figure, but as an anti-colonial "rebel poet." Along with the communist leader Muzaffar Ahmed, he was involved in running newspapers like *Laṃal* ("The Plough") and *Nabajug* ("New Age"). He was regularly invited to peasants' and jute mill worker's associations to sing his songs, ranging from Muslim ghazals to vibrant lyrics modelled on folk tunes. Born and raised in a village in Bardhaman in West Bengal, Nazrul himself was no stranger to folk culture. As a child, he had worked for rural theatres troupes, absorbing the rich worlds of Hindu myths as well as Muslim texts. [202] In composing songs for popular gatherings, he effortlessly moved between Hindu and Muslim themes, yet rejected visions of separate Hindu and Muslim folk cultures. Despite being scoffed at by

[202] See Priti Kumar Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul Islam: Poetry and History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 23, 43. Bose, *Recasting the Region*, 39-75.

orthodox clerics, Nazrul refused to draw religious distinctions. When a tempest rages, he wrote in a famous poem, the captain of a ship should not ask if the drowning ones are Hindus or Muslims, but save the "human beings, children of my mother."

Nazrul's humanist poetry and song, significantly more eclectic and popular in content and tune than Tagore's swadeshi songs, were early precursors to the emergent paradigm of *gaṇa-saṃgīt*, "people's song", as opposed to the swadeshi *loka- saṃgīt*, "folk-song". The term *gaṇa* is a Sanskrit word meaning a mass of people, and unlike *loka* does not suggest a common cultural or religious belonging. If *loka* was a translation of the Germanic *Volk*, *gaṇa* translated the Greek *demos*: democracy is translated as *gaṇa-tantra*, the rule of the *gaṇa*. Like *demos*, *Gaṇa* referred to the people as a *political* rather than a cultural entity, following the root of "politics" to the affairs of the *polis* or the city-state. By creating the category of *gaṇa-saṃgīt*, the communists attempted to do away with the divisive politics along religious and regional axes that *loka* had fostered, and continue their programmes of mobilizing peasants and workers irrespective of cultural divisions. Burgeoning from the 1930s, the genre found full expression in the early 1940s when a range of Marxist artists and intellectuals joined the cultural wing of the CPI, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). *Gaṇa-saṃgīt*, the communists decided, had to be a secular genre to do away with the divisiveness of the *loka*.

This emphasis on the secular solved an ideological problem, but engendered a practical one. How could the party achieve popularity by propagating the distinctively foreign idea of "secularism" among peoples whose worldviews were so completely shaped by religious myths and practices? Nazrul, having ideological leanings but no institutional political affiliations, had not faced this issue as he had freely drawn from religious imagery. The communists made a key conceptual substitution to resolve the dilemma. They embraced folk symbols and mythic worlds familiar to the people, but simultaneously labelled these symbols as secular "folk culture," a domain which had nothing to do with religion. They saw

folk culture as the people's subversive response to elite culture, and religion, being an elite institution, had no place in it. Even baul songs, often explicitly speaking of divine attachments, were dubbed as secular "folk songs".[203] The communists ignored all ritual meanings of the folk, and instead, to follow Rustom Bharucha's insightful formulation, appropriated "the 'folk' in the name of the secular."[204]

The reformulation of "folk culture" as secular enabled Marxist artists to draw upon the inexhaustible repertoire of popular myths, symbols and genres, as Nazrul had done two decades ago. Hemanga Biswas, the doyen of *gaṇa-saṃgīt* composers, composed a *Mountbatten Maṅgalkābya*. The song used the meter and tone of the medieval Hindu epic *maṅgalkābyas* but its content severely criticized the Congress' and the Viceroy Lord Mountbatten's plan for the Partition of India.[205] The Marxist artist Chittaprosad (1915-1978), known for his "secular" paintings of starving masses, not only sketched a Gajan (or Gambhira) scene for an IPTA folk dance exhibition, but also made the costumes for the ballet for two months using gunny cloth, as the IPTA refused to buy silk from the black market (1945).[206] Unsurprisingly, the study of Bengali folk culture has been dominated by Marxist intellectuals since the 1940s, who have seen folk dances and processions as "social" and not "religious" subversive reactions against bourgeois oppression (Figures 2.4-5).[207]

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[203] Jeanne Openshaw, Personal Communication.

[204] Rustom Bharucha, *In the Name of the Secular: Contemporary Cultural Activism in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 33.

[205] "O Mountbatten, in whose hands did you leave your prized baton?" the singer wailed, referring to the ineptitude of the Congress leaders of the Mountbatten ministry. Hemanga Biswas, lyricist, composer and singer, "Mountbatten Maṅgalkābya," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLkHwI-mw7w. Accessed 21 November 2015. The narration is by Salil Chowdhury. .

[206] Balraj Sahni quoted in Sanjoy Kumar Mallik, *Chittaprosad: A Retrospective 1915-1978* Vol. 2 (New Delhi: Delhi Art Gallery, 2011), 429. Chittaprosad's folk sketches may combine his "innate realism" and "the rhythmic simplification imbibed from folk practices," as his exhibition catalogue rather eloquently describes. At the same time, it is important to note that he was distinguishing "folk art" by means of that constructed "rhythmic simplification" from "religious art"; a casual glance at his major corpus of paintings (what the art critic likes to call "innate realism") show how adamantly "non-religious" his art was, in terms of iconography and content. Mallik, *Chittaprosad*, 426.

[207] Bireshwar Bandyopadhyay, *Bāṁlādeśera Saṅ Prasaṅge* (Kolkata: The Asiatic Society, 1972); Benoy Ghosh, *Baṁlā Lokasaṁskṛtira Samājatattba* (Kolkata: Aruna Prakashani, 1979); Gopal Haldar, *Saṁskṛtira Rūpāntara* (Kolkata: Orient Book and Co., 1965).

Figure 2.4 *Religious Sketches of a Communist Artist.* (Clockwise from top left) Chittaprosad's sketch of Shiva in Gajan; January 6, 1945 issue of *People's Age* which printed the folk dance sketches; detail of the Gajan scene; Chittaprosad's sketch of Shiva's wife Parvati. Graphite, brush and Ink on paper. Compare these with Figure 2.5, his generic sketches. Mallik, *Chittaprosad I and II.*

Figure 2.5 *A People's Art, A People's Movement.* . Chittaprosad, "The Road is made with Blood", pastel, pen and ink on paper, 1951. Collection of Neville Tuli Family, Mumbai. Mallik, *Chittaprosad II*, 331. Sketches with similar contents and stylistics consist the bulk of Chittaprosad's paintings.

Not all strands of Marxist activism appropriated the folk equally. IPTA theatrical productions on famine and peasant oppression, hailed as landmark by urban theatre-goers, received only lukewarm response from rural audiences, with few appreciating the innovations in the plays. A telling anecdote reports a peasant leader rushing backstage during an IPTA performance of *Jabānbandī* ("Statement"), pleading with the performers to "supply a commentary, since the peasants could not understand anything".[208] According to Bharucha, unlike the Maharashtra and South India wings of the IPTA that deployed regional folk forms,

[208] Malini Bhattacharya, "The Indian People's Theatre Association: A Preliminary Sketch of the Movement and the Organization 1942-47" *Sangeet Natak* 94 (1989), 17, quoted in Bharucha, *In the Name of the Secular*, 37-8.

the urban-focussed Bengal wing of the IPTA "failed to exploit" this indigenous world of the Bengali peasant of "the *jatra*, the *kabijan* [sic] and the *kirtan.*"[209] Bharucha is right in identifying that the urban plays had little impact on the villages, but goes remiss in seeing the IPTA as merely a group of urban intellectuals seeking to "exploit" folk forms. His metropolitan gaze misjudges rural theatre forms, which, far from waiting to be exploited by the urban artists, thrived on their own, with performers having their own political agendas.

For both the mofussil and the metropolis, it was less a question of exploiting folk forms than of redefining the very idea of the folk. A key redefinition in this regard was the shift from a culturally unified people (*loka*), to a political conglomeration of the "masses" (*gaṇa*). The idea of *gaṇa-saṃgīt* meant that only mofussil performers, and not the bhadralok, had the prerogative of using the songs as a political tool. Even if bhadraloks composed *gaṇa-saṃgīts*, the primary audiences were primarily the masses. Note that this idea of the "masses" is a different kind of abstraction than the swadeshi *desh*, but nonetheless a metropolitan abstraction. After all, none but Calcutta intellectuals founded this idea of *gaṇa-saṃgīt*; the *Janajuddha* report too was written by a bhadralok poet for a Calcutta audience.

Gambhira performers-politicians, therefore, had to mediate between several conceptual and performative fractures. They had to address their local audiences, yet place before the bhadralok an idea of "people's culture." They were meant to be the sole proprietors of *gaṇa-saṃgīt*, but the idea of *gaṇa* was itself defined by the bhadralok. A close reading of Gambhira songs of this period show the fractured mediations between the performance, the politics, and the idea of the *gaṇa.*

[209]Rustom Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theatre of Bengal* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), 44.

Reading the Gambhira Archive

If the turbulent years between 1920 and 1945 produced a new idea of folk culture, fractured and manipulated by several actors, then how were those fractures manifested in the actual enactment of Gambhira? What changed in the genre of performance since the days of Sarkar and Palit, and how did such changes reckon with the fractured folk and the communist discourse on "people's culture"? This section will closely examine Gambhira songs from these years, drawn from the unpublished notebooks of Govinda Seth as well as from anthologies complied by folklorists. These songs collectively form an extraordinary archive not only for examining the changes in Gambhira in the interwar years, but for understanding a "social history of the imagination" that grappled with the great political upheavals of these years, like the Second World War, the Bengal famine, and the looming shadow of partition.[210]

The Or-else Clause

In the interwar years, a fundamental change came in the way performers articulated their relationship to Shiva. While the swadeshi songs were playful jokes and puns or prayers for social reform, the newer skits grew increasingly sharper in arguing with Shiva, if not accosting him to meet certain demands. A 1942 song by Muhammad Sufi, quoted as the epigram to this chapter, entices Shiva with "good, sweet bananas" if the demands for independence (*swaraj*) are granted, but then warns "or else rotten, seedy bananas."[211] There is nothing unusual in bargaining with a god; much of popular worship like vows, or even the

[210] Seth was composing a book manuscript compiling songs of these years, as the notebook has his signature certifying these songs as authentic, and even an explanatory preface for readers. Seth's team, today called the *Kutubpur Gambhira Dal*, archives notebooks from the 1940s to the present, preserving an archive of over 600 Gambhira songs. While in this chapter we will focus only on the 1941-4 notebook, we will periodically return to these archives later. I am indebted to Prasanta Seth, Govinda Seth's nephew, for not only lovingly preserving these termite-eaten, water-soaked notebooks in his house, but for sharing them so graciously with me. Since the notebooks have no page numbers, they will be cited as Govinda Seth Papers (GSP) 1941-4, Prasanta Seth Personal Archives (PSPA). Clifford Geertz described art as "a social history of the imagination" in "Art as a Cultural System" In *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 119.

[211] Bhattacharya, *Loka-Sahitya*, 250.

Vedic sacrifice, is contractual in the sense that they promise offerings in exchange for divine favours. This contractual nature of religion extends well beyond the Hindu world: consider Moses on the mountain working out a special deal for his people, or think of Muhammad in the Mirāj bargaining with Allāh about the number of ritual prayers. What is indeed unique is the humorous, unveiled threat with "or else." Prayers generally take the form of "if you give me X, I will do Y for you," or "I give you Y, now please reciprocate my offerings." But the "or else" is almost an open threat which places the speaker at par with the god.[212]

Sufi's "or-else" was indeed a relatively mild threat to the poor god. Songs in Seth's notebook, in contrast, are vitriolic in their attack to the "forgetful god" whose "begging bowl was over" with the War ravaging people all over the world. The image of the forgetful farmer god coming to his wife disguised as a beggar, an endeared image of Shiva in Bengal, was put to a different use by Seth. "Forgetful" and "begging" were casted as negative qualities, with their striking parallels with a government that begged for taxes but forgot to govern, and Shiva symbolized British colonial rule in India. Written towards the end of the War, Seth's song challenged Shiva (the British) to save the Indian peoples "from sorrow and trouble":

> Or Else, we will not keep you in one piece.
> We will take you up a tree, throw you down,
> And send you to hell.[213]

Note how much Seth's else-clause is stronger than Sufi's. Seth threatens physical harm to the god, and even dares to send him to hell. Even by the standards of the most ethnographically relativist theology, such a proposition is nothing less than preposterous. Yet, Seth threatens the god, presumably with the full support of his audience, as an equal to the god.

This positional equality with the god fundamentally changes the tenor of the Gambhira genre. The practice of making fun of the hemp-smoking god, often with profanities

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[212] I thank Tony Stewart for his insights in this regard. Personal communication, 27 November 2014.
[213] *GSP* (1942), *PSPA*, 20-2.

and ribald references, is an old practice. The or-else clause is a radical development from that practice because it foregrounds political bargaining rather than mere humour. This development was possible principally because of the direct linking of folk culture and popular politics. From the 1920s to the present day, this threatening nature of the performance has become a defining feature of Gambhira: most performers today maintain that they sing Gambhira as it enables them to say everything to the god fearlessly.[214] Important here is also the idea of the *gaṇa-saṃgīt* as cultural yet non-religious. The older jokes about Shiva acknowledged the divinity of Shiva, and saw his idiosyncrasies merely as a play of the god, a very common and theologically important concept in Hinduism. In contrast, the songs of Seth, Saha and Sufi at best mock his divinity with the or-else threats, and at worst see him as merely human.

This extreme humanization of Shiva (extreme since the god's image was anyway quite human) allowed Shiva to become more versatile a symbol than ever, being attached to no myths, rites or textual prescriptions. Performers could freely adapt Shiva to the specific agendas of their songs. In the previous song, for instance, Seth fashioned Shiva as the British and threatened to throw him into hell if freedom was not granted. In the following song, Shiva is still the British, and implores "god wearing tiger-skin"[215] why has he been so sad and morose of late:

> Why have you thinned, what worries you night and day?
> You are dying because of your own faults,
> And you have finished us as well.
> How many more days will you last?[216]

Seth is considerably more sympathetic to the British in this song than in the previous one, despite not moving away from his conviction that the Empire will not last more than a few

[214] Ethnographic interviewing, Malda, May 2014.
[215] *kṛttibāsa*: an epithet of Shiva, since he always wears tiger skins.
[216] *GSP* (1941), *PSPA*, 5-6.

days. As we shall see in the next section, this sudden sympathy owes to the World War, and Seth decides that it is better to support the British than the Axis Powers. Here, it suffices to note that the symbol of Shiva was so flexible that the very term symbol, meaning representative of a certain idea, seems inept for describing it. The figure of Shiva became polysemic, and allowed performers to blend politics and performance in their own terms.

Political Performers, Performed Politics

Seth's sympathetic song to Shiva shows his careful treading between local opinions of his audiences about colonialism, and the bigger question about who should win the Second World War. To appease his audience, he first chastises the sobbing "lord of the world,"[217] warning him that the people are not asleep, they know all about his wrongdoings and the widening "cracks" in his Empire. After this sarcastic prelude, characteristic of the genre, the song shows unexpected affection and care for Shiva:

> We are Indians, we live far away from you,
> And we are worried about your well-being.
> We worry how you will win this war,
> We worry how the Germans will be decimated.

The performer offers a twist here: the anxiety for Shiva's health and the "worry" about winning the war first indicates that Shiva's well-being is ultimately necessary for the people. It begins to depart from the generic complaints against the colonial masters, and presages a different agenda.

This apparent anxiety is only temporary, for the next stanza again chastises Shiva for being ungrateful: despite winning the First World War with the help of Indian soldiers and politicians, the British remained indifferent to the question of decolonization for India. This accusation of betrayal was a key political argument in post-war Congress politics, not least in

[217] *Biśveśvara*: another epithet of Shiva.

the great mass movements of Gandhi. Therefore, despite Indians being Shiva's "well-wishing obedient subjects," who "shed tears on your torture," Shiva "extinguished the lamp of hope" after giving the hope of decolonization. The song's deceptive simplicity gives rise to a range of political interpretations. The line "we shed tears on your torture" may mean that obedient Indians cry upon seeing the plight of the Empire in the hands of Germany. It can also sarcastically mean that Indians cry after the tortures inflicted by the colonial state on them, like conscription of Indian soldiers and the refusal of decolonization. What is important to note here is that there is an element of suspense in the way the song moves: no one is quite sure of Seth's real political allegiance till the end of the song.

The ending stanzas, however, heighten the political ambiguity rather than resolving it, blending the threads of Hindu-Muslim conflict, colonial policy, and the turbulence of the war years:

> Following your injunctions, Muslim and Hindu
> Fight one another, and have no affinity left;
> We had been brothers and friends since the beginning of time,
> We lost our minds following your rules.
>
> **
>
> Stop, everyone, stop the communal fights
> In these turbulent days, do not be blind in anger!
> Govinda Seth clasps his hands before all of you:
> Raise the flag of righteousness (*dharma*)!
> Raise the flag of the British![218]

There are at least three conflicting arguments here. First, the animosity between Hindu and Muslim groups is considered to be an outcome of colonial "divide and rule" policy. This was,

[218]*GSP* (1941), *PSPA*, 5-6.

once again, a standard Congress interpretation of the contemporary political scenario. Secondly, Seth sensibly implores Hindus and Muslims to stop fighting, indicating that relations between the two communities were tense in Malda. Such a call is inevitably a challenge to colonial policy. Yet, the third and most ambiguous argument is to raise the flag of righteousness, or *dharma*, by raising the flag of Britain. The implication that the British embody righteousness, in the context of this song, can be best read as an immediate tactical remedy to stop the increasing animosity between Hindus and Muslims. Seth seems to imply that despite all the wrongdoings of the British, the British winning the war was in the best interest of the people. Perhaps Seth thought that a unified support for the British would have brought Hindus and Muslims on the same side of the table. Seth's songs, then, portray a complex and ambiguous take on colonialism. Note also how Shiva steadily disappears from the picture, with the end only having Seth alone requesting his audience for a favour.

The long narrative of one perplexing song demonstrates that local political agendas were so complex and ambiguous that any simplistic label of "popular politics" would not do justice to them. The "or-else threat" to Shiva is only a generic improvement, and the importance of that improvement is its versatility. Seth's songs show the incredible capability of the genre to move between various political agendas, being pro-British, pro-Congress or just his own agenda sometimes. Seth's situation, however, is only ambiguous when we consider the official viewpoints of national political parties like the Congress as the exclusive political voices. While those viewpoints clearly influence Seth, as seen in his opinion on the First World War or the origins of communitarian conflict, his agenda is by no means uniformly coterminous with theirs. In fact, the success of Seth's politics is based upon the ability to selectively draw upon diverse viewpoints to address the issue at hand. From this perspective, the question whether Seth was an active member of any political party (he might have had some connections with the CPI) is interesting only to the extent to which he

recognized that aspect of his identity. In almost all his songs, he does not. Further, unlike many other political gatherings where generally followers of a certain ideology were present, Gambhira gatherings were local events with diverse audiences of all identities. The eclecticism of the audience demanded a skilful negotiation between various viewpoints.[219]

The audience is quite important for performances in a multicultural locality like Malda. As shown in chapter 1, Palit and Sarkar had resolved the multiculturalism issue by prioritizing Gambhira as a heritage belonging to Malda, instead of assigning its ownership to any particular group. For Seth, the many songs explicitly address Hindu Muslim friendship, recognizing not only the high composition of Muslims in Malda, but also that he probably had both Hindus and Muslims as his audience. As a result, he, like many other performers of his time, carefully avoided an overuse of Hindu mythic imagery. Instead, he focussed richly on landscapes of Malda town and recent happenings in the district, issues that would naturally draw more attention than abstruse political or theological discourse. The vast majority of Gambhira songs, at all times, have focussed on local issues that mattered most to the audiences.[220] In the war years, such issues included the astronomical inflation rates, unemployment and frequent blackouts. Many songs lament about students being "cheated both ways," since with schools closing and no jobs left, they had become "a shameful presence for the place." "All streets are full of darkness," Seth mused about the blackouts, "This mind, which sees only darkness, thinks that the future is equally dark.[221]

Yet, this focus on the local should not mislead us, as it has misled many generations of folklorists, to assume that Gambhira performers were isolated into little worlds of their own. Rather, the local was the site where broader historical processes were lived and

[219]This is not to say that political parties did not recruit Gambhira singers for canvassing their viewpoints. But my sense is that that is a later development, and in the period under consideration, it was mainly the performers who were in charge. This point will receive further elaboration in the forthcoming chapters.
[220] See Farina Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 107-114, for a similar example of diverse audience participation in the shrines of colonial Punjab.
[221] *GSP* (1942), *PSPA*, 20-2.

experienced by the people. Seth's referral to the local often reflects an acute awareness of political developments in Calcutta, Delhi or even London. A telling example is a song on the 1942 arrival of Sir Stafford Cripps in India to negotiate with Indian leaders about independence. The Cripps Mission promised India dominion status once the war was over if Indians cooperated with war efforts. But in 1942 no one knew when the war would end, and Gandhi had famously dismissed the Cripps mission as "a post-dated check in a failing bank." Seth's standard imagery of Shiva as the British saw the Cripps mission as a hope for "fruits of much penance," following the vocabulary of contractual religion. Yet, the Cripps Mission was ultimately nothing but "taking Vishnu's name in deathbed" (*maraṅa kāle harināma*), a popular Bengali idiom that refers to a sinful person trying in vain to redeem himself at the last moments before his death. [222] Seth's message, essentially, is not very different from Gandhi's (even possibly derived from it), but tailored for a particular kind of audience, through an intelligent use of a common vocabulary of symbols.

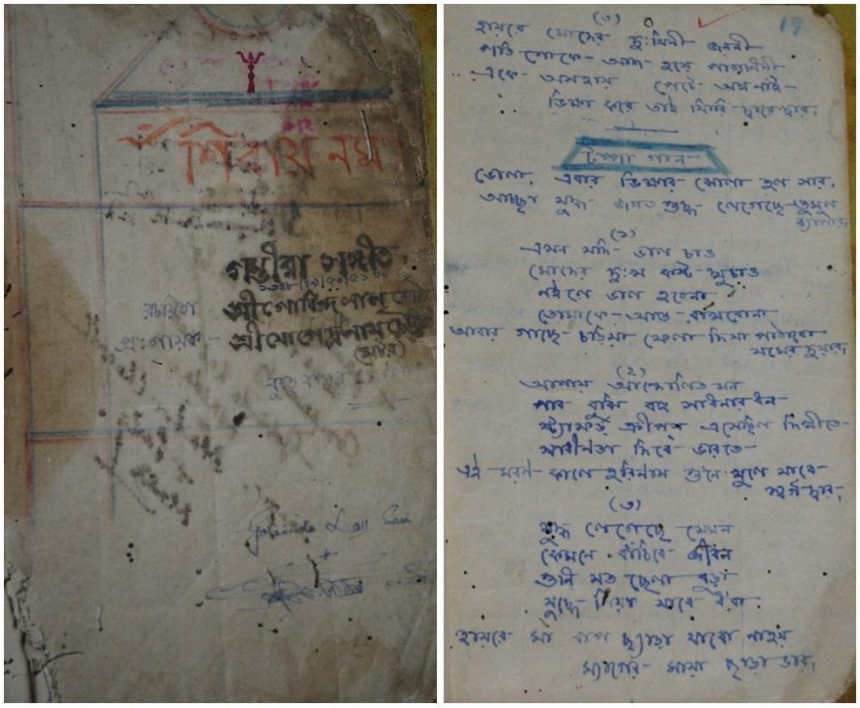

Figure 2.6 *Govinda Seth Notebooks.* (Left) The cover of Seth's 1941-4 Notebook, saying "I worship Shiva", and marking a small trident on the cover. (Right) One of the pages of the notebook. PSPA, Aniket De.

[222] *GSP* (1941), *PSPA*, 5-6.

The close entanglements of local experiences and global modes of political economy are most apparent in a brilliant narrative song describing the Governor of Bengal's visit to Malda. The 1941 visit of the Governor in a neglected corner like Malda gave rise to much excitement in town, and Seth lost no time in producing his sarcastic best: "Glory to the law," he declared, "the King's messenger comes to beg for alms." He constructed the state visit with the vocabulary of the ritual of *durbar*, the tributary court, where "the *rajas* and *zamindars* of Malda" came to pay tribute to the emperor. Such is the whirlwind of time, Seth lamented that the king begs for alms and is at the mercy of the landlords who pay him: "With this treasury, how will the British win the war?"[223] By showing that the Governor appropriated rituals of kingship without really following the roles expected of an ideal king, Seth demonstrates a fine understanding of the crux of the colonial economy. He, and probably the audience, was well aware of the questions of political economy, legitimacy, and war expenditure that vexed the British Empire during the Second World War.

The most important achievement of the song, however, was not such theoretical musings, but the vivid imagery of how the people of Malda took part in the event. In the standard style of a ballad, the song describes how messengers went around with drums announcing the visit, and people were excited to get the auspicious sight (*darśan*) of the divine king.[224] People flocked to Malda town on the great day, and many "sadly had to stay in brothels with all rooms being full." On the auspicious day, the royal court was held in a large field, with "four-mark, four-*loud speakers*" that could be heard from the road, with lectures in Urdu, English Bengali, and the local minister speaking a hybrid language to please everyone. But the King's demands were far from over:

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[223] *GSP* (1941), *PSPA*, 7-8.

[224] Seth further develops the mythical royal imagery, to boost up the aura of the Governor in order to puncture it effectively later. The concept of *darśan* is a key concept in Hinduism, when having the very sight of the deity is a religious experience in itself. By invoking an imagery of hundreds of people thronging to have just a sight of the Governor, Seth imparts a divine halo to the Governor.

Because he wanted to visit the Gaur ruins,

They poured buckets of water on the road,

They put up makeshift gates welcoming him,

People walking with parasols startled seeing the *sahib*,

And trashed them into the heath.

**

Taking Malda's money, he returned to his capital.

The money was only a drop in the ocean,

What more, brother! The durbar was over. [225]

These last two stanzas graphically establish the paramount disappointment following such a hullabaloo over the durbar. The people loved the Governor so much that they not only flocked to see him, but also dropped their parasol at his sight, often a monopoly of the royalty. Yet, all the king did was to count the money, not more than a drop in his ocean, and leave more like a trader than a king. The trope of kingship therefore exposes the contradictions of colonialism, much in line with standard interpretations by the Congress or the CPI, but nonetheless articulated in a vocabulary intrinsic to the local context.

This continuous treading between lived experiences of the people and theoretical interpretations of contemporary politics is best seen as a "fractured mediation" between the mofussil and the metropolis. It is not that there was no mediation between national politics and local performance: Seth's continued references to Congress policies and discourses reflect his, and his audience's, awareness of happenings in the metropolis. But at the same time, Gambhira performers had no obligation to be a reflection of such programs of social reform and national politics, as they did in the swadeshi period under the leadership of Sarkar. Instead, the performances were directed towards local audiences of Malda, and

[225] *GSP* (1941), *PSPA*, 7-8.

performers like Seth were politicians in their own right. Gambhira became an intensely political performance not because it reflected the metropolitan national ideologies, but because the very act of performing it was politically subversive. The conceptual fissure between the nation and the "people," the *loka* and the *gaṇa*, played out in the mofussil as a fundamental generic shift in the political role of the performance and the performer.

The Bhadralok Discomfort

The previous chapter had alluded to the "forgetting" of Gambhira by the Calcutta bhadralok, and even the *Janajuddha* article sneered at the Congress *bhadralok* for not caring about the Gambhira, despite the swadeshi obsession with Gambhira. This "forgetting" means that Gambhira was no longer central to the nationalist imagination in the way it was in the swadeshi period, not only because of changes in what folk culture meant, but also because of a clear fissure between the bhadralok idea of the folk and the actual enacted performance.

In the 1930s, as discussed above, literary scholars like Asutosh Bhattacharya and Sushil Kumar De had set out to create a canon of Bengali folk literature. They were interested mainly in showing the high literary value of folktales and epic poem, often by standards of Sanskrit aesthetics of the metric pattern, the rhyming scheme and the like. Gambhira was important in this project: thanks to Palit, the performance had a more minutely documented history than any other folk performance. Yet, the everyday performance of Gambhira, as seen in the songs of Seth, cared little for such aesthetic standards, had few literary techniques from the bhadralok point of view, and were often full of profanities and attacks on Malda notables. Since the idea of the folk and the performance of the folk diverged so much from one another, the bhadralok became increasingly uncomfortable with Gambhira.

A brief comparison of Gambhira songs collected by Asutosh Bhattacharya and the manuscripts of Seth clearly shows this discomfort.[226] Of about fifty anthologized songs, most link to old legends and myths of Shiva, if not to actual textual references. Bhattacharya prioritized songs having a high "literary value," with rich imagery, abstruse mythological allusions, and complex theological arguments. He ignored the most mundane and yet the most political of songs, which formed the majority of the Gambhira corpus. While the Seth manuscripts provide rich details on quotidian activities with little regard for a high literary taste, Bhattacharya's anthology includes the poems on everyday life only when he discovers smart metaphors in them. The same trend can be seen in later folklorists, often students of Bhattacharya, who have continued his editing preferences. These anthologies tell us as much about the folklorists and their agendas as about the actual performances.

Even when some songs of dissent were included, like Sufi's banana song, they were less harsh and had either some ritualistic overtone, or some abstruse theological-political argument. Consider the following song chosen, and probably edited by Bhattacharya, on the agency of Shiva in colonialism, in comparison with Seth's songs against the Governor and his war efforts:

> Ages after ages, you descend to the earth, O Shiva -
> King Ravana was virtuous and highly esteemed,
> You destroyed him taking the form of Hanuman,
> You destroyed Tripurasura, that wise monarch regarded well by all.
> O intelligent lord, you destroyed India's knowledge and consciousness,

[226] It must be explained why I am referring solely to Seth's manuscripts and no one else's. The answer is simple: I did not have a choice. It is very rare to find folk song manuscripts; few were written to begin with, and we are exceedingly lucky to have Seth's papers. That said, I do not see those manuscripts as the epitomic Gambhira, or ventriloquize other performers with Seth's views. But at the same time, the manuscripts do give us a glimpse of the genre at the time, the kinds of themes mentioned, and offers a refreshing break from the bhadralok anthologies, which is the only other source.

You destroyed India by taking the form of the British, O Shiva.[227]

The song's Sanskritic mythical references, a new one in every line, and even their interpretations, are so abstruse that even many native listeners would have understood little of it. The song puts forward a complex epistemology of colonialism by blaming Shiva for being the cause of colonialism. Moreover, the song reads established myths against the grain. In almost all Hindu myths, the "right" gods (*deva*) win over "wicked" demons (*asura*).[228] The god Rāma is generally seen as the ideal hero who defeats the demon-king Rāvaṇa, and Shiva restores the heavens to the gods by killing the demon usurper Tripurāsura. The song, however, highlights the positive aspects of the demons and the negative aspects of the gods. Tripurāsura and Rāvaṇa are shown as just, revered kings, and Shiva is the mad destroyer who destroys peaceful regimes of able rulers. The colonial destruction of India is seen as part of a larger pattern of divine destruction propitiated by Shiva.[229] Colonialism is seen as the death of the people's "knowledge and consciousness" (*jñāna*); secondly, that colonialism was not born out of the racial or military superiority of the British, but because of Siva's propensity to destroy. The concept of Shiva appearing ages after ages in various incarnations suggests that colonialism is one of the many forms of destruction brought forth by the deity.[230] Although the song's tone is solemn and melancholic, the underlying message also has a positive aspect to it: if the onset of colonialism is one of the many times a wise regime was destroyed, there is a potential for victims to re-emerge and regenerate sometime later. The modern, then, is not visualised as the natural result of progress, but as a result of the whims of Shiva, an isolated occurrence in time.

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[227] Bhattacharya, *Loka-Sahitya*, 254-5.
[228] In Bengal there is a literary tradition of favouring Ravana as a just ruler. See Michael Madhusudan Dutt, *The Slaying of Meghnad*, trans. Clinton B. Seely (Penguin).
[229] Note that the Shiva in this song is closer to the Vedic destroyer god Rudra than the Bengali farmer lord. This is an exception in the genre of Gambhira songs.
[230] The cyclical destruction is a major concept in the Bhagwad Gita, where Lord Krishna tells the hero Arjuna in the battle field that he (Lord Krishna) appears in the world in various incarnations 'ages after ages' (*yuge yuge*) and destroys whatever is decadent and wrong (Gita 4.7).

The very fact that this song is explicable only after such a long commentary sets it apart from the songs of Seth, which are composed of simple references to local events. This is why Gambhira songs like these, even if they did exist, would have been too rare to be commonplace. As John Berger had commented in his study of Renaissance oil paintings, an "exceptional" work of art was exceptional precisely because it departed from the genre, and that any attempt to understand art must focus on the plethora of "average" paintings to understand why certain works are masterpieces.[231] Bhattacharya's agenda for collecting Gambhira songs was to grab the exceptional at the expense of the average, as the average often did not fit comfortably with the agenda of folkloristics.

Even when he included less abstruse and mythical songs, he made sure that the songs reflected a rustic intelligence for urban audiences to wonder at. These "intelligent" songs, unsurprisingly, were theological nonetheless and often matched with nationalist arguments on modernity, technological superiority and politics:

How did such nonsense come to your head, god?

You have perhaps started drinking foreign liquor, instead of our local weed.

King Indra's thunderbolt[232] you have given to the telegraph;

The Moon in the *night* is defeated by the electric *light*.

The gods are tied to a stake, and there is no respite.

The skill of the divine chariot that traversed the sky [233]

You have now given to the airplane,

Sails chain Wind; Water is a slave of steam.

We sit and think day and night, London is your new Kāśī, [234]

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[231] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 88,110.
[232] Indra, the King of the Gods, has a thunderbolt or *vajra* as his signature weapon. He is often regarded as the Sanskrit equivalent of Zeus.
[233] The reference is probably to *puṣpaka ratha*, a flying chariot frequently mentioned in the *Ramāyaṇa*.
[234] Kāśī, or Banaras, is the pilgrimage town in north India that has one of the most important temples dedicated to Shiva; Kāśī is popularly known as the 'abode of Shiva'.

Your intimate friend Englanders; Will you remember us anymore?[235]

The song, though less abstruse than the colonialism song, nonetheless is full of references that grapple with various contradictions of modernity, like the replacements of gods with machines. It is only because of Shiva's whims (perhaps due to some enticement with foreign liquor), the argument goes, that the skills of the gods had been transferred to the machines of the West. Therefore, the superiority of the West was as mercurial as the whims of Shiva: if someday Shiva decides to desert his "intimate friends" and return to the gods, western technological superiority will crash. This argument also has a strong nationalist stance: what has been achieved by England had been known to Indians since antiquity, and England has achieved it only with the help of a Hindu god.[236] For Bhattacharya, this song perhaps reflected not just literary value, but also a mofussil perspective on colonialism, yet one that nonetheless parallels nationalist thought. Songs with such urban artistic values are exceptions (often written for urban audiences), and not the norm, in the corpus of Gambhira songs.

The bhadralok folklorists in search of a Bengali folk literary tradition also failed to fathom the eclecticism of the audiences who attended these Gambhira performances. As our reading of Seth's manuscript has shown, performers carefully avoided including heavy religious overtones in their songs, as they were catering to a mixed Hindu, Muslim and even "tribal" audiences. The metropolitan vision of a homogenous linguistic folk tradition, either Hindu or Muslim, poorly reflected into the actual mofussil sites of performance, which were too diverse and eclectic to be branded under such categories. Unlike the swadeshi years, when bhadralok like Sarkar and Palit recast Gambhira according to gentlemanly tastes, the fractured folk of the 1930s was guarded by performers themselves, resulting in an

[235]Bhattacharya, *Loka-Sahitya*, 253. The Italicized words were in English in the original Bengali song.
[236] The idea of 'gods in the modern world' had been a popular theme in Bengali literature by the 1940s. One novel in particular was very popular in nineteenth century Bengal, Durgacharan Ray's *Devagaṇera Martye Āgamana* which depicted gods descending to India and travelling all across the country via trains and steamers. The bewilderment of the gods in seeing technological modernity in the 19th century contrasts remarkably with the nationalist confidence in this song.

uncomfortable disjunction between the bhadralok and the folk. It was in such fissures that Gambhira as "nation-building" transformed into Gambhira, the "social weapon."

Conclusion: From National Heritage to People's Weapon

By 1945, Gambhira had morphed into a sharp, subversive weapon to make fun of people in power. So sharp was its effect that it faced police crackdowns and was hailed as a true weapon of the masses by the communists. Contrary to Benoy Sarkar's conservative view of the festival as "national task," the performers took pride in attacking the colonial masters and the local people in power. The implications of this transformation were far-fetched. As the forthcoming chapters will show, this idea of a subversive "people's culture" not only influenced later mediations between postcolonial national ideologies and popular cultures, but also became a defining feature of the performance. "Gambhira is the best folk performance form in all of India," a performer from English Bazar proudly declared to me in 2014, "because it belongs to the people, and no one but the people."

Yet thinking about a culture belonging to the "people" becomes increasingly complex when we realize that this idea of a "people" is itself an abstraction that has had multiple meanings over time. For the swadeshi romantic nationalists, "people" meant nothing but the culturally homogenous *loka*; in the interwar years, *loka* became more closely tied to regional linguistic identity, while the Marxists devised the political, rather than cultural, community of *gaṇa*. The postcolonial "people" encompasses yet more layered mediations between the centre, the region, and the local. More importantly, the Gambhira performers have always been aware of these changes in the very idea of a "people," and have responded to it. It is a signature error of the urban historian to assume that rural peoples are ignorant of large scale conceptual changes happening in cities. As the study of Gambhira shows, performers and audiences are well informed of these changes, since they live through them and grapple with them. Seeing folk festivals as "autonomous" domains of the proletariat, therefore reifies the

idea of autonomy, and ignores the nuanced, if fractured, mediations between the mofussil and the metropolis.

In order to better understand this elusive idea of autonomy, a historical perspective on folk culture becomes imperative. While anthropologists from Victor Turner to James Scott have all provided valid and useful tools to interpret the politics of rituals, they have seldom investigated if the possibility of such politics is itself a historical development. If rituals are multi-faceted, polysemic sites of performance, it is erroneous to assume that such sites remain unchanged for centuries. The most important lesson from a historical study of Gambhira is to understand that its emergence as a popular weapon was made possible due to historical changes of the interwar years. It is important to identify this critical historical moment because performers identify as protesting voices in their own right. While some scholars think such a linkage of Gambhira is a very recent development,[237] others consider it to be an inherent aspect of the performance since the swadeshi period.[238] A close historical analysis, however, shows that the idea of Gambhira as a subversive performance did not exist during Sarkar's and Palit's intervention, but certainly existed long before the 1990s: it was a product of the various fractures and shifts in the understanding and practice of the nation and its anti-colonial politics.

The concept of "fractured mediation" highlights that even the idea of the autonomy of the weak is a product of mediation between broader political shifts and local cultural worlds. In the interwar years, the identity of Gambhira was no longer based on the history of Palit and the activities of Sarkar, but as was presented a "folk song," a social yet not quite religious domain as defined by the Marxists For the audience, however, the social world was far from the secular world envisioned by the Marxists, given the surfeit of religious symbolism deployed and consumed. The Communist recasting of Gambhira as a "popular" tradition,

[237] Banerjee, "Look What They've Done to My Song."
[238] Pal, *Kabi-Shilpi*, preface.

therefore, was ultimately little more than an intelligent linguistic play. Nevertheless, Gambhira came to be viewed as a "people's tradition," and not as a palimpsest of Buddhist heritage. Seen from this angle, the discourse on the "autonomy" of Gambhira was itself the result of a long process of historical mediations for over twenty years, involving agents and actors as diverse as Chittaprosad and Seth. In a curious way, such mediation partially returned to the discursive elite/folk dichotomy of the mid-19th century, but this time "folk" identity was empowered with subversive meanings rather than denigrating sneers. Performing Gambhira no longer meant building the nation, but performing the proletariat. Unlike the Volk, such a proletariat was marked by cultural heterogeneity, including Hindus, Muslims, and other identities.

Not too long after Govinda Seth wrote the last lines of his notebook, the proletariat in Malda faced another fracture so momentous that even the insightful songwriter could not predict. Within a matter of weeks, the colonial state decided to divide India and Pakistan, and Malda lay right at the border between Hindu-majority West Bengal and Muslim-majority East Pakistan, ready to be ripped like a sacrificial lamb. Amidst the confusion, turmoil and violence of the postcolonial borderland, performers and their audiences had to begin a new set of mediations with the burgeoning nation-states of India and Pakistan. Gambhira still belonged to the people; but to two peoples instead of one.

Chapter 3

Divided Songs, Altered Gods

Partition and the Making of a Borderland Folk Culture

We became exiled in our own homes,
What country is this? What happened?
Hindu and Muslim, we always lived happily,
India and Pakistan happened, so what, so what?
O Shiva, O my dear grandpa Shiva,
Why will we lose our homes for that?

Gambhira song from Rajshahi (c. 1948)[239]

Chapai Nawabganj is about thirty miles south-east of English Bazar, and in 1947, when the Partition of India divided Malda between two nations, was possibly little more than a village of a few hundred. Today the international border between India and Bangladesh divides the still extant roads and railway lines between the two towns. Now a district headquarter of Bangladesh's Rajshahi Division, Chapai mirrors its Indian counterpart in being a gritty transport hub with rancorous buses, smoking trucks, and mango markets. Additionally, with a few dozen Gambhira teams professionally performing Gambhira throughout the year, Chapai is hailed as the Gambhira capital of Bangladesh.

Upon arriving in Chapai in 2014, I was directed to a nearby village where a local NGO had organized a Gambhira to implement a government program on the right to education. The well-decorated wooden stage was on a field before a mosque. Accustomed to Hindu rituals of Gambhira decoration with pots, banana trees, gods and goddesses, my eyes quickly spotted the lack of iconography. The decoration mostly consisted in flowers and leaves cut out of colourful papers, and large, neatly written posters.

[239] Alam, *Folklore Sankalan,* 38

The absence of iconography was most clear when the performers entered the stage. There was no one dressed as Shiva or as his followers. Instead, there were two performers dressed as Muslim farmers, one old and one young. The elderly performer, sporting a false white beard till his chest, adjusted his round, horn-rimmed glasses. The younger one had a black triangle sticking out his chin, and an amulet round his neck. Both carried sticks, and wore colourful loincloths (*lungi*) and conical straw hats (*toka*) typical of farmers. The *tokas*, beards and *lungis* made it clear that they were Bengali Muslim farmers. Further, it turned out that the two were related: the old man was the maternal grandfather (*nana*) of his grandson (*nati*). After a short overture, *nana* and *nati* began to talk:

Grandson: Think, *nana*, think, can we be "human" without education?

It is knowledge and education that will show us the right way.

Grandfather: But what kind of education?

Grandson: A nation is defined by its culture and civilization,

Can any nation exist without it?

But look at the dresses of all around us, look at their manners,

Can we pick the Bengalis out from the non-Bengalis here?[240]

I was a little taken aback at the tone and the subject of the Gambhira. Being familiar with the Malda Gambhira, which abusively attacked the state as a norm, it was surprising to encounter a Gambhira which facilitated pedagogical agendas of the nation-state. Linguistic nationalism was nothing but an agenda of the state, and the Gambhira was unashamedly arguing for it. Sifting through the Bangladeshi Gambhira archive since 1947, I was surprised to find that this performance was not an anomaly: not only had the form of Gambhira changed from Shiva to the grandfather, but the content of Gambhira in Bangladesh was also much more pro-state than the subversive Malda Gambhira. Why?

[240] Performance at Chapai Nawabganj, Rajshahi, June 2014.

Figure 3.1. *Altered Gods*. A 2015 Gambhira performance in Dhaka, with a dialogue between the bearded *nana* and the *nati* with the conical hat. The backdrop reads "Heritage Nana-Nati" promoting "A Clean Bangladesh." Picture courtesy dailynewnation.com.

Why has Bangladeshi Gambhira become such a unique genre in form and content, distinctly unrecognizable from its Malda counterpart? How did the Gambhira of swadeshi nationalism and popular protest evolve into two forms of performance on both sides of an international border? In investigating these questions, I deploy the term "borderland mediation," referring to the precarious and fundamentally transformative mediations between realities of borderland regions and the ideologies and practices of the postcolonial nation-states. Unlike the contact mediation of the swadeshi years and the fractured mediation of the interwar years, the impacts of borderland mediation were more pronounced, simply because the postcolonial nation-state was more powerful a force than the previous metropolitan producers of such ideologies.

This chapter focusses on the Bangladesh case, drawing only sporadically on the happenings in Malda in this period. The years between 1947 and 1971, when East Bengal

was ruled by Pakistan, was the time when a new Gambhira, with the grandfather substituted for Shiva, was introduced by Sufi Master, having moved to Chapai from English Bazar post-1947. Sufi's borderland mediation was a mediation *across borders*; he tried to create a new niche, departing from the English Bazar norm, for his new, post-Partition audience in Chapai. In the Pakistan years, the tradition remained local and subversive. Things changed after 1971, when the Bangladeshi state, obsessed with shaping a Bengali national identity, constructed Gambhira as a national tradition, and patronized Gambhira performers. This heavy state sponsorship implied that the tradition grew increasingly more compliant to the state, unlike in Malda where the subversive mood had remained dominant since the 1940s. This compliance, I argue, was not a sell-out to the state, but a shift in the terms of borderland mediation. A close look at the Gambhira archives reveals that while the songs were not subversive, they intelligently used the Gambhira to bargain with the state regarding questions of development and citizenship rights. The borderland mediation in post-1971 Gambhira, therefore, was a *disguised mediation* with the capital city Dhaka, in context of the increasingly unavoidable presence of a strong postcolonial nation-state.

After theoretically outlining the idea of borderland mediation, this chapter analyses three instances of borderland mediation in the case of Gambhira. The first section is about the period 1947-1971, detailing the nuances of Sufi Master's mediation to make a new Gambhira in Chapai, while the Malda Gambhira remained largely unchanged since the interwar years. The second section studies the dialectic between the Bangladeshi state and Gambhira after the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, when subversion of statist agendas gave way to a bargaining for rights with the a powerful and ever-present nation-state. The final section takes a glimpse into the ways in which Indian and Bangladeshi scholars have tried to claim Gambhira. All these cases hint that the intricate linkage of the concept of folk culture to postcolonial nation-building makes mediations necessary, precarious and pronounced.

What is Borderland Mediation?

My concept of "borderland mediation" is based on three ethno-historical observations regarding the Bengal borderland. First, people living in the borderland live in a condition of fundamental politico-economic inequality with their centers of power. Malda and Chapai have always been less developed than Calcutta and Dhaka, and borderland peoples are at the mercy of the state for their development. Secondly, while borderlands remain connected, economically and culturally, to nations across the border, those connections cannot supersede the strong power inequality between the center and the region. So while many in Malda live by smuggling across borders, for matters of development they continue looking up to Calcutta. Finally, the practice of border-crossing does not necessarily map into the creation of "borderland identities." I am yet to meet a single person in the Malda-Chapai region who identifies as a "borderland person." Most commonly, people identify as being either an Indian or a Bangladeshi, and then complain about the state's negligence of the borderland.

Based on these propositions, I propose that "borderland mediation" is a two way mediation. It is, on the one hand, a negotiation between the borderland and the power centres of nation-states to bargain for greater development. The border regions are simply too undeveloped and the state too powerful for people to show outright subversion against the state, however oppressive. As a result, borderland peoples often sing the tunes of the nation-state as a trade-off to bargain for better development. This is a classic example of a disguised "art of resistance," to follow James Scott.[241] On the other hand, borderland mediation is also a cultural mediation between the regions which the border has divided. Nowhere is this clearer than in the divergent traditions of Gambhira and the creation of two traditions and their two national lineages. Both sides are fully aware of the happenings on the other side, but yet try to carve their own niches through innovation and mediation. The postcolonial borderland, more

[241] Scott, *Domination and Arts.*

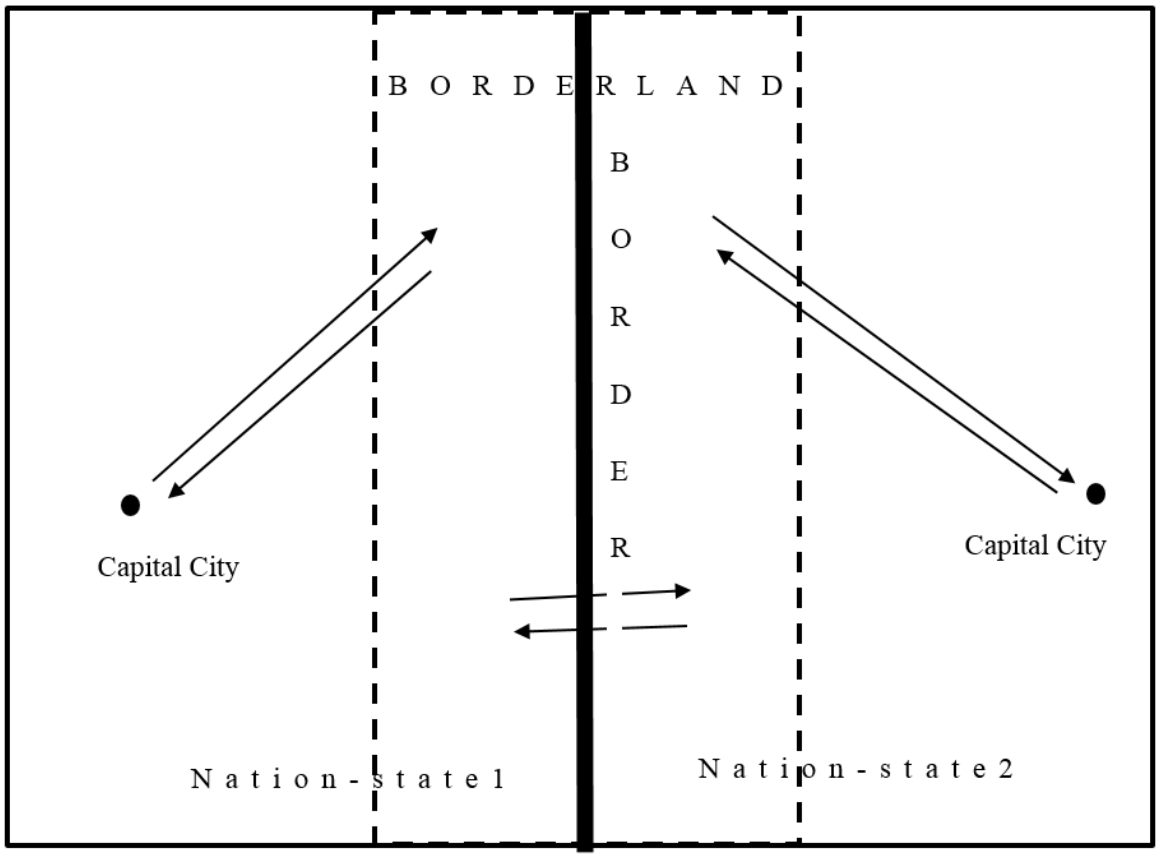

Figure 3.2 *Schematic Representation of Borderland Mediation.* The arrows represent cultural-economic exchanges, the dark bold line the international border between two nation-states, and the dotted line the culturally and economically connected "borderland" region.

starkly demarcated than all previous borderlands, is a perfect place to study these transformations. The production of borderland cultures, as reflected in the case of Gambhira, are products of these two-way mediations, as demonstrated in Figure 3.2.

The idea of the borderland is relatively new in scholarship. Not too long ago, borderlands were studied, if at all, merely as edges of the nation-state. In the late 1980s, cultural theorists, notably Renato Rosaldo and Gloria Anzaldúa, began arguing for "border cultures," or particularly non-state cultures in borders, mainly the US-Mexico border.[242] Taking note of this incongruity between state centers and borders, Michiel Baud and Willem van Schendel proposed their influential idea of the "borderland" in 1997: regions on both sides of an international border, and affected socially, culturally and economically by the

[242] Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza=La Frontera* (San Francisco: Spinsters/ Aunt Lute, 1987); Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

border. For Baud and van Schendel, while borders do create overt national distinctions, they also give rise to "new" networks and "systems of interaction across them." The best way to understand such interactions, they argue, is to study borders not from the perspective of the center, but by bringing the everyday practices of borderland peoples to the forefront.[243] Malda and Chapai are fine examples of borderlands in their senses of the term.

Baud and van Schendel's notion of the "borderland," as an identifiable socio-economic region comprising areas on both sides of a border, has been very influential for ethnographies. Van Schendel's own work in the Bengal borderland has brought to light the intricate economies of informal trade, the careful cultural negotiations between peoples of different countries, and the constant material and ideological exchanges on either side of the border.[244] Even if works dealing only with the Bengal borderland is considered, the past two decades have seen an increasing number of rich and diverse ethnographies focussing on cross-border exchanges, from mining villages in the Meghalaya-Sylhet border and fishermen crossing borders in the Ganges delta to an entire edited volume of extraordinary scope, on "borderland lives" in "Northern South Asia," covering the entire land border of the subcontinent from Kachchh to Mizoram.[245] These works, founded on van Schendel's pioneering accounts of cross-border exchanges, have accepted the notion of the "borderland," and have enriched the concept by a library of case studies.

Van-Schendel's concept of the borderland has also come under critical historical reflection over the years. An important shift in border studies over the past decade has been the realization that borders are processes rather than products, and states themselves are

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[243]Michiel Baud and Willem van Schendel, "Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands," *Journal of World History* 8.2 (1997): 216.

[244] Willem van Schendel, "Easy Come, Easy Go: Smugglers on the Ganges," Journal of Contemporary Asia 23.2 (1993):189-213.; Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia* (London: Anthem Press, 2004).

[245] The most recent such works include Delwar Hussain, *Boundaries Undermined: The Ruins of Progress on the Bangladesh-India Border* (London: Hurst, 2013); Annu Jalais, *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010); David Gellner (Ed.) *Borderland Lives in Northern South Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

"incomplete, fragmented, and embedded in everyday practice."[246] These interventions include, notably, the works of Lauren Benton, James Scott, and the older works of Peter Sahlins and A. I. Asiwaju.[247] Even modern states, with their unparalleled power of violence over their peoples, cannot, or often do not, care much about fully sealing all borders. As a result, cross-border exchanges, akin to those described by van Schendel, are possible. To this extent, the contribution of borderland studies in identifying and foregrounding such exchanges is acceptable and praiseworthy. However, even when historically sensitive, the borderland literature tends to construct the border as a space where people inherently challenge, negotiate with and resist the ideological projects of nation-states. The Leviathan's grasp loosens at its edges, and frontier peoples take this opportunity to undermine oppressive state policies through "illegal" activities like smuggling and undocumented crossings.

Yet, fetishizing "border crossing" as a romantic, peculiarly hybrid act is both analytically unfruitful and ethnographically inaccurate. There is a tendency in borderland studies, Pablo Vila points out, "*to confuse the sharing of a culture with the sharing of an identity,*" when "it is quite possible to share aspects of the same culture while developing quite different narrative identities."[248] Vila's insight is valuable, and agrees with my own observations in the Indo-Bangladesh border. While people in both Malda and Chapai share most aspects of Bengali culture, they unequivocally see themselves as either Indian or Bangladeshi. This is most certainly a historical development: in 2015, most people I met had been born after the 1947 Partition, and had almost no memories of colonial India. With the border in place for about seven decades now, the idea of nationality had firmly taken roots in

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[246] Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan, "Borders and Border Studies," in *A Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), 13.
[247]Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Paul Nugent and A.I. Asiwaju (Ed.) *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits and Opportunities* (London: Pinter, 1996); Scott, *Art of Not Being Governed*; Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
[248] Pablo Vila, "Conclusion" in *Ethnography at the Border*, ed. Pablo Vila (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 308.

people's minds. As Vila points out, positing a certain "borderland identity" against an equally reified "national identity" ends up granting the border certain magical qualities.

Despite being well connected across borders, not least through "illegal" crossing and smuggling, none of my informants, on either side of the Indo-Bangladesh border, saw themselves as "borderland" peoples. They called themselves as either Indian or Bangladeshi, and then complained of the state not giving adequate attention to their needs. The complaint was not so much based on identity as much on the role of the state in establishing a fundamental inequality between the center and the borderland. The key point to note here is that *practice* of border-crossing did not necessarily map into the formation of borderland *identities*. The discursive element of the state, through actual instruments like the passport and the army, and through propagandist machineries like television and radio, played a fundamental role in defining people's identities in the borderland. Given the complex manifestations of the state in the borderland, it is difficult to talk merely of a "borderland" identity in opposition to a national identity. The two are so entwined that their separation is of little analytical value.

The concept of "borderland mediation," in turn, does away with such binaries like nation and borderland, state and frontier. Instead, it foregrounds how cultural forms in the borderland act as sites of mediation between pressures of identity from the nation-state and the practical realities of borderland lives. Such realities mean the unequal development of the borderland relative to the centres and the ever-increasing presence of the state in the borderland. For Chapai, such practicalities additionally mean the cultural world of Gambhira across the border in Malda, and the state's attempt to define Gambhira as a Bangladeshi tradition. The concept also acknowledges that borderland peoples actively mediate with many forces, finding themselves at the crossroads of several changing political currents. As a result, the concept must be historicized: different historical period demand different kinds of

mediation. As this chapter shows, for Chapai the terms of mediation between 1947 and 1971 and those after 1971 were significantly different, resulting from the altered politico-economic circumstances of those periods.

The story of Gambhira shows that the divergent forms of Gambhira today, on either side of the border, have evolved from dealing with such mediations between mutually interacting forces. The borderland mediation in Chapai was bidirectional, taking place with both Malda and Dhaka. On the one hand, such mediation was nothing new for Gambhira. As the previous two chapters have shown, the performance had evolved in dialogue with metropolitan pressures since the swadeshi years. On the other hand, borderland mediation takes place in the new space of a postcolonial borderland, one that not only faces pressures from a newer, stronger and militarized center, but from two centers that define themselves, politically, against one another. Further, as the rest of the chapter shows, the means and contexts of such mediation have changed with changing historical circumstances. Since 1947, this dialogue between new centers of power and new borderlands has given rise to two Gambhiras instead of one.

From God to Grandfather: Gambhira 1947-'71

It is impossible to pin down one historical moment when the Malda Shiva changed his guise to become the grandfather of Chapai. The change was processual; it appears that in 1947 there already existed in Chapai a local theatre form characterized by the conversation between *nana* and *nati*. After Partition, the well-known English Bazar performers who moved to Chapai, notably Sufi Master and Sulaiman Daktar, reworked this older genre into a new idiom of performance that they later touted as the Bangladeshi Gambhira. The sources for this period, a mere handful of oral histories and some government interviews of a few performers from the 1980s, are depressingly silent on the matter and are so coloured with the

ideologies of the post-1971 Bangladesh state that they occlude a fair consideration of the period between 1947 and 1971.

What can be argued with reasonable certainty, however, is that the grandfather's figure had been formulated around 1947-49, and was firmly in place by the late 1950s. This argument goes against the claims made by the Bangladeshi state, discussed later in this chapter, which relentlessly congratulates itself on releasing Gambhira from the fetters of religion into ownership by the masses.[249] On the contrary, there is enough evidence to suggest that the pivotal change had taken place well before the creation of Bangladesh.[250] The period between 1947 and 1971 is therefore a crucial one. The border was significantly more fluid in this period, especially before the introduction of the passport and the visa in 1952.[251] Yet, despite such fluidity, communities on both sides of the border continued to develop distinct styles of performance. The very fact that such changes had been occurring without any direct pressures of nation-building, which come only after 1971, indicate that borderland peoples were beginning to grapple with the profound historical change they had experienced. The borderland mediation of Gambhira in this period was less a dialectic between the metropolis and the frontier, and more a negotiation of new identities and subjectivities, a search for niches within a new postcolonial framework of folk culture. The period 1947-71, in this regard, was different from the post-1971 period, discussed in the next section, when these local innovations were claimed as national treasures by the new nation-state.

The Partition months were puzzlingly tumultuous for "patchwork" borderlands like Malda, since the location of the border was quite unclear.[252] On 14 August 1947, the new flag of Pakistan was unfurled in English Bazar. The exact boundaries of Pakistan were not to be released until the 17th; but Viceroy Lord Mountbatten, the master of suave and confident

[249] See also De, "Our Songs and Their Songs."
[250] By 1968, Gambhira had been performed "for long" in Rajshahi radio. Ghosh, *Gambhira Utsab*, 33-4.
[251] Van Schendel, *Bengal Borderland*, 94-7.
[252] The phrase is from Willem van Schendel, *Bengal Borderland*¸ 53-4.

decision-making, had proclaimed that all districts with Muslim majorities would be provisionally handed down to Pakistan on the days of independence, 14th for Pakistan and 15th for India. Malda, with its famous marginal Muslim majority of 57%, had been won over by Pakistan, along with several other districts like Dinajpur (50%) and Murshidabad (57%). Hindu landlords and Congress leaders of Malda frantically lobbied with the Boundary Commission, while local hooligans marked properties to capture once refugees fled. Some kept their prized possessions at hand, ready for a swift escape; many gave up and hopelessly flocked into Calcutta-bound trains.[253]

Two days after Nehru's India awoke to life and freedom, Sir Cyril Radcliffe's Boundary Commission released the precise borders of the two new nation-states, initiating, for Malda and its adjoining districts, many more trysts with destiny to come. In English Bazar, one flag went down as another was raised. Malda had largely remained in India. Radcliffe had mulled over the question of assigning the whole of Malda to East Pakistan on ethical lines, since he was not keen on handing down the large Hindu population to Pakistan. In a rather unusual move, Radcliffe subdivided even a district between the two countries. The police station divisions of Bholahat, Gomastapur, Nachole, Nawabganj and Shibganj, were awarded to East Pakistan, and eventually formed the district of Chapai Nawabganj in the Rajshahi division. The rest of the district remaining in West Bengal formed the Malda district in postcolonial India.[254]

As migration statistics in table 3.1 indicate, the movement of people to and from Malda was not completed overnight. Rather, the influx of refugees was a gradual process, with several peaks and troughs. Note, for instance, that the influx into Malda increased eightfold in 1950, most probably due to a rather sudden increase in anti-Hindu violence across the border. These refugees were Hindu refugees, and over two-thirds of them were

[253] Safar Ali Akanda, "Dināǰpura Jelāra Bibhakti-1947," In *Dināǰpura: Itihāsa O Aitijya*, edited by Sarafuddin Ahmed (Dhaka: Bangladesh Itihas Samiti, 1996), 95-109.
[254]Mansergh (ed.), ToP XII, 753.

from adjacent Rajshahi; by 1951, the population of English Bazar alone at swollen by 30,000 people, with camps rapidly increasing the size of the city. [255] Indeed, while the violent partition of Punjab had seen the exchange of comparable populations between India and West Pakistan, in Bengal the movement of refugees was largely one sided, with millions of Hindus moving into West Bengal from East Pakistan, and relatively few Muslims leaving West Bengal. This argument is corroborated by the fact that previously Muslim-majority districts of West Bengal, like Malda or Murshidabad, continue to remain Muslim majority to this day, while the number of Hindus in East Pakistan have steadily decreased.[256]

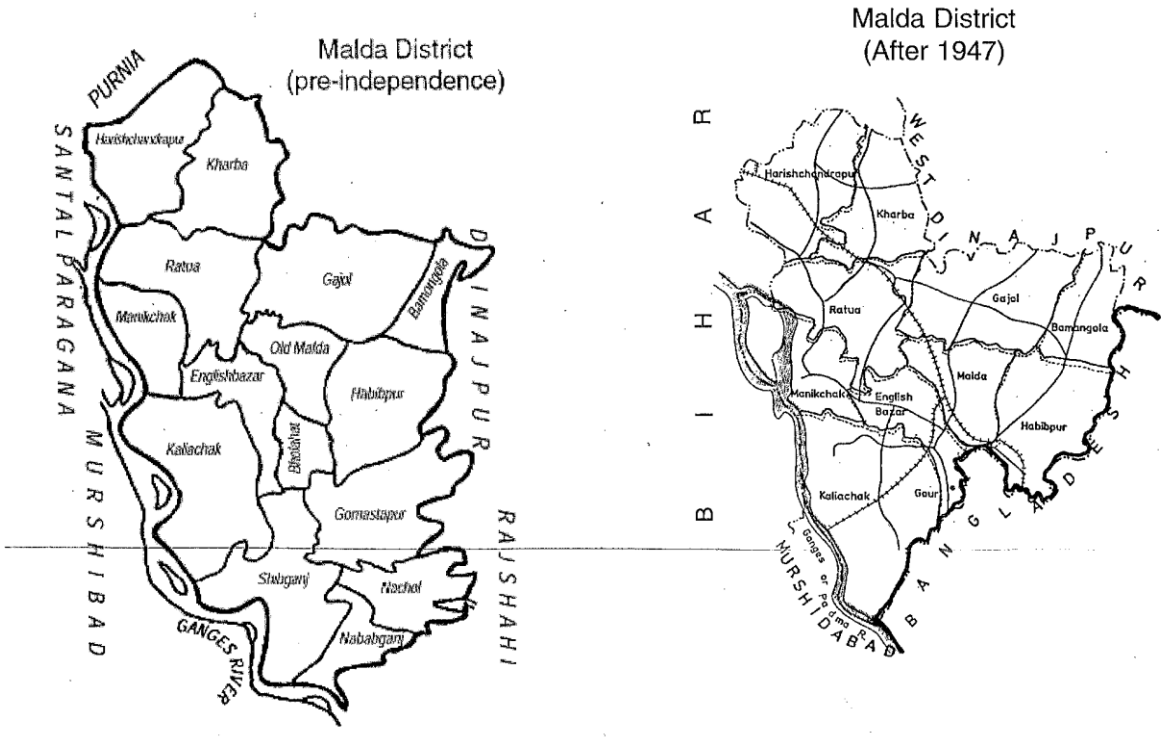

Figure 3.3. *A District Divided.* Malda before and after 1947. Note how some police stations from the south-east have been sheared off to Pakistan in the map to the right, From Sarkar, *Changing Profiles*, vi-vii.

[255] Sarkar, *Changing Profiles*, 72-6.

[256] For border-making in Punjab see Lucy Chester, *Borders and conflict in South Asia: The Radcliffe Boundary commission and the Partition of Punjab* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), one of the few cartographic works on Partition. For the "Punjab bias" in the historiography of Partition, see van Schendel, *Bengal Borderland*, 28.

Year of Arrival in Malda	No. of Displaced People		Total
	Males	Females	
1946	105	86	191
1947	2307	1978	4285
1948	2536	2685	5221
1949	3233	3041	6274
1950	22243	20992	43235
1951	494	498	992
			60198

Table 3.1. Year-wise influx of refugees into Malda, 1946-50 (1951 Census). Sarkar, *Changing Profiles*, 72.

Sufi Master and the Making of a New Gambhira

Among the relatively few Malda Muslims who decided to move to Pakistan was Sufi Master, Benoy Sarkar's erstwhile protégé, and now the most revered Gambhira performer in English Bazar. Sufi decided to move to Chapai in 1947 when Muslims of Malda were offered the option of choosing Pakistani citizenship. Sufi seems to be the earliest Gambhira performer to have left Malda; his compatriots Solaiman Daktar and Kalu Moktar moved to Chapai only around 1962.[257] Why Sufi decided to move to Chapai despite being idolized in English Bazar is quite unclear. Religion is unlikely to be a primary factor, since Sufi had sung songs of Shiva since the swadeshi days. Entering the realm of pure speculation, one can guess that Sufi moved to live with family members in Chapai, since the aging man now looked for care. Despite being legendary, Sufi, like most Gambhira performers, lived amidst intense poverty on a small salary. He might even have feared, perhaps not too illogically, that a rapidly changing Malda would present new socio-economic challenges for Muslims (Figure 3.3).

[257] The only biographical note on Sufi is presented in Pal, *Kabi-Shilpi*, 69-73.

Figure 3.3 *The Mythicized Mediator*. Perhaps the only existing photograph of Sufi Master, though from when he was considerably younger. Even the photograph is contested. Pal, *Kabi-Shilpi*, front matter.

Myths abound about Sufi's life, while little is corroborated by facts; I was unable to track down a single manuscript by him. Even his name is a matter of speculation: people debate whether his real name was Sufiur Rahman, Muhammad Sufi, or Sufi Khalifa.[258] Some Gambhira performers and scholars today go to the extent of attributing the very introduction of Shiva into Gambhira plays by him during the swadeshi years; others dismiss him as a "greedy opportunist," who switched sides and tactfully manipulated Gambhira depending on changing political situations.[259] The second view probably has a ring of truth to it, not because of its comments on Sufi's character, but because it highlights Sufi's ability to tweak the tradition to suit circumstances. Throughout his lifetime, encompassing the whole timeline covered by this thesis, he had lived through and grappled with various historical shifts in Gambhira. While some can see his actions as crafty manipulation, to me both his myths and facts show him to be a mediator *par excellence.*

[258] Pal, *Kabi-Shilpi*, 69.

[259] Both were oral recensions to me by Malda performers. The Shiva story, in my opinion a rather fine later-day invention, describes a time when a Gambhira performance by Sufi was supposed to be attended by Sir Asutosh Mukherjee, the redoubtable Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University. He never showed up, and, to cheer up his audiences, Sufi called "Asutosh! Asutosh!" and someone dressed as Shiva entered the stage, since Asutosh is a name of Shiva. Thus began, the story goes, the presence of Shiva in Gambhira plays. While this is highly unlikely to be true, the myth reflects how Sufi was seen as someone able to mould the tradition to his advantage.

A few facts are certain about Sufi's post-Partition life. By 1947, he had settled in Chapai and begun composing Gambhira. These compositions included both performances with Shiva, and the *nana-nati* dialogue, a tradition already existing as a beloved dramaturgy of the region. By 1949, he had begun offending the right people, since that very year the Punjabi magistrate of Chapai is said to have issued a ban against Gambhira.[260] Later Bangladeshi scholars have made much of this ban, claiming it an attempt of West Pakistani censorship with little tolerance for "un-Islamic" forms of performance. It is useful to remember in this context that only four years back the Hindu magistrate of colonial Malda had issued a similar ban; perhaps Islam was merely an excuse for silencing voices of dissent. In any case, the ban was far from successful in silencing Gambhira completely during the Pakistan regime. Sufi drew upon his mastery of the *Alkap*, another folk theatre form of Murshidabad based on the conversation between groups of people. Alkap, primarily practised by Muslims, was not attached to any Hindu god in a way Shiva was linked to Gambhira. Sufi continued to write Gambhira songs prolifically throughout the 1950s, and was joined in 1962 by Sulaiman Daktar from Malda. Sufi remained a celebrated figure till his death in Chapai in 1967, four years before the birth of Bangladesh.[261] Given that the legendary founder of Bangladeshi Gambhira died before the birth of Bangladesh, one can argue fairly certainly that the *nana-nati* Gambhira had been introduced during the Pakistan years, and possibly had been completely formulated by the early 1950s.

Another important source suggests that the transition from Shiva to grandfather had taken place in the early 1950s, and that Sufi's manoeuvres had drawn on an existing vocabulary of performance in the region. This source is an interview given by Qutubul Alam, the foremost Gambhira performer of Bangladesh, to the folklorists of the Bangla Academy in the late 1980s. Born in 1936, Alam was a native of Chapai and grew up amidst the

[260] Pal, *Kabi- Shilpi*, 73; Taru, *Hajar Bacharer Gambhira*, 185.
[261] Pal, *Kabi-Shilpi*, 73.

tumultuous shifts of the Partition years. From Alam's fond recollection of his schooldays, well before Sufi gained a strong foothold in Chapai, it seems that the dialogue between *nana* and *nati* was a common folk art form in Chapai:

> I began performing the role of *nana* when I was in grade seven, in 1949… My high school organized cultural programmes, and Gambhira song was a regular item there. Our assistant headmaster Naimul Haq, our Bengali teacher Luthu Mian, and our Arabic teacher Afsar Mian used to sit together and compose songs for us. The content of these songs included complaints from the school, like lack of funding for the library, laboratory, or the gymnasium. We used to address the district magistrate or the school inspector as "O Nana," and present these complaints.[262]

While debates may remain on the precise location and role of Sufi Master in 1949, this recollection settles beyond doubt that the people of Chapai were accustomed to the form of the *nana-nati* dialogue, and that such a form had existed well before the birth of Bangladesh.[263] Note how Alam describes the practice of Gambhira in school as a quotidian, non-professionalized practice: it was schoolteachers who got together informally, when needed, and wrote the songs which were appreciated largely. This ad hoc nature is the norm rather than the exception for folk cultures everywhere. If anything, thanks to Benoy Sarkar, it was English Bazar with its organized Gambhira culture of teams, team leaders and main artists, which was a real anomaly.

Indeed, Sufi and his ilk were lionized for their professional excellence by the people of Chapai in pre-Partition days. "We used to eagerly wait for the Gambhira performers of Malda under the direction of Sufi Master," Alam recounted, "who performed excellent sophisticated Gambhira plays with a big fat Shiva on stage, before whom all their complaints

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[262] Qutubul Alam, "Md. Qutubul Alam: Pariciti O Sakshatkar," In *Bangla Academy Folklore Sankalan* 67, ed. Habib-Ul-Alam (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1995), 46-7.
[263] Alam also mentions that he won a prize for singing Gambhira before the education minister in Dhaka in 1959.

were narrated. These happened just once a year, and were also called Gajan songs."[264] It appears that before Sufi's arrival, Chapai was a consumer of Gambhira, but not a prime center of production. None but the troupes of English Bazar, the teams of Sufi and Govinda Seth, dominated the field. The fact that Alam was especially attracted to Malda teams indicates that the theatrical form of Gambhira was in fact something based firmly in English Bazar before Partition. This fact should not come as particularly surprising, since Benoy Sarkar's contact mediation was, after all, focussed primarily in English Bazar, a town that had developed a rather unique culture of Gambhira teams, competitions, and theatrical forms.

The difference between Chapai and English Bazar was in terms of professionalization of the art of Gambhira, a practice since swadeshi times. Chapai had a local idiom of similar Gambhira which had made an audience receptive to Gambhira; English Bazar had skilfully crafted and trained performers who could successfully cater to such audiences. Therefore, when Sufi and his acolytes went to Chapai, they found their reputation preceding them; while the audience held Malda performers in high esteem, they also had their quotidian form of Gambhira in place. For Sufi, the context was fertile for deploying his gift for improvisation. The *nana-nati* form of Gambhira was not only something palatable to the audience, but also a way to disguise Gambhira before the Pakistani authorities, who had shown their grudge against the art at least once.

Despite the supposed police crackdown by the Pakistani state, or perhaps because of it, the tone of the Gambhira songs between 1947 and 1971 remains remarkably subversive. They have more in common with the rebellious songs of the interwar years than with the relatively docile post-1971 songs. Of the handful of songs preserved from that period, not all subvert the state directly, but do have the same flavour of sarcastic jabs and abusive language

[264]Alam, "Sakshatkar," 47.

that characterized interwar Gambhira, and is still a defining feature of Malda Gambhira. Consider this song, alluding to the Pakistani government:

> Run away from here, everyone,
>
> Our enemy is chasing us!
>
> They will lock us up in their machine,
>
> All the arts are locked inside,
>
> And soon it will be Gambhira's turn![265]

In its tone of challenging and ridiculing the state, this song is quite recognizable as a typical Gambhira song. There might be some politics of preservation in play here, since the Bangladeshi state would undoubtedly privilege the preservation of anti-Pakistan songs. But even those that do not deal with Pakistan have the tone of ironical self-reflection, and show an unmistakable stamp of Sufi Master's authorship. Sufi's innovation in 1947-71, therefore, was only in substituting the grandfather for Shiva, with the content of Gambhira remaining largely the same.

Sufi's borderland mediation in the pre-1971 period, therefore, was not primarily a mediation between Dhaka and Chapai, but a negotiation between the two idioms of Gambhira on two sides of the border. While the Muslim artists from Malda had arrived with a set of skills on crafting performances, they did not single-handedly substitute the grandfather for Shiva. Rather, they combined the English Bazar idiom of Shiva theatre with an existing vocabulary of conversational humour between a grandfather and his grandson in Chapai. This mediation took place largely in collaboration with local artists of Chapai; Sulaiman Daktar and Kalu Moktar, according to Alam, collaborated with Pashupati Moktar, a playwright based in Chapai. Local enthusiasts like Alam himself were immediately recruited into forming Gambhira teams, following the English Bazar tradition. The mediators were indeed

[265] Alam, *Folklore Sankalan*, 66. This song was collected from Rajshahi in 1964.

consciously creating something new: "they officially inaugurated the formal Gambhira of nana and nati," Alam recounted.[266]

Why did this transformation from god to grandfather take place at all? As the Bangladeshi sources would have us believe, it was the result of Pakistani aggression on un-Islamic rituals. If that was indeed the case, then the Gambhira of nana and nati would have been only another disguise of Shiva for concealing the hidden transcript, as James Scott would say. But this particular transformation had more to it, as indicated by the energetic and continuing collaboration between the English Bazar and Chapai camps. In Chapai Sufi and his compatriots found a new audience significantly different from English Bazar, a predominantly Muslim audience grappling with their new national identity as Pakistanis.[267] Encountering an audience accustomed to a different form of Gambhira, the English Bazar performers unsurprisingly thought it best to modify their art to suit the changed circumstances. Indeed, the audience would have only seen their own existing tradition refined by performers they had looked up to. For Sufi, it was a case of but another mediation in order to cope with political change, an art he had grown to be adept at since the swadeshi years. On the other side of the border, however, Malda performers were following a different trajectory.

Old Gambhira in New Malda

Since this chapter is primarily focussed on the Bangladeshi Gambhira, a full-scale study of Gambhira in postcolonial English Bazar is outside its scope. However, some quick comparative insights into what happens to Gambhira in post-1947 English Bazar will be useful in highlighting the exceptionality of the trajectory of post-1971 Gambhira in Bangladesh. Largely speaking, Gambhira remains, at least till the 1990s, quite unchanged from the subversive, acerbic Gambhira of the interwar years. It received little state support, and continues to face police crackdown for its anti-state tenor. During the emergency

[266] Alam, "Sakshatkar," 47.
[267] See van Schendel, *Bengal Borderland*, Ch. 5-6 for moving accounts of confusion regarding new national identities in the post-1947 period.

declared by Indira Gandhi (c. 1975-6), there was a curfew on the nocturnal performance of Gambhira; as a response, Gambhira performers had unprecedentedly started performing in the morning.[268] Unlike post-1971 Bangladeshi Gambhira, which received state patronage to become a national tradition and increasingly less subversive, the Malda Gambhira continued to be quite local and subversive, as it was in the interwar years.

A significant percentage of the songs continued to be anti-Congress, indicating that the communists had been active in Malda during that time. This song, written by Upendranath Das in 1967, links Shiva's lassitude to the Congress' malpractices:

> O Shiva, you ploughed India for two years with your double oxen,
> You poured the manure of "independence" on the field,
> And then you flooded our good harvest by digging canals,
> Starving us by feeding maize and rotten beans;

The references are to the Congress' symbols, two oxen, in the 1960s, punned with Shiva's carrier animal, the bull. Shiva's farming imagery was deployed to attribute Congress' continued insistence that they had brought "independence" to the country. The irrigation project had spoiled crops recently, making West Bengal import crops from America. The song went further:

> Gandhi wanted to make a *ram-rajya*, O Shiva
> But random goons got together to destroy our country,
> Selfish capitalists took hold of all positions,
> And robbed us to the last coin, O Shiva![269]

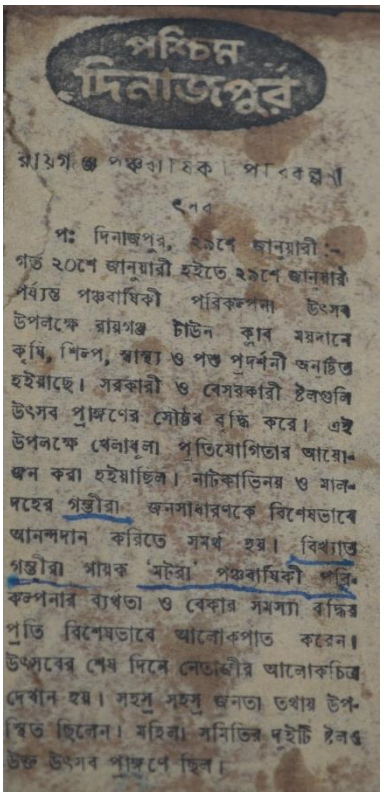
This was a particularly Communist critique, who have called a Congress a party of "goons, capitalists and America's pimps" more than once. Similarly, they challenge that the post-1947 had reduced to ashes Gandhi's dream of an ideal state, the *ram-rajya.* The sharp

[268] Oral History Interview with Prashanta Seth, English Bazar, 15 August 2015.
[269] Pal, *Kabi-Shilpi*, 292-3.

language and critical tone had remained largely unchanged since the days of Seth, which had seen the challenge to bureaucrats similarly. Seth himself remained active, as a newspaper reports him making fun of Nehru's five-year-plans in the 1950s (Figure 3.4). Unsurprisingly, then, the Congress did not hesitate to crack down on these performers during the Emergency years.

Overall, the postcolonial Calcutta bhadralok, barring the Communists, seems to have maintained their distance from Gambhira as in the 1940s. There were some stray attempts of integration, like the formation of a "Gambhira Parishad" (Gambhira Society) in Calcutta, but none of it garnered much attention or success (Figure 3.4). Gambhira was confined to Malda as a local tradition, and the only places where one found any sign of it were government publications and gazetteers pertaining to Malda. The West Bengal Government did highlight some folk forms like the *bāul*, although its propensity for folk traditions was negligible compared to the enthusiasm of the post-1971 Bangladeshi state. Gambhira was simultaneously too political and with too little aesthetic appeal to define "Bengali-ness" in any way. Further, most of the songs were in a dialect unintelligible to Kolkata and used language unacceptable to bhadralok parlours. Gambhira remained confined to Malda until very recent attempts by NGOs.

There is, however, one curious absence in Malda Gambhira of this period: they seem not to be aware at all that there is a parallel tradition emerging in Bangladesh. Perhaps it was a conscious choice to keep away from Sufi's activities across the border: the Malda performers wanted to remain a voice in postcolonial Indian politics. If they wanted to continue their fragmented mediation of protest, which they seemingly did, such a choice was indeed wise, since post-1971, Bangladeshi Gambhira entered a new phase of borderland mediation that almost completely redefined the genre.



পশ্চিম দিনাজপুর

রায়গঞ্জ পঞ্চবার্ষিক পরিকল্পনা

পঃ দিনাজপুর, ২৯শে জানুয়ারী :-
গত ২০শে জানুয়ারী হইতে ২৯শে জানুয়ারী পর্য্যন্ত পঞ্চবার্ষিকী পরিকল্পনা উৎসব উপলক্ষে রায়গঞ্জ টাউন ক্লাব ময়দানে কৃষি, শিল্প, স্বাস্থ্য ও পশু প্রদর্শনী অনুষ্ঠিত হইয়াছে। সরকারী ও বেসরকারী ষ্টলগুলি উৎসব প্রাঙ্গণের সৌষ্ঠব বৃদ্ধি করে। এই উপলক্ষে খেলাধূলা প্রতিযোগিতার আয়োজন করা হইয়াছিল। নাটকাভিনয় ও মালদহের গম্ভীরা জনসাধারণকে বিশেষভাবে আনন্দদান করিতে সমর্থ হয়। বিখ্যাত গম্ভীরা গায়ক 'মটরা' পঞ্চবার্ষিকী পরিকল্পনার ব্যর্থতা ও বেকার সমস্যা বৃদ্ধির প্রতি বিশেষভাবে আলোকপাত করেন। উৎসবের শেষ দিনে নেতাজীর আলোকচিত্র দেখান হয়। সহস্র সহস্র জনতা তথায় উপস্থিত ছিলেন। মহিলা সমিতির দুইটি ষ্টলও উক্ত উৎসব প্রাঙ্গণে ছিল।

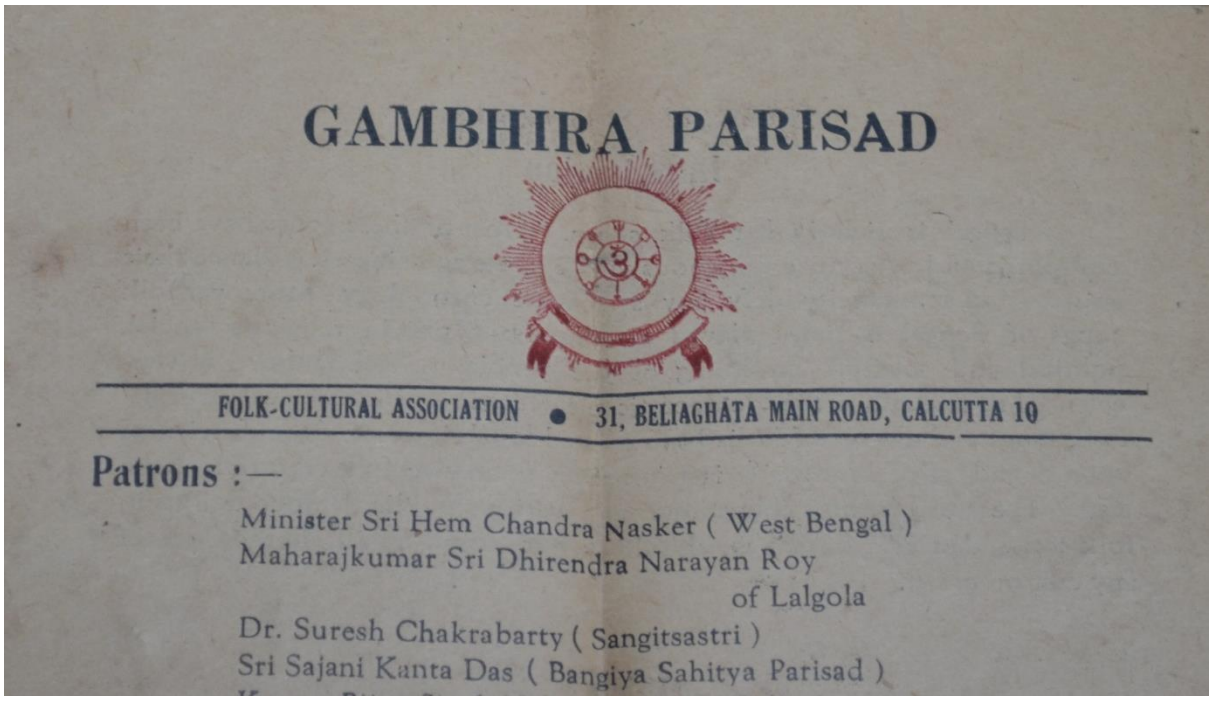


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Figure 3.4. *Malda Gambhira, Postcolonial yet Subversive* (Clockwise from top): Gambhira from late 1960s makes fun of key politicians Jahangir Kabir, Jyoti Basu, and Ajay Mukherjee. From Ghosh, *Lokasaṅgīta O Utsaba*; Article from Dainik Basumati (1958) mentioning Gambhira performers had critiqued Nehru's five-year plans (underlined in blue); a pamphlet of the Gambhira Parisad in Calcutta from the 1950s, formed by some Calcutta elites in the Benoy Sarkar vein, but ultimately failed to be of much significance given that interwar Gambhira had fractured significantly from the bhadralok vision.

National Traditions, Borderland Mediations: Bangladeshi Gambhira since 1971

On 16 December 1971, after a bloody civil war with Pakistan, Bangladesh became the newest sovereign state in South Asia. The undisputed architect of the anti-Pakistan freedom struggle was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who became the first premier of Bangladesh. The new state fashioned itself as a "People's Republic," and, despite having an overwhelming Muslim population, consciously did not fashion itself as an Islamic Republic, thereby keeping a distance from Pakistan. Instead, the nation defined itself as a country for the Bengali-speaking peoples, returning to the strictest sense of the Herderian *Volk*, which saw a people with a common language to be the sole legitimate basis of a nation-state. 1971 saw, for the first time, "Bengali" identity being solidified and politicized to the extent of being a foundation for a state.[270] The emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign state had great ramifications for Gambhira. While the Malda Gambhira lay in a neglected corner of India, the Bangladeshi Gambhira metamorphosed into a "national" tradition. The post-1971 borderland mediation, consequently, was also more strenuous and chequered than Sufi's small-scale, localized negotiations between Shiva and *nana* had been.

After the establishment of the new state, Bangladeshi nationalists sought legitimacy not only in the Liberation War of 1971, but in the Bengali Language Movement two decades back. Since 1948, the Pakistani state had refused to make Bengali an official language, and had ordered Urdu to be the only language in both East and West Pakistan. Consequently, waves of dissatisfaction had come from students, who had rightly read this move as a form of colonization. Skirmishes had reached a new high on 21 February 1952, when the police shot dead many peaceful student activists who broke an imposed curfew. The "Language

[270] For the politics around the creation of Bangladesh, see Ayesha Jalal, *The Struggle for Pakistan: A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). For 1971, Bengali identity and citizenship, see Antara Datta, *Refugees and Borders in South Asia*: *The Great Exodus of 1971* (London: Routledge, 2013); Ananya Jahanara Kabir, *Partition's Post-Amnesias: 1947, 1971 and Modern South Asia* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2013).

Movement," as it was later known, sparked widespread civil disobedience in its time. While politically the Language Movement and the Liberation War were quite distinct events, the Bangladeshi state later skilfully wove the 1952 movement into its own genealogical narrative.[271] The state had produced a strong Bengali personhood by weaving together the political legacy of the Language movement and the Herderian idea of a land united by the Bengali language. While Bengali Muslims had enacted their identity through literary practice since swadeshi,[272] 1971 saw those literary affinities solidified into the ideological projects of the nation-state.

Gambhira and the Folkloristic State

This emphasis on language as the central marker of national ideology, for Bangladesh, translated into an enduring concern for the collection, curation, and preservation of folklore. The Bangla Academy, an institution for the study of Bengali language along the lines of the Académie française, had been established as early as 1954, but gained new importance following independence. Since the late 1970s, the Folklore Department of the Academy has interviewed thousands of folk performers and produced a formidable volume of textual, folkloristic and ethnographic scholarship. It has taken especial care to categorize and classify each of the myriad folk traditions of Bangladesh, and to produce high-level documentation in each of the production. Today, the Bangla Academy boasts an imposing seven-storey building in central Dhaka with hundreds of employees, scholars, fieldworkers and editors tirelessly researching on Bengali folklore. The life of Gambhira in post-1971 Bangladesh was thoroughly informed by the state's "insatiable taxonomic appetite" with regards to folklore.[273]

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[271] See Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), Ch. 16-18 for a succinct historical overview of this phase in Bangladesh's history. All official business is conducted strictly in Bengali in Bangladesh, and 21 February, now celebrated by UNESCO as International Mother Language Day, is largely touted as the moment of origin for the Bangladeshi national movement.
[272] See Bose, *Recasting the Region*, Ch. 1-2.
[273] Herzfeld, *Place in History*, 6. Ashraf Siddiqui, *Folkloric Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1976) is an example of nationalist folk collection in the early years of Bangladesh. It has been followed by many hundreds of such volumes.

The new state quickly came in contact with the obscure theatre from Chapai. Only a few months after the creation of Bangladesh, the Minister of Cooperatives was scheduled to stay the night in Chapai while on a tour, and the local political leaders decided to honour him with some cultural performances. Qutubul Alam, who then happened to be in Chapai, was summoned to play his part as *nana* in a Gambhira. Qutubul chose Raqibuddin, the nephew of the venerable Sufi Master, to play *nati*. Sulaiman Daktar wrote the songs. The event was a great success, and there began a tradition of performing Gambhira before visiting political authorities from Dhaka:

> The topic was about the problems of Nawabganj, the poor condition of roads and the like. The minister was happy, and said that it was an effective form of mass media. Since then, we have presented Gambhira before all ministers who have come to Nawabganj or Rajshahi.[274]

Gambhira was therefore a forum to bring complaints to the notice of metropolitan authorities. The mofussil-metropolis dialogue was akin to the contact mediation of Benoy Sarkar, but the terms of the conversation had now changed. Swadeshi Malda had showcased its heritage to Calcutta; post-1971 Chapai not only showed its culture but demanded marks of governance, especially infrastructure development like roads and railways, from Dhaka, the new center of power. Note that none but Chapai locals had initiated showing Gambhira, and thereby voicing their complaints, to the authorities in Dhaka.

However, the "folkloristic state" of Bangladesh, to rework a phrase from David Guss, lost no time turning Gambhira as a domain to assert its presence.[275] Soon after the visit of the co-operative minister, none but the Prime Minister, Mujibur Rahman, was on an official visit to Rajshahi. A gifted orator and beloved leader, Mujib had already gained legendary status by then, being the national hero who had brought freedom through blood and sweat. The

[274] Alam, "Sakshatkar," 50.
[275] David M. Guss, *The Festive State: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism as Cultural Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

1972 Gambhira performance before Mujib in the Natore Public Hall was the most important moment for Bangladeshi Gambhira. Alam fondly recollected the event:

> We told *Bangabandhu* ["Friend of Bengal," Mujib's sobriquet] about the devastation the Liberation War had brought. Our Gambhira showed him how communication was devastated, and gave detailed accounts of people's losses and grieves. He was so moved after listening to my family tragedies, that he started crying himself. We called him "*Baro Nana"* [great grandfather], and presented him with a stick and a conical hat, the symbols of a peasant.[276]

Mujib being hailed as the great grandfather and wearing the symbols of a Bengali peasant was an instance of the state embodying its *Volk*. Mujib, and by extension the Bangladeshi state, was not critiqued by Gambhira performers in the way the colonial state had been. Rather, he was accepted into the fold as simply another peasant. This moment of embracing the state instead of rejecting it turned out to be a crucial moment for Bangladeshi Gambhira.

Later Bangladeshi scholars have hailed this moment as *the* pivotal moment when the Bangladeshi Gambhira was born.[277] This is not completely true, since, as we saw in the previous section, the *nana-nati* Gambhira had a vibrant life in the Pakistan days. But two pivotal changes did happen: first, Gambhira was increasingly touted as a "national" tradition rather than the older idiom of a "local tradition"; secondly, Qutubul and Raqib, because of their proximity to Mujib, became unparalleled faces of Bangladeshi Gambhira. No other Gambhira performer, till date, have been as synonymous with the tradition as they have. Mujib had grown increasingly fond of the Gambhira duo, and is said to have regularly entertained them at his official residence in Dhaka. Till his assassination during a coup on 15 August 1975, Mujib took personal care to promote them (Figure 3.5).

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[276] Alam, "Sakshatkar," 51
[277] See Selim, *Gambhira*, preface.

Figure 3.5 *The Folkloristic State.* Mujib (center) with Qutubul (left) and Raqib (right) in his residence at Dhaka. That the State premier met them in a loose robe, and not his formal Bengali attire, shows how familiar he was with the Gambhira Duo. Selim, *Gambhira*, end matter.

Following Mujib's enthusiastic backing of Qutubul and Raqib, a new era began in the relationship between Gambhira and the Bangladeshi state. The state deployed its full machinery to showcase Gambhira and several other folk forms as quintessential reflections of the Bangladeshi people. Qutubul and Raqib were contracted, first by Rajshahi Radio and then by Radio Bangladesh in Dhaka, to regularly perform Gambhira as First Class artists. They took part in the "folk festivals" of Dhaka, where the state gathered folk artists from throughout the country to showcase the unity of one nation despite diverse folk forms.

They soon joined the Bangla Academy, not only performing regularly in their auditorium, but performing in educational documentary films, covering topics from the liberation war to family planning. These documentaries were shown in movie theatres before the beginnings of movies and also screened with projectors in remote villages. Gambhira now therefore reached audiences all over Bangladesh rather than being confined to audiences in small fields of Chapai.

Figure 3.6. *Spreading a National Tradition*. Qutubul (left, standing) and Raqib (right) in a television show in Bangladesh from the 1980s. Notice the carefully designed artificial backdrop of a village, complete with thatched roofs, trees and courtyards.

The final moment in making Gambhira a "national" tradition was 1975, when the director of the Bangla Academy started directing a television program which specifically focussed on Gambhira performed by the two (Figure 3.6). With television programs and documentary films, Gambhira now reached hundreds of thousands of people. As Lila Abu-Lughod notes in her remarkable ethnography of television and national identity in Egypt, the television is a mode of "organizing everyday life" which "works at both the cultural and socio-political levels," and "weaves its magic through pleasures and subliminal framings."[278]

[278] Lila Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 9.

Unlike in West Bengal, where Gambhira remains another little-known theatre form in a corner, Bangladesh made Gambhira into a national tradition by systematic state-sponsored backing through various media, like film, television, and radio. Even when performed locally, it had to mediate between local realities and its image as a national tradition.

A New Borderland Mediation

If Sufi's borderland mediation had meant to create a new niche in opposition to Malda, the post-1971 borderland mediation by Qutubul and Raqib was of a different order. Now heavily patronized by the state, the subversive role of Gambhira had been thwarted; indeed, very few post-1971 Gambhira songs articulate any substantial critique of the state. The issue is not exactly "censorship": Gambhira performers still take pride in saying aloud the "people's voice," a legacy of the reshaping of the idea of the folk as people's culture, as discussed in chapter 2. Qutubul proudly stated that he only "tells the truth" and does "constructive criticism," which the state has never persecuted him for. But for all his claims of non-censorship, the fact remains that very few songs today contain the kind of subversion that was common in the pre-1971 period.

The new borderland mediation since 1971 has shifted the terms of mediation from critiquing the state to bargaining for the rights to development and governance. For the borderland, already existing in a position of inequality with the center, the importance of state patronage cannot be underestimated. The financial support and appeal of mass audiences offered by state media was of crucial importance for Gambhira performers. As a result, they did not challenge the fundamental claims of the nation-state, like its re-framing of a new Bengali history grounded on the language movement or the Liberaton War. Most songs conform to and even propagate these agendas. At the same time, they critique the state in matters of inadequate governance, which reflect the realities of life in the borderland. Shifting the field of critique from politics to development is a prime example of borderland mediation:

borderland people pay lip service to the agendas of the state through Gambhira, while using the same tool to demand better rights.

Surveying post-1971 Gambhira songs, one is amazed at how conventional they have become since the acerbic tunes of the 1940s. The songs about the Language Day and the Liberation War uncritically replicate the nationalist myths of the Bangaldeshi state. A very popular Gambhira song from the 1970s went as follows:

> Twenty-Five years ago,
>
> Twenty-first February
>
> A day built with blood, can we forget it?
>
> To Institute the Bengali Language,
>
> So many lives have been lost,
>
> None can forget this immortal day![279]

The historical memory embedded in songs like these is very much in lines with the official narrative of the Language Day. Words like "immortal" and "day built with blood" are frequently repeated in official discourses, and these songs directly echo such language. This song also echoes the famous "Twenty-first of February, the day coloured with my brother's blood," the song that has grown to be the anthem for the day.

Some language day songs, like even the one quoted at the beginning of this chapter, go to the extent of chastising the people for not being Bengali enough:

> O Nana, what are we seeing,
>
> They are all using a foreign language,
>
> Leaving our mother's language,
>
> We don't understand why, O Nana!
>
> Let us take an oath,

[279] Collected from Chapai, anthologized in various places.

That we shall not work in a foreign language from today![280]

Note that the critique is articulated from the perspective of the nation-state, since it is no secret that Bangladesh sees the Bengali language as the unquestionable and ultimate basis of nationality. The Bengali Muslim peasant instructing audiences about Bengali-ness does seem to have come a full circle since the swadeshi years, when the Muslim peasant had been completely excluded from the bhadralok national imaginary.[281] The song not only follows the agenda of the state, but facilitates its pedagogical projects. Compared to the staunch critical songs of the interwar years, Gambhira indeed seems to be de-fanged and tamed; several Dhaka intellectuals echoed this idea when they told me about post-1971 Gambhira being "sold out" to the Bangladeshi state, and having no original political stance.

But a closer look at post-1971 Bangladeshi Gambhira songs suggests that the mediation was much more complex. Many songs did voice grievances against the state, but those critiques were grounded on the basis of unequal relation of governance between the center and the borderland. These songs tended not to be performed in national media, but in the local stages of Chapai. Consider this song on the failure of the educational policies of the state:

O Nana, how will we spread education?
Education Policies are so defunct!
Day after day it goes down,
Education is the main part of a nation,
Why do you not care?[282]

This song points out a flaw in the educational policies of the state, and asks the government to pay more attention into matters of education. The criticism, however, is far from being subversive, especially when compared to the sharp songs of the interwar years. Indeed, none

[280] Alam, *Folklore Sankalan*, 81.
[281] I thank Rishad Choudhury for this insight.
[282] Alam, *Folklore Sankalan*, 86.

of the songs of the Bangladeshi Gambhira have the sharp edge that the colonial songs had, or for that matter some songs in Malda still have. Instead, these songs bargain with the state without subverting its norms. Since the state claims to be a democracy with room for dissent, this critique remains well within the limits set for democratic conduct. This action cannot be dismissed as a mere "sell-out." One must consider the realities which matter most to the performers; perhaps the ability to ask for development after by being recognized by the state was preferable to being obliterated by the state as an anti-national element.

When one reads the post-1971 Gambhira archive with an eye for songs of demand rather than songs of subversion, an overwhelming majority of songs come to view. Overtly, these songs praise the cultural agendas of the state: subversion is not at all their agenda. But at the same time, they never cease demanding what is given to them by the rights of citizenship set by none by the state. With an emphasis on the local, these songs challenge the idea of a sell-out quite strongly:

> Nawabganj is our home,
> We think everyone to be our friends,
> But they all consider us strangers,
> We are poor farmers, nana,
> Is that why this neglect?
> Forgive your grandson, nana,
> I cannot say any more.[283]

Despite not naming anyone, the tenor of the song is quite clear. "They" refer to the authorities in Dhaka, who do not care for Nawabganj: being further from the center means being further away from development. Since state propaganda elaborately constructs the figure of peasant as a national asset, the performers assert their identity as farmers, and expose that the state

[283] Alam, *Folklore Sankalan*, 87.

does not practice what it preaches. At the same time, "they cannot say any more," since they do not want to offend the state and thereby be stripped off state privileges. A very similar song claims it more overtly:

> Nana, Rajshahi has the Development Department,
> But despite there being everything, we get nothing!
> The President has sanctioned enough money, I hear,
> Now can we please get going with the road projects?[284]

Once again, the key theme for bargain is development. The performer praises the President for allocating money, thereby leaving no grounds for the state to be upset with them; at the same time, they are fully aware of what they need from the state, and ask for those benefits, not as privileges but as citizenship rights.

Note that subversion is not the issue here at all, and it does not need to be so. As highlighted in chapter 2, there is a tendency in scholarship to inherently link folk culture with subversion. But that link appears only in certain historical moments, like it had during the political circumstances of the interwar years. In post-71 Bangladesh, on the other hand, Gambhira performers thought it most advantageous to play the game by the rules set by the state. Having become a borderland significantly removed from the center had placed them in a precarious position with respect to developmental programs. I understood this during a conversation with a performer in Chapai, to whom I asked, with quintessential ethnographic naiveté, why he did not sing "revolutionary" songs like the older performers. He had smiled and replied, "If you ask me whether the quickest way to build roads in Chapai was to plead to the government or to call for a revolution, I would plead the government." Considering all the options available to them, the Chapai performers had chosen to mediate carefully with the

[284] Alam, *Folklore Sankalan*, 86.

government: they had no qualms spreading government ideologies on nationalism and Bengali-ness, but in turn demanded what they considered more important.

In his classic account of the "structural transformation" of the "public sphere," Jürgen Habermas had argued that the public sphere in Europe, a societal realm of debate outside state control, disappeared through the end of the nineteenth century because of the increasing presence of the state in people's lives. Since the state controlled every aspect of economy and governance, debates were concerned less with the nature of state and society, and increasingly more with bargains for better privileges like budget allocations.[285] The situation is not too different with the presence of the Bangladeshi state and the Gambhira public sphere, given that the performers are heavily dependent on the state for every minute demand. I, however, do not share Habermas' pessimism with the demise of the public sphere as a result of state incursion. Rather, to invoke James Scott again, the lip service to the state alongside the demands can be seen as yet another "disguising" and "muting" of ideological resistance, if only "for safety's sake."[286] Gambhira performers had worked out a way to bargain with the state despite not challenging the fundamental claims of the Bangladeshi state. Their solution was an intelligent mediational trade-off between their local demands and the ideological pressures of the nation-state.

The borderland mediation of Gambhira post-1971 was significantly different from the mediation during 1947-1971. In the Pakistan years, Sufi and his compatriots had aimed to construct their own niche, with a separate identity from the English Bazar model. Perhaps the presence of the Pakistani state did have some role to play in this transformation. However, after 1971, the Bangladeshi state aggressively appropriated Gambhira as a "national" tradition, thereby forestalling the re-formation of a subversive practice. Gambhira could still have been subversive against the state, but that would have merely resulted in complete

[285] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).
[286] Scott, *Domination and Arts*, 137.

obliteration of the performance. Instead, the performers shifted the debate from subversion to demand; while an increasing number of songs solidified the myths constructed by the nation, an equal number of songs demanded more development, through "constructive criticism," in Alam's words. That the criticism was constructive and not destructive indicates that this was borderland mediation *par excellence*: Gambhira performers understood that a little conformity to the nation's ideological practices could bring real material gains for the borderland. This mediation between the center and the borderland was necessary not only because the modern state was more powerful than ever, but because a basic relation of inequality characterized the relationship between Dhaka and Chapai.

Our Songs, Their Songs: In Quest of the Gambhira Prometheus

If post-1971 Gambhira performers have mediated between the national and the local, scholars on both sides of the border have engaged in contestation rather than mediation. A close comparative examination of the scholarly accounts produced from India and Bangladesh reveal not only how much the nation-state has influenced the study of folk culture, but also which aspects of the folk have been sites of contestation. In his classic study of Venezuelan festivals, David Guss showed how festivals are "sites of continual struggle, public stages on which competing interests converge to both challenge and negotiate identity."[287] Guss was interested in such negotiation in the domain of performance; here I extend the contestation to the realm of scholarship on the subject. It is by studying the cross-border scholarship the ideological pressures of the state in the borderland become most apparent. In the case of Gambhira, reading the Bangladeshi and Indian narratives with an eye for differing claims makes it clear that scholars on both sides of the border are interested in claiming specific aspects of the tradition, and what they want to claim are largely determined

[287] Guss, *Festive State*, 23.

by their respective agendas. These contestations also begin to reveal certain aspects of the post-colonial idea of folk culture.

Scholars from India, generally based in English Bazar, extol the antiquity of the art form by hailing modern Gambhira performers as the carriers of a millennia-old ritual. The tone for this kind of scholarship was set in the 1960s by Pradyot Ghosh, by far the most prolific scholar on Gambhira. A student of Asutosh Bhattacharya, Ghosh followed his mentor's literary paradigm of seeing modern folk performances as texts from pre-modern Bengal. In 1968, Ghosh published the first book-length work on Gambhira ever written since Palit's book. "A religious festival of Bengal has changed garments many times in the course of time," he reflected, "and it shall never stop, since rural culture has wholeheartedly accepted it." He reverently acknowledges the antiquity of Gambhira which he agrees, following Palit, dates to the Buddhist kings of yore. Yet, he insists, the "huge historical leap" from being a "religious festival" to a "social art" went unnoticed by Palit, because it happened after Palit wrote his book. This historical leap, presumably the swadeshi moment of Sarkar and Palit, had thrown apart the "narrow" religious boundaries of the festival. Contemporary Gambhira, he noted, has been liberated from religious boundaries both in terms of audience and the diversity of themes, making it a truly "liberal and popular" movement. [288]

Ghosh therefore wants to celebrate Gambhira for both its ancient Buddhist origins and for its modern appeal among the people. Here, he inherits and combines the two ideas of the "folk" discussed in the previous two chapters, of creating an ancient genealogy and deploying the discourse of the people. This attempt to simultaneously celebrate antiquity and modernity creates several paradoxes for him. For instance, he introduces the distinction between "Gambhira festival" and "Gambhira song" to mark the key transformation in the swadeshi

[288]Ghosh, *Lokasaṅgīta O Utsaba*, preface.

period. This is a valid analytical distinction in itself, but for Ghosh the distinction maps into dichotomies like religious/secular, old/new, dying/rejuvenating. As a result, "the Gambhira festival of the past, of a glorious Malda woven with myths and legends, has greyed in decay, and is lurching towards the horizons of memory," while "nowadays Gambhira songs are cherished, in their popular value and appeal, in the streams of their unpolluted laughter they generate."[289] This is a direct legacy of the interwar Marxist intervention on the matter, which, unlike Palit, had claimed the folk solely for the proletariat. Note that Ghosh lauds the festival's antiquity for its grandeur, but celebrates its modernity for being popular and humorous. As a result, he has to lament the decay of one and laud the rise of another, and extol contemporary Gambhira for having both qualities.

The paradox reaches a peak when Ghosh tries to grapple with the fate of Gambhira in East Pakistan. In a 92-page book, he devotes one precious paragraph, titled "Another Form of Gambhira: East Bengal" to indicate that the tradition even exists across the border. Here I quote his entire revealing paragraph:

> After Partition, Gambhira has taken a new form in the part of Malda in East Pakistan, especially the districts of Bholahat and Chapai Nawabganj. "Nana" means Shiva in Malda, but in East-Pakistan means an old village farmer, who is also the village headman, with a beard. The grandfather and his grandson are the only two characters there. The dialogues between grandfather and grandson narrate the news of country and society, and also subjects like municipality and union boards. One does not find mention of political events from Malda. "Rajshahi" radio still broadcasts Gambhira under the supervision of Wahed Rahman, and their main poets include Muhammad Sulaiman and Pashupati Swarnakar. *It has to be admitted that since the various characters from Malda have not entered the Gambhira of East Pakistan, the*

[289] Ibid.

> *entertaining quality of the Gambhira in East Pakistan is much less than the Gambhira found in West Bengal.*[290]

Ghosh's attitude to the East Pakistan Gambhira is at best lukewarm and at worst dismissive. He has clear scorn for the new format, and proposes the extraordinary conclusion that the East Pakistan Gambhira is less entertaining since it has fewer characters. While such a conclusion has no ground whatsoever, his argument effectively robs the East Pakistan Gambhira of both reasons for which he lauds the Malda Gambhira: being morphed by Muslims into grandfather and grandson it has no lineage to be proud of, and also fails to be popular and entertaining due to its paucity of characters. Ghosh's views on the East Pakistan Gambhira did not change following the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. His 1982 book does not even have the quoted paragraph, despite otherwise mirroring the 1968 volume. Ghosh's paradigm of simultaneously lauding antiquity and modernity and ignoring the Bangladeshi Gambhira remained the norm for several other scholars from the 1970s to the 2000s.[291]

But in 2003, in yet another "re-judgement" of his 1968 volume, Ghosh devoted four full pages to the Bangladeshi Gambhira, even anthologizing several songs from across the border. And reconsideration it was: he filled the Bangladeshi Gambhira with unbridled praises for being "an extremely popular folk theatre," "highly successful" and "pervasively expanded and communicated."[292] By now, he had cautiously withdrawn the remark on East Pakistani Gambhira being less entertaining; instead, he lauded the Bangladeshi Gambhira for including women's Gambhira teams, something that even Malda could not achieve. His anguish with Malda Gambhira went further: while the Bangladeshi Gambhira was growing successful, Malda Gambhira groups were "firmly roped in by local political parties" and the death of all major artists had "stopped its popular appeal in Malda."[293] Perhaps his view of

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[290] Ibid, 33-4. Emphasis added.
[291] Ghosh, *Lokasanskriti Gambhira*.
[292] Ghosh, *Gambhira Purnarbicara*, 131
[293] Ibid, 133-4.

Bangladesh had improved after some real exposure to the region; for the first time in 2003 he cites Bangladeshi books on the subject. Nonetheless, he basically uses Bangladesh as a foil to say things about West Bengal and India, even if his notion of Bangladesh keeps shifting. Ghosh's work, therefore, is a good example of a discursive borderland where the apparent border is itself a moving entity.

For Ghosh, Bangladeshi Gambhira ultimately remains "another form," that can be selectively invoked to point out everything that is wrong with the Malda Gambhira. As a result, only those aspects of Bangladeshi Gambhira which are comparable to its Malda counterpart are invoked in a handful of pages, that too in the context of Ghosh's frustration with Malda. The point is not to criticize Ghosh, but to understand the normative logic of analysing Gambhira, or postcolonial folk at large. In India, this logic focuses on simultaneously lauding the decaying erstwhile glory and the secular political reach, and tying the culture firmly to the place. Therefore, it is a curious combination of Palit's idea of an antique tradition and the Marxist idea of a people's folk.

Scholarship on Gambhira from Bangladesh, on the other hand, faces different predicaments. To begin with, such scholarship had the disadvantage of beginning late, with Bangladesh stabilizing only in the 1980s, by when two of Ghosh's books were already dominating the field. Secondly, it was widely known that performers from India had migrated to Bangladesh and begun this performance, and there was no space for claiming "Bangladeshi" origins for Gambhira. In order to recognize Gambhira as a "tradition" and not merely a recent innovation, one had to acknowledge its Hindu and Buddhist roots created by Palit, and those roots were unlikely to be of much use for the fledgling nation with an overwhelming Muslim majority. In order to settle this dilemma, Bangladeshi scholars negotiated with the existing Malda narrative, and emphasized aspects of the story that were quite different from Ghosh's project.

Bangladeshi scholars did not challenge Palit's narrative; rather, they happily embraced it. Most Bangladeshi writings on Gambhira begin by meditating on the ancient roots of Gambhira in Malda, and spend considerable time narrating the rituals today not found in the Bangladeshi Gambhira. Indeed, one collection of essays was even titled "A Thousand Years of Gambhira."[294] These essays also replicated Palit's descriptions of the rituals of Gājan and Ghosh's descriptions of the Malda Gambhira, and even hinted at the anti-colonial role of the performance in the 1930s and 1940s. That Gambhira "originated" and was "nurtured" in Malda seemed not to be a problem, since it was accepted beyond question that before 1947 Malda and Rajshahi were a coherent whole.[295] The argument for the antiquity of Gambhira was in fact crucial for a new nation-state that desperately needed to find older roots to legitimize a national culture. Palit's Hindu and Buddhist Gambhira, however un-Islamic and unrelated to the modern form, perfectly suited such a purpose.

The Malda narrative is tweaked, however, by invoking a vocabulary of "re-birth" and "progress" which Bangladesh has brought to this ancient performance. While the origins of Gambhira surely lay in Malda, the argument went, it was Bangladesh who cared for, rejuvenated and reformed the decaying heritage.

> Although Gambhira was very popular in Malda…Gambhira was re-born after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. The lamp of Gambhira was lit by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, with encouragement, inspiration and patronage.[296]

Another account stresses on the "progressive" aspect of the nation that has inevitably changed the folk form for the better:

> Although Gambhira was the worship of Shiva, over the course of time Gambhira has acquired new meanings. *In the process of metamorphosis of folklore, bathed in the streams of social progress, Gambhira has been liberated from the older garments of*

[294]Taru, *Hajar Bacharera Gambhira.*
[295] Alam, *Folklore Sankalan*, 1.
[296] Selim, *Gambhira*, 5.

> *religion.* For the socially-conscious man, it has created the figure of the "grandfather" in place of Shiva, a figure that embodies people's emotions of sorrow and pain.[297]

The garment imagery was used by Ghosh to describe the change in Gambhira, but these accounts add to it a liberal vocabulary of "progress" and "liberation from religion." It was Bangladesh, the story goes, not least its premier Mujibur Rahman, who enforced this liberation on an otherwise decaying practice. Correspondingly, the transition from Shiva to grandfather is read in lines of "progress," as a movement from religious restriction to secular freedom. To be clear, these Bangladeshi claims about Gambhira is at odds with the actual history of the evolution of the tradition. The transition from Shiva to grandfather took place during the Pakistan years, and the regime, at least in matters of Gambhira, was not nearly as oppressive as the Bangladeshi accounts make it to be. The claim of Mujib "re-lighting" the lamp of Gambhira and "liberating" it is entirely a post-1971 claim, and is in tandem with the political agendas of the postcolonial folkloristic state.

It is precisely this attitude of "liberating" the old Gambhira for the common people that Bangladesh claims for itself. Unlike the Indian accounts that eulogizes Gambhira's ancient heritage, Bangladeshi accounts stress how the state has actively facilitated the liberation of folk culture from the clutches of religion. The Bangladeshi discourse explains this by embracing the Marxist vocabulary of the "people's culture", as opposed to the swadeshi religious demarcation of the folk, and tying it to the ideologies of the liberal state. Using a vocabulary of "popular liberation" effectively cloaks the religious tensions that could have arisen if labels like "Hindu" and "Muslim" had been affixed to Gambhira. The tensions are further alleviated since the Bangladeshi state makes no qualms about accepting and acknowledging the Hindu origins of Gambhira. Bangladesh's claim does not depend on origins, but rather on a vocabulary of rejuvenation and reform. This claim was made so

[297]Alam, *Folklore Sankalan*, preface, emphasis added.

forcefully in the 1990s that even Ghosh, who once dismissed Bangladeshi Gambhira as unentertaining, cited Bangladeshi scholarship on Gambhira to chide Gambhira performers in Malda. As we saw, for him, Bangladesh had achieved the popular appeal of Gambhira that the political factions of Malda had failed to reach. In doing so, Ghosh had easily accepted the claims of the Bangladeshi scholars, not least because those claims, despite having their niches, never sharply contradicted the standard Indian narrative.

The competing Gambhira narratives do not exist in a vacuum. Written in Bengali and printed by local presses in Calcutta, Malda and Dhaka, these cheap books are read and debated by people, not least Gambhira performers and audiences. Many of the Gambhira performers I interviewed in Malda had books by Ghosh and others in their bookshelves, and had read them religiously. Unsurprisingly, these books end up informing the current practice of the performance in curious ways. Their influence is most effective in defining the history and antiquity of the tradition. When I asked Gambhira performers, "How old do you think Gambhira is?" they either pulled out one of the books that I had already read, or referred me to "the scholar who lives in the locality," who "definitely knows much more about the history of Gambhira than we do." Scholars like Ghosh were, further, natives of Malda who grew up with many Gambhira performers, and they regularly derive authority from their "first-hand knowledge."[298] Ethnographically, the close dialogue between performers and scholarly accounts implies that a simplistic opposition between "people's voices" and "nationalist narratives" is of little analytical worth. The narratives discussed in the previous section actively inform the way performers conceive and enact Gambhira; a close personal relationship with performers, in turn, influences the scholars who weave the narrative together. This relatedness hints at a much broader process of interaction between nationalist narratives and cultural worlds of the borderland (Figure 3.8).

[298]Pal, *Kabi-Shilpi*, preface.

Figure 3.8. *Our Songs, their Songs.* The covers of Pradyot Ghosh's *Lokasaṃskṛti Gambhīrā* (1982) and the *Bangla Academy Folklore Sankalan* (1995). Ghosh's cover is replete with Hindu icons, with masks of several gods including Shiva and his bull. The Bangla Academy collections have a generic cover (for all its volumes, Gambhira is only the 67th) with a flower, harkening loosely to a Mughal architectural symbol; though not explicitly Islamic, it is tellingly non-Hindu and abstracted: a reflection of how the Bangladeshi state sees itself. Note that Bangladesh prefers to use the English term "Folklore" over the Bengali "lokasaṃskṛti."

When I asked a pre-eminent Gambhira performer of Malda his thoughts on the Gambhira in Bangladesh, he laughed it off. I pressed him again. "Don't make me laugh," he said, "I cannot stop laughing while talking about that grandfather-grandson cartoon." I protested that the performance had been quite instrumental in public education throughout Bangladesh, and charged him, "Have you ever watched a Bangladeshi Gambhira? If not, why do you ridicule them so much?" He said that he has indeed never watched any Bangladeshi Gambhira, and neither did he desire to do so. For the Gambhira in Bangladesh was, after all, much inferior to the Malda Gambhira, as shown by the derivative origins of the former:

> Ha! You ask about the Gambhira of Bangladesh. I'll tell you how they got to have Gambhira. One Bangladeshi, devious as they are, overheard one tune being rehearsed

> by the best Gambhira team of Malda. He ran back to Bangladesh with that one tune. That is why throughout Bangladesh Gambhira is sung in only one boring tune: the one tune they stole from our rehearsals. They couldn't get more, for people understood the eavesdropping and stopped practicing. There is no variation and no creativity in Bangladesh, their Gambhira is not worth hearing. Go ask [a certain scholar], he'll corroborate that this story is true.

Unsurprisingly, the scholar in question was bemused by this citation, and vigorously denied making any such claim. But it cannot be denied that most scholarly works of Malda in Gambhira treat the Bangladeshi counterpart as a poor step-cousin. Extraordinary narratives like these are therefore born only in part out of professional rivalries; the stories are simultaneously reinforced by ongoing nationalist rivalries fought out in the battlefield of Gambhira scholarship.

Note how the crux of the Malda myth about Bangladeshi Gambhira focusses on the derivative *origin* of the tradition, and even explains its apparent monotonicity with reference to the Bangladeshi's inability to pick up more than one tune. This obsession with origin was not an idiosyncrasy of this particular performer; several others recounted Bangladeshi Gambhira as "copied from ours," "cheated away from us," or even "stolen from us." Surprisingly, few people seemed to be aware that it was indeed Muslim performers from Malda, like Sufi Master and Solaiman Daktar, who had crossed the border and given birth to the Bangladeshi Gambhira. The most obvious nationalist argument along these lines would have been to see Bangladeshi Gambhira merely as an extension of Malda Gambhira, thereby retaining the claim to origins even more firmly. But instead people preferred to delegitimize Bangladeshi Gambhira a performance form with a dubious lineage and parentage.

The curious figure of the Gambhira thief of course becomes a Gambhira Prometheus for Bangladesh, a liberator of Gambhira from shackles of Hindu ritual. "It was Sufi Master

who released Gambhira into the people," an elderly performer told me in Chapai, "otherwise the Hindus would have just been too happy to lock it in their temples." Interestingly, however, Sufi Master never had a key place in the Gambhira hagiography of Bangladesh. That place has been secured by the Qutubul-Raqib duo, with their signature photographs flooding the internet, government publications, and even stage decorations in official programs. Few people outside Chapai seem to know about Sufi Master, while Qutubul-Raqib are beloved names in many Bengali households. Once again, this change has much to do with the state sponsorship in the form of media attention that the two have received since the days of Mujib. If Sufi was the Gambhira Prometheus, they had been the pious priests who had kept the fire alive, but nonetheless secular priests who were custodians of a "people's culture."

Despite all the contestation, two themes remain constant for both Indian and Bangladeshi scholarship on Gambhira. First, they combine the swadeshi idea of folk culture having ancient origins with the Marxist idea of the folk as a "people's culture"; religion finds little mention on either side beyond the invocation of identity. Secondly, the aim of both sides is not to propose entirely new narratives, but to highlight aspects of the narrative which bolster the nationalist agendas most effectively. For India, it is the simultaneous invocation of an ancient past and the commitment to a social unification. For Bangladesh, in turn, it is the triumph of a liberal, progressive state based on linguistic homogeneity but free from religion. Given that the country has always styled itself as a "People's Republic" rather than an "Islamic Republic" like Pakistan, it is unsurprising to see its continued emphasis on the liberated nature of the folk. While the examined evidence is too restricted to come up with a larger definition of postcolonial folk culture, the cross-border debates on Gambhira highlights how such a concept has been historically produced by combining the two older modes of conceiving of folk culture, in context of various practices of the bureaucratic nation-state.

Conclusion: Postcolonial Folk Culture and the Making of Borderland Traditions

As Chapai metamorphosed from a colonial mofussil to a postcolonial borderland, Gambhira saw two distinct periods of borderland mediation. First, between 1947 and 1971, the figures of *nana* and *nati* replaced Shiva. This substitution was engineered by Muhammad Sufi, aiming to craft a new niche of expertise, competing with English Bazar, in context of a new audience. The content and tone of Gambhira, however, continued to be subversive to the state, much like Seth's songs from the colonial period. Secondly, after the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, this form of *nana-nati* was enshrined as national heritage and communicated to millions through mass media like television and radio. The content of Gambhira, however, became increasingly obedient to the state. The agendas of the nation-state and of Gambhira were so much in tandem that the genre seemed to have nothing to do with the subversive Gambhira of the interwar years. This choice made by the performers, I have argued, needs to be seen not as a surrender to the state's monetary temptations, but as a form of mediation. With an increasing presence of the "folkloristic" state of Bangladesh, performers thought it best to accept the agendas of the state, and then bargain regarding developmental issues. Note that the first mediation was across borders, while the second was within borders.

While this chapter has not given adequate attention to postcolonial Malda Gambhira, it is worth reiterating that Gambhira in Malda remained quite subversive and anti-state till the 1990s, when the liberalization of India and the presence of NGOs introduced certain new dynamics. One reason for this was perhaps that Malda performers never had to grapple with the degree of state presence that Chapai performers had to. To an extent, this was because Nehru's India was not as aggressively "folkloristic" as Bangladesh was; while a flavour of "national unity within cultural diversity" pervaded the official rhetoric, the idea of postcolonial India was debated more in matters of infrastructure development, religious unity

and caste politics rather than a Herderian notion of folk culture.[299] More importantly, even when the Indian state was folkloristic, it had a smorgasbord of aesthetically pleasing folk art forms to draw from, from the mystified bāuls in ochre robes to the resplendent dancers of Gujarat with little mirrors studded on their saris. In contrast, Malda lay at a little known corner of India, and the interwar guise of Gambhira, with its abusive language and subversive gesture, had no aesthetic appeal for urban audiences. The state had little interest in packaging it, and perhaps this disinterest, aided by communist mobilization, preserved its subversive tone. The comparative point with Malda Gambhira shows that sometimes the way the state "sees" folk culture, as Scott would say, [300] can make a lot of the difference in the kind of mediations performers have to conduct. Such negotiations with the state make it very clear that folk culture is far from an autonomous, unmediated domain.

Alongside the interventions of the state, another key engine of cultural production has been the cross-border battlefield of scholarship on which Gambhira is contested, redefined and reproduced. The survey of the scholarly contestation of Gambhira reveals certain aspects of postcolonial folk culture. First, postcolonial folk culture is stamped with the ideologies of the nation-state more prominently than the previous iterations of the concept. This is because of the efficient technologies of control deployed by the state, and the ever-increasing presence of the folkloristic state in matters of folk culture. Secondly, in the case of Gambhira, that definition combines the swadeshi idea of the folk as a reflection of the romantic and antique nation with the Marxist ideas of the folk as a weapon of the people. This dual strategy simultaneously preserves the "subjective antiquity" of the nation-state,[301] while also propagating its liberalist claims of being a modern state; of, for, and by the people.

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[299] For good introductions to this broad and fascinating topic, see Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1998); Benjamin Zachariah, *Developing India: An Intellectual and Social History, c. 1930-50* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).
[300] Scott, *Seeing Like a State.*
[301] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

Borderland cultural forms like Gambhira are shaped as performers try to grapple with these discursive claims and practices of the postcolonial nation-state regarding the very idea of folk culture. This is why it is crucial to foreground the *bidirectionality* in borderland mediation: Bangladeshi Gambhira today is a product of historical mediation both across and within the borders. Overlooking such mediation and seeing borderland traditions as inherently subversive or anti-state results in insufficient analysis. Intellectuals who dismiss Bangladeshi Gambhira performers as unprincipled people bought by the state overlook the precarious borderland mediations the performers regularly conduct with the Leviathan that looms large amidst them. Foregrounding mediations, on the other hand, dismantle the state/borderland binary to highlight how both the idea and the practice of folk culture are located in the middle of state practice and the reality of the lives of performers. Having recognized the importance of mediation in understanding folk cultures, we arrive at an overarching conceptual and methodological question: how to write history from the middle?

Epilogue

Disguised Mediations, Mediated Disguises

How to Write History from the Middle?

Shiva, how will we bear this plight?
We were happy in our mother's arms,
But to torture us, you destroyed our peace,
Dividing our country, you made brothers quarrel;
But now India is a graveyard, and Pakistan is ablaze,
And here we are, left crying in the middle.

Gambhira song by Upendranath Das (c.1948)[302]

In 2013, the English-Bazar based theater troupe Malda Malancha produced a new play called *Gambhira Gambhira*. Malda Malancha is not a Gambhira team, but what in Bengal is termed a "group theatre," where amateur actors from around a locality commune to stage a production under an expert director. These actors all have other full-time occupations; some sell fish in the morning flea market, some are carpenters and owners of tiny wooden kiosks that sell betel leaf and cigarettes, and a few even work as government clerks. They rehearse at night in a school building, which the government allows them to use after school hours. The plays are staged, however, not in village fields but in proscenium theatres in both small and big towns all over India. Though Malda Malancha began as a Malda-based small group, of late they have launched successful productions in Kolkata, and even in the National Theatre Festival in Delhi. Emboldened by the success of past years, the director Parimal Tribedi, a former government employee who later dedicated his life to theatre, decided to stage a play about the reality of the lives of Gambhira performers.

[302] Collected from English Bazar, 2014. A similar version is compiled in Pal, *Kabi-Shilpi*, 291.

Tribedi's play *Gambhira Gambhira* is a story of a team of Gambhira performers, focusing on a renowned Gambhira artist Bhuvan and his protégé Tarapada. The play begins with an enactment of a Gambhira performance by the group, where Bhuvan uses his wonderful artistic qualities to criticize the government. Bhuvan then returns home to see his wife Parvati and their little son Dulal. Parvati, concerned of their poverty, quarrels with Bhuvan for pursuing a profession that brings fame but not prosperity. Later that evening, an influential politician of the ruling party meets the Gambhira team (Figure 4.1). He threatens them for singing against his party, and baits them with financial privileges if they simply sing the government's praises. Bhuvan and some others are shocked to hear a proposal to curb their freedom. Tarapada, however, is in a dilemma, as he cannot ignore the financial gains that the political party can give them.

Fissures deepen within the group as some performers align with Tarapada, while Bhuvan refuses to be bought by politicians. Tarapada shuns Bhuvan as arrogant and impractical, and leaves the group. Humiliated and deserted by his favorite student, Bhuvan feels helplessly alone. At this point, two people from a Kolkata NGO ask Bhuvan to sign an enviable contract, guaranteeing him money and privileges, including overseas performances, if he works in their public campaigns. Again, Bhuvan adamantly refuses to be bought by anyone. A depressed, ailing Bhuvan is confined to his house, as Parvati, who is secretly proud of her husband's talent, tells Dulal stories of Bhuvan's fame and success. Tarapada forms a new team, and is patronized both by the political party and the NGO. Tarapada gets cash and new honors every day, while the lonely Bhuvan sobs in his sick bed. The play ends with Dulal running into Bhuvan's arms and promising, "I will sing Gambhira with you". The father-son duo sings praises for Shiva, promising to continue performing Gambhira, without giving in to any temptation.[303]

[303] Parimal Tribedi, "Gambhīrā Gambhīrā," Unpublished Theatre Script (2013).

Figure 1 *Mediated Disguises, Disguised Mediations*. A scene from *Gambhira Gambhira* depicting a political leader (second from left in a red shirt) negotiating with a team of Gambhīrā performers (right). Note the microphones hanging from the ceiling and the art decoration on stage. Picture courtesy Parimal Tribedi.

Gambhira Gambhira: Disguised Mediations and Mediated Disguises

Gambhira Gambhira is a rich, layered text that is an excellent example of how contemporary productions grapple with and are informed by the historical processes of mediation discussed in this thesis. On the one hand, the play is itself a form of "disguised mediation," staging certain statements about contemporary politics in West Bengal. On the other hand, the disguises it uses are themselves mediated by several historical processes and contemporary concerns. A close analysis of the play not only shows how contemporary performances are products of the changing phases of historical mediation in Gambhira, but also reveals that mediation as a historical process remains equally salient today.

The play highlights three aspects of Gambhira. First, Gambhira is shown unambiguously as a professionalized art form rather than as ritualized practice; the whole plot is based on the internal power dynamics of a group of skilled performers. Secondly, Gambhira is seen as the unmediated people's voice, represented by the tragic hero Bhuvan, who will die in poverty but not give in to temptations. The ending of the play, with Dulal taking up his father's mantle, reaffirms the preservation of this tradition of a people's voice. Finally, there is an element of horror at the idea of state intervention. Tarapada, who defects to the state and the NGO, is the anti-hero. State intervention is staged as the principal enemy of Malda Gambhira: the true villains in the play are the political leaders and the NGO staff, who try to entice Gambhira performers with money.

These three aspects of Gambhira reflect three distinct historical mediations. The grounding of the plot on a professionalized team is a lasting impact of the contact mediation of Benoy Sarkar and Haridas Palit. So powerful was their intervention that Gambhira is invoked solely as a "theatre" and never as a "ritual" in the play. The vision of Gambhira as unmediated people's voice is another enduring, if contested, legacy of the fractured mediation of the interwar years. The message of the play is to preserve Gambhira's independence, along lines of the Marxist definition of popular culture. The horror of the state and the NGO, on the other hand, is a direct result of the borderland mediation with Bangladesh. This connection is counter-intuitive, and was initially not clear to me. But the Bangladesh connection was clear when I interviewed Tribedi. "We need to save Malda Gambhira from being like the Bangladeshis," he said, "We need to save it from being a vehicle for the political parties and NGOs." Tribedi's discomfort with political intervention into the folk was not just a comment on Gambhira being a "people's tradition," but was also a warning against acquiring the fate the Bangladeshi Gambhira had.

Not only is the play a product of several historical mediations, it is itself a disguised mediation between various issues. The play mediated between the categories of "Gambhira performers" and "theatre actors." "We all face the same problems, don't we?" Tribedi smiled, "we theatre actors of the mofussil are equally ill-paid, and political parties try to hijack us all the time." The last comment was with reference to events in Kolkata, where a group of theatre artists, previously Marxist intellectuals, had been lured by the new government, formed by the anti-Communist Trinamool Congress, into its political fold. Tribedi used the situation of Gambhira as a foil to talk about this switching of political affiliations in Kolkata. The disguises were precarious. I was aware that Tribedi's theatre troupe too was funded by the collective of artists founded by the pro-Trinamool actors. He too, then, had changed his political colors, being an ardent Marxist earlier. I charged him on this. "What else could we do?" he retorted, "You study in America. You don't run the group. I do. We need money. So we have affiliated with the collective. But we will protest against what we don't like; not outright, but by hiding it within the play." Unknowingly, Tribedi had succinctly corroborated not only James Scott but also the logic of the Bangladeshi Gambhira performers, whom he had dismissed only a few minutes ago.

If Tribedi had disguised his mediations with Kolkata, the disguise of Gambhira he used to foil his mediations was itself mediated. As I pointed out, the very idea of Gambhira as having certain characteristics, like being a professionalized team effort and constituting an autonomous people's voice, were products of historical mediations. But even beyond such historical mediations, Tribedi crafted the play with certain purposes and audiences in mind. *Gambhira Gambhira*, after all, is not a Gambhira performance; it is a play conceived and produced by Tribedi for a dual audience. Like Palit's book, it is an *autoethnographic* text, intended for both fellow citizens of Malda, who know Gambhira thoroughly, and for audiences in Kolkata and Delhi, who needs to be introduced to Gambhira. According to the

tastes and backgrounds of these audiences, Tribedi has tempered and packaged Gambhira. In his words, the play "captures the essence of Gambhira" for new audiences.

The play, for instance, begins with an elaborate ritual, with one performer carrying a pot of water on his head, and others moving in well-choreographed paces, reciting an obscure chant. This enactment is nonetheless shown as a theatrical performance than a ritual (Figure 2). Since I had never seen, or even heard of, a single Gambhira performance beginning in such a fashion, I asked Tribedi where he had seen such a ritual. He looked at me chidingly. "Are you telling me you are researching on Gambhira without reading Haridas Palit?" he asked, "does he not say that this was how the ritual was enacted since the Buddhist times?" While I was fully aware of what Palit had said, I did not know that Tribedi's vision of Gambhira was informed not just by his local knowledge of Malda, but also by the Gambhira constructed by the likes of Palit and Pradyot Ghosh. It turned out that following Tribedi, several Gambhira performers had introduced the ritual scene in their performances: "it looks pretty, doesn't it?" one performer asked me.

Tribedi's knowledge of Gambhira was therefore a mediation between his personal experience of the tradition and a "textual attitude," to follow Edward Said,[304] towards the antique, romantic "essence" of Gambhira. . The modern play can be read as a textual allegory, with Bhuvan and Parvati, much like the Shiva and Parvati of old *Sivayana* poems, engaging in domestic quarrels about providing for the family. The new ritual prelude that Tribedi traces to Palit is almost a quasi-Hinduizing element, bringing a kind of Hindu ritualistic invocation, hinting at the mediated presence of Hinduism in the modern public sphere. This Hindu element is of no small importance in defining a borderland tradition, especially with Bangladesh touting Gambhira as "secular" practice. Tribedi's mediation between text and performance not only points to the continued mediation between

[304] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 92-3.

scholarship and practice, but also exemplifies the reciprocity between conceptual and social histories.

The story of *Gambhira Gambhira* shows that the effects of historical mediations described in this thesis are not locked up in the boxes I have periodized them in. Their legacies are lived, negotiated and further mediated with changing socio-political contexts. Therefore, an eye for historical mediation can reveal new and interesting dynamics in ethnography, not just in South Asia but beyond. To look for mediations is not to search for origins, but to follow the processual interconnections between the past and the present. Similarly, foregrounding mediations between various worlds as historical processes can bring to light agents and actors whose works often get lost in historiographic norms that remain embedded in debates between "top-down" and "bottom up" approaches.

Figure 2. *Textual Dances*. The ritual dance scene from *Gambhira Gambhira*, scrupulously following the ethnography of Palit. Picture courtesy Parimal Tribedi.

History from the Middle? Mediation as a Historical Process

The historiography of South Asia, at least since the early 1980s, has been ridden with debates between the "top-down" historiography, focusing on big changes in political structures implemented by people in power, and the "bottom-up" historiography on the agency of low castes, peasants, women and tribes, fostered mainly by a variety of postcolonial historians defined under the umbrella term "Subaltern Studies."[305] The contributions of Subaltern Studies in expanding the base of South Asian historiography, especially in terms of theoretical sophistication and intelligent use of sources, cannot be overstated. Despite their solid grounding in theory, one rather unsophisticated dichotomy that this school of historians continue to maintain, mostly because of their unyielding commitment to Marxism, is a dichotomy between the high and the low, the elite and the popular. In doing so, they enshrine the subaltern as an autonomous, sometimes even ahistorical, actor who supposedly constantly resists incursions by the state.

As we have seen in the case of Gambhira, this dichotomy does not do justice to the complex entwining of the "high" and the "low". If we accept the dichotomy between the elite and the popular, then how are we to explain the activities of Haridas Palit, a poor, low-caste homeopath, who ran around the fields of Malda to reframe a low caste ritual as a festival of ancient Buddhist kings? The state/people dichotomy can even mislead ethnographic analysis, like blaming state-sponsored Gambhira performers as "sold to the state," instead of noting their intelligent, precarious bargaining with a very powerful structure. Accepting that the cultures of the high and the low are two closed, mutually exclusive boxes is ultimately to uncritically accept the discursive claims of the elite, who cherish their distinction. Instead, it is more fruitful to examine the mutually informing dialogues between the high and the low, and to see how cultural forms are produced through such dialogues.

[305] For a review of this complex and long-standing debate, see Sugata Bose, "Post-Colonial Histories of South Asia: Some Reflections," *Journal of Contemporary History* 38.1 (2003): 133-146.

Reflecting on ways to "contest the power of post-colonial state monoliths," Ayesha Jalal had suggested two paths. The first was to "defend the fragments," referring to the project of Subaltern Studies. The second, like her own work on Jinnah, was "to rethink and reconstitute the structural and ideational bases of states though the pooling of sovereignties of its fragmentary parts."[306] One can go a step further in the second path suggested by her, by looking not just at the discursive and practiced basis of state-making, but also examining the ways in which the fragments have historically grappled with state ideologies and practices. Such modalities of grappling are not confined to the realm of statehood and citizenship, but extend into realms of culture and performance. The history of folk culture in twentieth century Bengal, this thesis has suggested, can be a worthwhile lens to observe the rich relational threads between large-scale structural changes enforced by the state, and local realities and symbolic worlds of the fragments.

The story of Gambhira since 1905 shows how a borderland folk culture has been shaped by different processes of mediation with changing historical circumstances. Writing a history of Gambhira from the middle neither locks Gambhira as a unique tradition in an obscure corner of South Asia, nor sees it as just another manifestation of some supposed universal definition of folk culture. Rather, it has been a space for people of Malda and Chapai to represent, negotiate and grapple with broad historical changes over the years, including swadeshi nationalism, mass politics, and Partition. As the example of Tribedi's play *Gambhira Gambhira* shows, such mediations are far from over in the present day.

To write a history from the middle is to stay attuned to these processes of mediation, and to note the agency of different historical actors who are able to mediate in various historical moments. A history from the middle must also refuse to remain confined to binaries like high/low and elite/popular, while being keenly attentive to the contact zones where these

[306] Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), xvii.

ideologies meet, clash and re-shape one another. This is why a borderland like Malda is an excellent space to understand such mediation. Finally, to study mediation is also to recognize the roles of the many mediators, from Haridas Palit to Qutubul Alam, who have shaped Gambhira over the past century. One must, however, avoid seeing mediation as simply a contact between two self-contained, isolated processes. Since mediation suggests a middle position between two ends, there remains the danger of seeing the processes being mediated as somehow pure and unmediated. One way of avoiding this trap is to look at the processes themselves as dynamic, changing and informing one another. I have tried to show that dynamism in this thesis is by being attentive to what Koselleck called the "reciprocal interlacing" of conceptual and social history. Recognizing that the very idea of the "folk" changes with time helps, at least to some extent, to avoid seeing processes like nationalism and folk culture as monolithic, unchanging entities.

While this thesis has focused on only one localized theatre form, the idea of historical mediation can be fruitful in studying folk cultures all over the world. In our fragmented world of nation-states, states almost invariably assert legitimacy by claiming ownership of peoples and their cultures. Popular cultures, in turn, change historically with the changing nature of such claims, as people devise new processes of mediation to grapple with ideological and structural pressures imposed by metropoles. The changing disguises of Shiva, then, offer invaluable lenses to observe these pervasive and mutually transformative dialogues between the local and the global, and the shifting mediational contours between the nation and its frontiers.

Glossary of Terms

Ālkāp	dialogic rural theatre form common in Murshidabad, West Bengal
bāul	wandering mystics in Bengal
bhadralok	Bengali urban educated intelligentsia, elite and middle class
Charak	low-caste festival of swinging from hooks, with Gājan.
Deś (*desh*)	country, nation, land (Bangla-"desh"); originally one's native village
Gājan	South Bengal variant of Gambhira, festival accompanying Charak
gaṇa	"People" as a non-cultural, political entity: Greek *demos*, or Latin *populi*.
gāna	song
Hook-swinging	colonial term for *Charak*, where people swung from poles tied to hooks
jātra	Bengali rural theatre held in open fields and makeshift stages
jāti	nation, race, caste
kṛttibāsa	one who wears tiger skin; attribute of Shiva.
loka	"People", the standard Bengali and Hindi translation for "folk".
nānā	grandfather
nāti	grandson
rūpakathā	fairy-tales
saṁgīta	arts of singing, dancing and playing musical instruments (Sanskrit)
swadeshi	"of one's own country (desh)", anti-colonial movement of 1905
śilpa/ śilpī	art/ artist
utsaba	festival

Short Biographical Notes

Alam, Qutubul (1936-1999)	Most prominent Gambhira performer of Bangladesh alongside Raqibuddin; native of Chapai.
Bhattacharya, Chittaprosad (1915-1978)	Marxist artist based in Bombay, best known for his political cartoons and sketches.
Das, Sarat Chandra (1849-1917)	Traveller and British spy in Tibet; wrote several volumes on Tibet and the preface to Palit's *Adyera Gambhira*.
Dutt, Gurusaday (1882-1941)	Civil servant, folklorist and writer; led the Bengali folk revival project in the 1930s.
Giri, Baladevananda	Dasnami monk and swadeshi leader in Malda, who worked with Benoy Sarkar to make a swadeshi Gambhira.
Islam, Kazi Nazrul (1899-1976)	"Rebel poet," anti-colonial activist and author; later National Poet of Bangladesh.
Mitra Majumdar, Dakshinaranjan (1877-1956)	Swadeshi folklorist under Dinesh Sen, became a household name with the publication of *Ṭhākumār Jhuli* (1907), a collection of fairy tales.
Mukherjee, Satish Chandra (1865-1948)	Swadeshi leader and a pioneer of national education; a mentor of Benoy Sarkar.
Palit, Haridas	Malda homeopath and antiquarian, known widely for his 1912 key text *Adyera Gambhira*.
Rahman, Sheikh Mujibur (1920-1975)	*Bangabandhu* "friend of Bengal," leader of Liberation War against Pakistan and first premier of Bangladesh.
Sahityabisharad, Abdul Karim (1869-1953)	Manuscript collector and scholar who amassed a huge library of early modern Bengali Muslim literatures.
Sarkar, Benoy Kumar (1887-1949)	Internationally renowned sociologist, political theorist born in Malda, played a crucial role in swadeshi restructuring of Gambhira.
Sen, Dinesh Chandra (1866-1939)	Doyen of Bengali literary studies of his time; led the swadeshi impetus on the collection of Bengali folk literature.
Seth, Govinda	Famed Gambhira performer of English Bazar whose notebooks were confiscated by the colonial magistrate.
Seth, Radheshchandra	Historian and Antiquarian of English Bazar, founded the first printing presses there.

Shastri, Haraprasad (1853-1931)	Sanskritist, philologist and traveller; discovered important Buddhist manuscripts in Nepal under the Asiatic Society.
Tagore, Rabindranath (1861-1941)	Poet and philosopher, the first Asian to receive the Nobel Prize (1913), swadeshi enthusiast but later a critic of nationalism.

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