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Dalit Resistance during the Bengal Renaissance: Five Anti-Caste Thinkers from Colonial Bengal, India

Mahitosh Mandal¹

Abstract

This article debunks the myth that Bengal is a casteless land or that Bengalis have no understanding of caste, by excavating, from within a Dalit historiographical framework, the rich and heterogeneous anti-caste politico-intellectual tradition launched and carried forward by the Dalits in colonial Bengal. Due to the paucity of space, it focuses only on three among sixty Dalit communities residing in Bengal and demonstrates the radical edge of five diverse anti-caste thinkers, namely, Harichand Thakur, Guruchand Thakur, Mahendranath Karan, Rajendranath Sarkar, and Mahendranath Mallabharman. Through a critical rejection of nationalist, Marxist and subaltern historiographies and interrogation of the Brahmanical appropriation of Bengal's anti-caste tradition, it foregrounds the independent and self-critical intellectual history of the Dalits of colonial Bengal. It exposes the epistemic violence suffered by Dalit thinkers and reformers in the textbook historical narratives that glorify a Brahmanical Bengal Renaissance and highlights the neglected discourse of Dalit resistance and renaissance that had taken place at the same time in the same province. It shows how these anti-caste organic intellectuals fought the Brahmanical supremacists during the anti-British movement led by the Brahmins and upper castes, and how their agendas of self-respect and redistribution of wealth conflicted with the Swadeshi movement. Finally, the article demonstrates that while in the history of the anti-caste movement, Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar justifiably occupy much of the discursive space, a significant and unacknowledged intellectual and political contribution was also made by their contemporary Bengali counterparts.

Keywords

Dalit historiography, Dalit resistance, Dalit renaissance, anti-caste thought, Colonial Bengal, Bengal Renaissance

¹Assistant Professor of English, Presidency University, Kolkata, India
Email: mahitosh.eng@presiuniv.ac.in, mahitosh2020@gmail.com

Introduction: Conceptualizing Dalit Historiography of Bengal

Kancha Ilaiah, a leading anti-caste thinker of our time, noted in a 2018-lecture held in Kolkata that, “In Bengal, there is a caste cancer without diagnosis” (C.S. Bhattacharya, 2018, September 22). He emphasized that there is casteism in Bengal but Bengalis have failed to make sense of and articulate its gravity. By extension, he implied that Bengalis have been unable to launch any effective anti-caste movement. It is undeniable that resistance against casteism is not as strong, scathing, and successful as it is to be found in Indian states like Maharashtra—the land of the Phules (Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule) and Babasaheb (B. R. Ambedkar), and Tamil Nadu—the land of Periyar (E.V. Ramasamy). But it might be problematic if one takes Ilaiah’s comment at a face value and imagines a total absence of anti-caste resistance in Bengal. Instead, this article investigates the reason someone like Ilaiah might be compelled to reach such a conclusion. It is now well-known among those researching the caste question in Bengal that the discourse of caste had been completely sidelined and repressed for thirty-four years in the Communist regime in postcolonial Bengal. The state-sponsored massacres of Dalits in the Morichjhapi Island, the public denial of the existence of “backward castes” by the chief minister Jyoti Basu in the context of Mandal Commission agitations (Mandal, 2021, May 17), and the murder of nine Dalits in the Nandigram violence (Teltumbde, 2010, pp. 168–169) are some of the instances of how the repressive state apparatus of the Communist regime had maltreated the Dalits and sidelined the caste question in Bengal. This has been supplemented by nationalist and Marxist historians who, under the garb of writing the history of Bengal’s anti-colonial resistance and excavating its subaltern history, reinforced a Brahmanical and class-centric interpretation of history, thereby suppressing and ignoring the caste question. None of the history textbooks for school students in Bengal mention anything about anti-caste movement in colonial Bengal although these are replete with references to the so-called Bengal Renaissance. The nationalist historiography was developed to glorify the so-called powerful resistance the caste Hindu Bengalis had put forth against the British Raj, be it politically, or in terms of revivalism and reformation. The Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) of historians, on the other hand, reduced the Gramscian notion of the “subaltern” to the proletariat or the class-subaltern and substantially ignored the multiple other forms of subalternity including those related to caste, religion, race, and territory, the last three being proposed by Gramsci himself (Green, 2011, p. 394). It is the class-centric dimension of subaltern historiography informed by Marxian political philosophy that completely prevented the possibility of the emergence of an anti-caste or Dalit historiography in Bengal. It may not be completely out of place to note that the bulk of the members of the SSG group are Brahmins and that their assumptions remain deeply Brahmanical. Gayatri Chakravorty, for instance, argued that the subaltern cannot speak because either she cannot be found in the elite and colonial documents or she is embedded within the dominant discourse only as an “Other” (Green, 2002, p. 16 & Spivak, 1995, pp. 27–28). Nevertheless, while looking for non-elite archives, the SSG historians did not necessarily explore the archives produced by the Dalits or even the tribals. The caste-subalterns of Bengal made use of the print culture brought to India by the British and from the later nineteenth century onwards they started documenting their struggles and creative output, largely in the vernacular Bengali but also occasionally in English. Rup

Kumar Barman's (2016) aptly titled article "Yes! The Scheduled Castes Can Write," therefore, produces a strong rebuttal against the Brahmanical assumptions of the SSG. Historians, not officially affiliated to the SSG, particularly Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, have also been writing on the caste question in Bengal. Bandyopadhyay though an ubiquitous presence in caste scholarship on Bengal has nevertheless neglected to look into the vast range and heterogeneity of Dalit archives of colonial and postcolonial Bengal. Therefore, almost condescendingly and sweepingly, he claims that the Dalits of colonial Bengal could not transcend Brahmanical "imagination" and launch any substantially subversive protest (Bandyopadhyay, 2004, p. 38). If one reads his works one is forced to feel that Bengal did not witness any radical anti-caste movement. But nothing could be far from the truth. On the other hand, a recent book by Dwaipayan Sen (2018) elaborately analyses the historical importance of Jogendranath Mandal (1904–1968) as a Dalit leader during and in the aftermath of India's independence from the British colonial rule and the decline of Dalit politics following his mysterious demise. While Mandal had been a towering Dalit leader and perhaps the most significant Ambedkarite from Bengal, he was certainly not the only anti-caste thinker either in colonial or postcolonial Bengal. Nor was the Namasudra sub-caste, to which he belonged, the only Dalit caste from Bengal to have launched and been launching anti-Brahmanical resistance. Therefore, this article seeks to highlight the plurality and diversity of anti-caste thought in colonial Bengal of which Jogendranath formed just a part, however major, and thereby open up further possibilities of exploring the multi-layered and multi-faceted anti-caste resistance in postcolonial Bengal as well.

This article argues that the long history of anti-caste movement in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Bengal has not really been documented in English language scholarship or translations. Whereas there are hundreds of pages written by the Dalits in the vernacular Bengali language that document Dalit history, hardly any professional historian has referred to these. One example could be the eight volumes of *Poundra-Monisha* reprinted by Poundra Mahasangha in recent times. These volumes comprise autobiographies, literary writings, political pamphlets, manifestoes and news reports produced by the Poundras, a Dalit community, in colonial Bengal. A reading of these volumes—almost none of which has been translated into English nor referred to in any of the scholarly works including those of Sekhar Bandyopadhyay—will give one a fair idea of the history of anti-caste struggle of this particular Dalit community. And, this is the output of just one Dalit community from a specific historical period and if their contemporary publications are considered then their output would be much larger than eight volumes. Bengal is home to sixty different scheduled caste communities. If one reads the literature and pamphlets produced by all these Dalit communities and studies the scores of anti-caste organizations based in Bengal, some of whom are explicitly named after Buddha or Ambedkar, then one might have to rethink the proposition that Bengalis have failed to diagnose the cancer of caste or that they have no understanding of caste. But there is a barrier between a knowledge transmissible nationally and internationally and the knowledge produced locally, confined to vernacular language, and completely ignored by the class-centric and Brahmanical scholarship. It is this barrier that justifies Ilaiah's statement.

This article is an attempt to demonstrate the radical edge of anti-caste thought in five Dalit thinkers from colonial Bengal. Positioned within Dalit historiography—something totally absent in the bulk of the historians mentioned above—it intends to

be a critique of the Marxist and nationalist historiographies that have monopolized Bengal's intellectual history. The article proposes that such historiographies are silent about a Dalit renaissance and resistance that had taken place in Bengal at exactly the same time when the so-called Bengal Renaissance happened. To emphasize the range of anti-caste thought and avoid homogenization (as found in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, for instance, as mentioned earlier), it chooses four thinkers from two numerically large Dalit communities (Namasudra and Poundra) and one thinker from a numerically small Dalit community (Malo). The thinkers discussed are—Harichand Thakur (Namasudra), Guruchand Thakur (Namasudra), Mahendranath Karan (Poundra), Rajendranath Sarkar (Poundra), and Mahendranath Mallabharman (Malo). It may be mentioned that all these thinkers were also at the same time reformers from the untouchable communities and were committed to anti-caste and self-respect movements through political resistance and social organizations. That is why they might be described better as “thinker-reformers,” implying their intellectual output was intricately linked to their social commitment, and they were thus organic intellectuals. Of course, a focus on just three communities does not do justice to fifty-seven other Dalit communities residing in Bengal. Nevertheless, within the permissible word-length, this is the most one can do in an article that proposes to be one of the initiators of anti-caste discourse on Bengal's Dalit history written by Bengali Dalits from a Dalit point of view.

This article uses the term “anti-caste” in the sense in which Gail Omvedt uses it in *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anticaste Intellectuals*. For her, anti-caste movement is to be understood as “nonbrahman movement” and “dalit movement” (Omvedt, 2016, p. 24). In a similar vein, Dalit historiography is defined in this article as alternative histories written by Dalit, non-brahman and Ambedkarite intellectuals from within an anti-Brahmanical, anti-Hindu, anti-caste and Buddhist perspective. This article argues that Dalit historiography should be exclusively based on and inspired by an unequivocally anti-caste framework of thinking. A radical Dalit historiography of Bengal, this article contends, can emerge only through a critical rejection of nationalist and Marxist (SSG being predominantly a class-centric enterprise) historiographies which have symptomatically glossed over Dalit history in constructing Bengal's intellectual history.

Harichand Thakur (1812–1878)

Harichand Thakur is the earliest Dalit thinker of colonial Bengal. He was born in 1812 into a family of Chandals, eventually renamed as Namasudras,¹ residing in the village of Safaldanga in East Bengal. Harichand's radicalism manifested in multiple areas including politics, religion, economy and education. He was critical of Buddhism, Vaishnavism, and Vedantism, but arguably molded his religion, Matuaism, through a combination of Vaishnavism and Shaktism. (His wife was Shakta and the poet, Tarak Chandra Sarkar, who documented his words in verse was a Malo by caste and a Shakta by religion). For Harichand, Buddhism, admittedly a philosophy that appealed

¹The census reports demonstrate the trajectory of naming of the community: Chandal (1872), Namasudra or Chandal (1891), Namasudra (Chandal) (1901), Namasudra (1911). The struggle to replace “Chandal” with “Namasudra” was a part of the identity formation movement led by Harichand's son Guruchand Thakur along with assistance from many including the Christian Missionary C. S. Mead.

to the masses because of its anti-caste commitment (*Horiṭilamrito* quoted in Mohanta, 2015, p. 170), degenerated due to its emphasis on ascetic life away from the family or *grihodbhōmo* (literally, family-centric religion). According to him, *garhosthyo ashrom dhōri nōrōkul bnache/ grihike koriya bhōr sōkolei royeche/ tai dekhi grihodbhōmo sōkoler mul/ eikhane buddhodeb korilen bhul*. This translates to: the humans are familial beings/ everyone depends on the family persons/ hence, *grihodbhōmo* is the root of all/ and Buddha's mistake was to ignore it. Such ideas insisting on the family life are replete in *Horiṭilamrito*. Another instance could be: *Grihete thakiya jar hōy vadhodōy/ sei se pōrom sadhu janibe nischōy* (He who realizes divinity while living a family life is the greatest monk) (Sarkar, 2016, p. 24).

On the other hand, Vaishnavism had turned the devotees of the early nineteenth century Bengal into irresponsible religious beggars of alms and practitioners of unrestrained sexual acts. Harichand observed how a clear caste division emerged among the Vaishnavites themselves—the 'lower caste' and untouchable devotees were looked down upon by their upper caste and Brahmin counterparts (Sarkar, 2016, pp. 54–55). Furthermore, as noted by many including Bandyopadhyay, Harichand's religion was critical of the Vedantism of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and the prevalent notion of renunciation involving giving up of desire for sexuality and wealth. Instead, he wanted to foreground material desire over spiritual bhakti, dismissing the abstract and metaphysical idea of a Brahman, the ultimate reality, as being of no use to the toiling masses (Bandyopadhyay, 2014, n.p.). Furthermore, he opposed the Vedic religion and the Brahmins on several occasions (*ved-vidhi nahi mane na mane brahmôn* and *ved-vidhi shoucacar nahi mani tai.*) (Sarkar, 2016, pp. 94, 138). The point is, Harichand was not "influenced" by these religious traditions as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay would have us believe but radically opposed them to mold the distinctness of his political theology (Bandyopadhyay, 2014, n.p.).

Harichand's theology was a spiritual discourse structured in terms of material requirements of the poor Dalits. His famous dictum *hate kam, mukhe nam* (work with hands, sing god's praise with mouth) is therefore to be considered as an aphorism against metaphysical, non-materialistic, abstract theologies (Sarkar, 2016, pp. 23, 55, 73). This is how the Matua religion of Harichand Thakur avoided being an "opium of the people" to borrow a phrase from Karl Marx. Marx argued that "The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is a demand for their true happiness" (Marx, 1982, p. 131). Harichand's religion, unlike Brahmanical religions, did not promise illusory happiness. It did not ask the devotees to concentrate on the happiness in the *there and then* while suffering in the *here and now*. Instead, it inspired them to achieve material success in this world and that alone could be the source of spiritual happiness, according to him. This is uncannily similar to how Protestantism gave moral sanction to the economic prosperity of the Christian (prosperity being a sign of divine "grace"), a fact elaborated by Max Weber (2001) in his classic work. One could in fact talk about a Matua religion that supported the spirit and pursuit of capitalism.

Harichand was a Dalit among the Dalits. He faced overlapping forms of discrimination due to being a) a Dalit and b) a poor peasant. Several revolutionary moments from his life attest to his experience and resistance to casteism. He was invited

to a funeral ceremony which the Brahmins refused to attend because they did not want to be at the same place as the Chandals. Harichand could not take this lying down and subsequently launched his anti-Brahmanical agenda. Harichand found that the Dalits had been suffering from dire poverty lacking lands for cultivation. He asked them to till the waste lands (*potit jomi*) and harvest rice (Sarkar, 2016, pp. 71–73). He emphasized that Dalits needed to be economically empowered to eventually overcome the state of being downtrodden. Hence, he foregrounded the economic pursuit: *Grihosther mulbhitti ôrthôniti bôte/ banijye bôsoti lokkhi ei bani rôte* (money is the familial base/ the goddess of wealth blesses the man of commerce); or *ôrthoke ônortho bôla kôtohôro vul* (it is a grave mistake to consider money as worthless) (*Horilâmrîto* quoted in Biswas, 2015, p. 30). Furthermore, he realized that the key to the community's success is to make it free of superstition and bring education to them. To this end, he inspired his son to set up the first school for Dalits in the village of Orakandi (Biswas, 2015, p. 31). He dealt a blow at Brahmanical patriarchy by promoting equality between men and women, prohibiting polygamy (*ek nari, brohmochari*), and empowering women through education and job prospects (Sarkar, 2016, p. 192).

In addition, Harichand motivated the Dalits to organize, participate, and lead in politics because political and administrative power was considered crucial for their liberation. He wanted them to become “raj-shokti.” The religion of the Matuas, Harichand emphasized, was not meant for the Namasudras alone. It was open to all Dalits, embraced even Muslims, and preached inter-dining for all. In this way, it aimed at developing into a Bahujan religion (*Horilâmrîto* quoted in Thakur, 2015, pp. 18–19).

Harichand, himself uneducated, gave twelve commandments which offer a glimpse into his philosophy, although, one should mention, these do not encompass everything he said or asked his followers to do: “1. Always speak the truth. 2. Look at women other than your wife as mothers. 3. Love everybody in the world. 4. Never practice casteism. 5. Respect your parents. 6. Beware of the temptations of the six senses. 7. Do not condemn other religions. 8. Give up outward monkhood and desire for ascetic life away from family. 9. Sing Hari's praise but toil with the hands. 10. Establish temples of Sri Hari. 11. Pray daily with heads bowed down. 12. Give yourself to Sri Hari” (quoted in Sarkar 2015, p. 188, translation mine).

When the theoretical and practical contributions of Harichand and of Guruchand (discussed in the next section) to the Dalits and minorities are considered, one cannot help describing them as agents leading to concrete social change and reawakening of the ‘lower castes’. One critic has rightly described them in Bangla as *banglar ôbohelito lokayoto sômajer nôbojagôroner jôtharthoi dut* or the harbinger of the renaissance for the neglected masses (Tushar Chattopadhyay quoted in Baidya, 2015, p. 57). In fact, following Dilip Gayen, a Pundra thinker, one could state that if Ram Mohan Roy is the Father of Bengal Renaissance (which, according to Gayen was basically a Brahmin Renaissance) then Harichand was the Father of the Mulnvasi, Dalit and Bahujan Renaissance (Gayen, 2021, p. 28). Harichand's work would be carried forward by his son Guruchand Thakur and his great-grandson Pramatha Ranjan Thakur.

Guruchand Thakur (1846–1937)

Arguably it was Guruchand, Harichand's son, who extensively applied the philosophy of Matuaism to the cause of Dalit liberation. Guruchand valued the education of the Dalits as a topmost priority because education was a means of liberation and empowerment (Sarkar, 2016, p. 144 & Sarkar, 2015, pp. 191, 198). Following his father's instruction regarding the importance of education for the Dalits, he founded the first ever school for the Dalits in 1880 (approximately 30 years after the Phules did so in Maharashtra) in his own house in Orakandi, eastern Bengal. However, no teacher was available immediately because the Brahmins refused to teach the 'lower castes,' until a Dalit, Raghunath Sarkar of Dhaka, came over and volunteered to do so. To ensure that such schools run smoothly, Guruchand convened the first educational conference of the Matuas in 1881 in Dattadanga. Approximately, 5000 representatives attended the conference. In the same year, under Guruchand's guidance, the Namasudra Welfare Association was set up and representatives from twenty-two districts joined the Association. In 1908, the first school for English education was founded by Guruchand with assistance from the Australian missionary C.S. Mead. In 1932, the Hari-Guruchand Mission was established in Orakandi and the Mission assisted in the establishment of a school for girls. By one account, Guruchand established around 1882 schools in Bengal, out of which 1067 schools were founded in the Dhaka division alone (Sarkar, 2015, pp. 191, 195; Roy, 2019, p. 60). This pales the educational contribution of Ishwar Chandra Bandyopadhyay, the much-glorified face of the Bengal Renaissance, who established, by one account, around thirty-six schools (Sarkar, 2015, p. 195). And yet, it is Ishwar Chandra who is remembered as the archetypal educational reformer of Bengal and Guruchand's revolution in educational field remains undocumented in the official intellectual history of Bengal.

Apart from establishing schools, Guruchand was instrumental in the dissemination of anti-caste thought through magazines and newspapers. He was the founder of the monthly journal *Nômosudro suhrid* (Friend of the Namasudras, started in 1907) which was dedicated to excavating the history of the Namasudras and discussing their empowerment and advancement. Guruchand is described as the first Namasudra journalist (Roy, 2019, p. 55). He was the inspiration behind the setting up of at least three more magazines and journals during this time, namely, *Nômosudro potrika* (1908), *Nômosudro hitoishi* (1916), and *Pôtaka* (1916).

Guruchand mobilized the Dalit peasants, following his father's footsteps. The Chandals had a long history of resistance including their general strike of 1873 in which, as noted by W.W. Hunter, they resolved "not to serve anybody of the upper caste in whatever capacity, unless a better position among the Hindu caste than what they at present occupy was given to them" (Hunter quoted in Roy, 2019, p. 51). Positioned within such a context, as early as 1900, Guruchand advocated for *tebhaga* or the agenda that the peasants must be given two-third of the crops' share and the landlords must have only one third. He organized them against the exploitative system of Indigo plantation and destroyed the Indigo farm of a British sahib in 1909 (Das, 2015, pp. 216–218). He was the president in the peasant convention that took place in Barishal in June 1922 and a key speaker in the 1933 provincial peasant convention

held in Midnapore. Unlike the upper-caste Marxist historians and reformers, he was fully aware that the bulk of the poor peasants belonged to the ‘lower castes’ or outcaste communities; therefore, it was as much a struggle to overcome casteism as it was overcoming classism.

Perhaps, the most defining moment in Guruchand’s movement was his refusal to participate in the nationalist movement launched by the Congress Party under the leadership of M.K. Gandhi and Chittaranjan Das. Gandhi wanted to rope in the Dalits in his anti-British struggle. However, Guruchand flatly told Chittaranjan who had written a letter to Guruchand for support on Gandhi’s instruction, that their struggles were different. For Guruchand, a freedom struggle that was focused on gaining independence from a foreign enemy by those who kept intact their enmity and injustice towards the downtrodden in the native land was a form of hypocrisy. Dalits needed, first and foremost, an emancipation from casteism and poverty caused by the caste Hindus and they did not have the luxury to participate in the Swadeshi movement and Gandhi’s Non-Cooperation Movement (Halder, 2021, pp. 412–416). For Guruchand, the so-called freedom struggle was concerned with the freedom of the few while he was concerned with the freedom of all the oppressed communities. In fact, Guruchand developed close association with the British and fully utilized the provisions for the ‘lower castes’ prepared by the British government. His 1906-meeting with Sir Lancelot Hare, the then Lieutenant of East Bengal and Assam, was historic in the sense that he acquainted Lancelot with the plight of the Namasudras. Afterwards Lancelot ensured that thirty-one communities from Bengal were included in the list of the Scheduled Castes from Bengal and they could thereby avail various opportunities provided by the government (Roy, 2019, p. 59). Furthermore, under Guruchand’s leadership, fourteen Dalits held deputation to the British government in 1907 and consequently, from 1907, Dalits earned the right to government jobs under the Proportional Representation of the Community in Public Employment Act passed the same year (Sarkar, 2015, p. 194).

Guruchand’s was a *total* movement. Like his father, he was ready to embrace everybody within his fold—all Dalit and ‘lower caste’ groups from Kumbhokar, Kopali, Mahishya, to Das, Chamar, Poundra, Tnaati, Malakar, and even minority groups like Muslims. This was truly a resistance of the subaltern, and more specifically, the caste-subaltern (Halder, 2021, p. 144). His contribution, though ignored by the caste Hindus who launched Bengal Renaissance, did not go unnoticed by the British. He was awarded the title of peasant leader, won the Gold Medal, and came to be known as *nômosudro-kulopoti* (an undisputed leader of the Namasudras).

Mahendranath Karan (1886–1928)

Many leaders, thinkers, and reformers emerged among the Poundras in colonial Bengal. Mention may be made of Srimanta Naskar, Hemchandra Naskar, Raicharan Sardar, and Benimadhav Halder all of whom fought for the cultural recognition of the Poundras, derogatorily called “Pod,” as Kshatriyas. They criticized the use of the word “Pod” in the early census report in the preparation of which many Brahmin and caste

Hindu officers were involved, and launched an organized resistance to change their name to “Poundra Kshatriya.” This was another major identity movement in colonial Bengal since it involved hundreds of members of a single Dalit community. It was not simply an attempt to replace a derogatory word (Pod) with a sophisticated term (Poundra). But it was supplemented by research into the history of the community and revival of their past glory. In this sense, Poundra movements in colonial Bengal too contributed to Dalit Renaissance. Their intellectual output was huge, and in many cases, was published in several dailies and monthly magazines and journals. It is possible to enlist at least eight such magazines published by the Poundras at various points in colonial times: *Bratya Kshatriya Bandhob* (started in 1910) edited by Raicharan Sardar and Gopalchandra Dutta, *Protigna* (1918) edited by Mahendranath Karan and Bhavasindhu Laskar, *Kshatriya* (1920) edited by Jogendranath Roy and Prasannakumar Barma, *Poundra Kshatriya Sômachar* (1924) edited by Kshirodchandra Das and Mahendranath Karan, *Sotyojug* (1927) edited by Sureshchandra Koyal, *Dipti* (1927) edited by Digambar Sahityaratna, *Sôngho* (1935) edited by Rajendranath Sarkar, and *Poundra Kshatriya* (1938) edited by Rajendranath Sarkar, Patiram Roy, Kunjobihari Roy, and Digambar Sahityaratna.

It was Mahendranath Karan, a Poundra from Midnapore, who wrote the first ever English treatise on the history of the Poundras, titled *A History and Ethnology of the Cultivating Pods* (1919), arguably the earliest anti-Brahmanical text written in English by a Bengali Dalit. It was published by Raicharan Halder on behalf of All Bengal Bratya Kshatriya Samiti. It may be mentioned that the term “Bratya Kshatriya” was rejected by Karan later and the arguments provided for the same are discussed at the end of this section. The title of the 1919 work is precise, particularly the expression “cultivating Pods” who are distinguished by him from “fishing Pods.” The so-called Pods were of different kinds—the Aryan Pods and the non-Aryan Pods. The Pods described as Mlechhas, beef-eaters or fishing Pods were allegedly of non-Aryan origin from the Deccan areas. However, the cultivating Pods to whom Mahendranath himself belonged were, according to him, of Aryan origin. According to Karan, even though they were derogatorily called *chasha* (“an abusive and contemptible word” for farmers), agriculture as a profession had been synonymous with them and was not historically looked down upon (Karan, 1919, p. 14). The *Brohmoboibôrto Puran* mentions a few characteristics of an Aryan Poundra (“charitable, physically strong, benevolent, worshipping the Devas and living by cultivation”) and according to Karan all these are present in the present-day cultivating Pods (Karan, 1919, p. 30). In the book which he wrote in English so that the British administrators and ethnologists could take a note of it, he argues why the cultivating Pods are to be called “Poundra Kshatriyas” and must not be confused with the mixed castes (*Varna sônkor*) nor be categorized as “Depressed Class” (Karan, 1919, pp. 17, i).

Karan offers a detailed history of the Poundras based on references to the scriptures. He associates the term to Sri Krishna himself who was known as “Pundôrikaksho” or the eye of Pundar or Poundra. As argued by Karan, in the *Hôribônsho Puran* (Chapter 35), it is mentioned that Basudeb, the father of Sri Krishna, had a son called Pundra, from the mother Sutanu, who eventually became a king (Karan, 1919, p. 36). Thus

Poundras were the descendants of King Pundra, and, therefore, were Kshatriyas. The term Pod was a corruption of Poundra, Poundarika, Padmaja, or Padma. The land where the Poundras lived or settled in came to be known as Poundradesh. That the Poundras were of high status, according to Karan, is proved by the fact that they were not prohibited from temple entry and that they enjoyed high social dignity in the sixteenth century. Karan refers to a list of twelve castes, grouped as Bratya Kshatriyas by Manu who mentions that three (Poundras, Udras, and Dravidas) of these twelve castes were exempted from being Mlechhaised, i.e. being “excluded from all religions” (Karan, 1919, p. 64). In other words, the Poundras in reference to Manu had had their religious rights intact. According to Karan, that the Poundras are not Mlechhas is indicated by the similarity of their language, manners, and customs to those of the Hindus or Brahmins (Karan, 1919, pp. 4, 6).

If Poundras enjoyed the status of the Kshatriyas how did they lose it and degenerate to the level of the Shudras? The reason given by Karan is similar to the one furnished by Ambedkar in *Who Were the Shudras?* Poundras were deprived of Upanayana. Indeed, as Karan observes, Poundras fell from their status due to living “unministered” by the Brahmins or being deprived of sacred rites (Karan, 1919, p. 18). This happened due to the wrath of Parashuram, as per the scriptures, who was on a mission to annihilate the Kshatriyas. Kshatriyas hence took “refuge in the hills and forests lying beyond the range of the Brahmin’s formidable axe. Some Kshatriyas [*sic*] fled to other countries where they began to live in disguise of Sudras [*sic*], having given up sacred threads” (Karan, 1919, p. 39).

Perhaps, a major effect on the Poundras was that of Buddhism to which they converted and which distanced them further from Brahmanical rites. Bengal remained an area where Brahmanical civilization was yet to extend to for a long period of time and, according to Karan, it was considered “a prohibited area for the Hindus on account of its Buddhist connection” (Karan, 1919, p. 45). In fact, Bengal or Banga was held in low esteem and “mere trampling over its soil required re-sanctification” (Karan, 1919, p. 46). This is indicated, according to Karan, in a few possibly interpolated verses of *Anusasôn Pôrbo* of the *Mahabharata* where Brahmins are found cursing the Poundras to a Shudra state of life because they converted to Buddhism and refused to accept Brahmanical supremacy. However, from the eleventh century onwards, the Buddhist converts started embracing Brahmanism, the Kayastha group of Kshatriyas being the first (Karan, 1919, p. 48). Poundras were condemned as *jôl-ôbyaboharyo* (not as *ôsprishyo*/ untouchable) or that group of the Shudras “whose water is not accepted by Brahmins” (Karan, 1919, p. 55). In fact, those Brahmins who performed sacred ceremonies for the Poundras were excommunicated. Karan ends with the suggestion that the only way for the cultivating Pods to get back their glory is to perform ceremonies “in obedience to the directions prescribed by the Sastras [*sic*]” and thereby restore their “former prestige” and re-install their “original status” (Karan, 1919, p. 74).

Although Karan refuses to group the Poundras as Depressed Class (this will be challenged by other Poundras), his text contains common motifs of Dalit texts like pro-British, anti-independence (against immediate independence from the British

rule), and anti-Brahmanical stances. Even though he, like many others, ascribed a high social status and past glory to the Poundras, their maltreatment by caste Hindus was a fact and Karan knew it. Nor is his text silent about such maltreatment. One could argue that by desiring to reinstall an original Kshatriya status and by distinguishing themselves from the Mlechhas or those considered untouchables in some scriptural terms, Karan was not ready to annihilate caste but to simply reinstate an original Varna system. But one needs to be empathetic here. Karan's text was thoroughly anti-Brahmanical. In fact, the reclamation of Kshatriyahood in itself was subversive vis-à-vis Brahmanism. But the most important point was to reclaim human personality. It was a matter of self-respect of the community and to reawaken confidence in themselves, such historical and scriptural excavation was required. The need to do so arose also from the experience of being maltreated by Brahmin and upper caste officers in the Census department who used every opportunity to project the Poundras derogatorily as Pods (the word 'Pod' sounds similar to the Bengali word 'pnod' which is a slang for anus and is still used to abuse the Poundras). Karan's text, therefore, needs to be seen in the context of a series of self-respect movements launched by the Dalits in colonial Bengal. It might not have opposed casteism as scathingly as Periyar's Self-Respect Movement had proposed to do but the attack on Brahmanical hegemony, particularly the scriptural sanction of Brahmanical supremacy through corrupt interpolations, by non-Brahmins and Dalits must be taken note of.²

Apart from the English text, Karan wrote few others in Bengali and one of these needs to be mentioned here, namely, *Poundra Kshatriya bônâṁ Bratya Kshatriya* (Poundra Kshatriya versus Bratya Kshatriya, 1927). Herein he strongly argues that the name "Bratya Kshatriya" should be dropped and "Poundra Kshatriya" should be used instead. Quoting the Manusmriti, he argues that twelve castes fell from Kshatriya status due to not being ministered by Brahmins, and Poundra is one of them (Karan, 2013, p. 126). Poundras, unlike Jhal, Malo and five other castes, were historically designated as actual Bratya Kshatriyas (this is discussed further later on). Even though they fell from their Kshatriya status, Poundras, for Karan, are not Bratya Kshatriyas. Although this logic seems problematic, and also inconsistent with his theorization in the English text, what Karan seems to be indicating is that Poundras did not lose their status altogether and that they were not designated as untouchables. This is a text written seven years after the English text and by this time the Poundra movement had undergone many upheavals. Therefore, it was considered confusing to categorize the Poundras as Bratya Kshatriyas and identify them with untouchables or even Jhal-Malo communities. Falling from grace but not being *bratya* (literally meaning "outsider")—this is a tricky logic. Karan's conviction, however, is infectious here, and he is completely in opposition to the likes of Raicharan and Benimadhav both of whom pushed for their community's designation as Bratya Kshatriyas. Karan reiterates that Pundra was one of five sons of King Boli and Bratya means one who is fallen from the rites, without being ministered by Brahmins. An additional argument is included: even if the Poundras fell from grace and were considered "Bratyas," to continue the term

²Periyar, for instance, stated that "Amongst dogs you don't have a brahmin dog and pariah (untouchable) dog. Among donkeys and monkeys we do not find. But amongst men you have. Why?" (Periyar, 2016, n.p.).

to designate the community is antithetical to their movement for self-respect (Karan, 2013, p. 132). He, therefore, puts his foot down: one must not use this term! He quotes Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay in his support because Sharat Chandra opposed the use of the term “Bratya” (Karan, 2013, p. 134). Poundras were not fallen: they were descendants of Kshatriyas who were source of the name, Poundradesh (the land of the Poundras), unlike the Malos who derived their name from their place of residence, i.e. the Malabar part of the country. What is fascinating about these arguments is that they constitute an intra-community (within a specific Dalit community or across Dalit communities) debate, thereby developing an anti-caste intellectual tradition not controlled/ regulated/ overshadowed by a Brahmanical Big Other. This is where my reading of Dalit history of colonial Bengal differs from that of Sekhar Bandyopadhyay who argues, as mentioned already, that Dalits of colonial Bengal were subsumed by Brahmanical imagination.

Rajendranath Sarkar (1903–1979)

Important Poundra organizations were arguably concentrated at three key places in colonial Bengal: South 24 Parganas and Calcutta (important representatives included Raicharan Sardar, Benimadhav Halder, Srimanta Naskar, and Hemchandra Naskar), Midnapore (Mahendranath Karan), and Khulna (Rajendranath Sarkar and Suniti Sarkar, among others). Whereas key spokespersons of Calcutta, South 24 Parganas, and Midnapore were focused on reviving their past glory through redefining themselves as Poundra Kshatriyas instead of Pod, those from Khulna, though they supported such movement, were more concerned about the then-prevailing poverty and backwardness of the larger Poundra community. When in the early twentieth century, the British government created the provision for reservation of jobs for a list of backward communities, and included the Poundras in it, Raicharan Sardar as the secretary of Poundra Kshatriya Samiti and others including Hemchandra Naskar violently protested the move. Allegedly, Hemchandra Naskar stated that he refused to be in the same list which included Dom, among other ‘lower castes.’ There was a strong split among the Poundras, and Raicharan Sardar, with support from colleagues from South 24 Parganas, wrote to the concerned authority to remove the Poundras from the list. This was resisted by Rajendranath Sarkar and others from Khulna who wrote a letter asking for inclusion. Following this tussle, all leaders and supporters of the Poundra movement agreed to meet in a conference on this subject held on 20 April 1935 in Ballygunj (Calcutta). In this conference, the Khulna representatives, fearing organizational split, momentarily gave in to the demands of Raicharan and Hemchandra who then wrote another letter confirming their collective stance to *not* include Poundra in the list. However, once Rajendranath and his team were back to Khulna they immediately wrote yet another letter confirming *their* position and demanding the *inclusion* of the Poundras in the list of scheduled castes (Sarkar, 2013, pp. 72–76).

What makes Rajendranath one of the uncompromising, radical, and prudent thinkers among the Poundras is his pragmatism to reflect on the present condition of the Poundras rather than dwelling on a once-upon-a-time glorious identity of the

past. He certainly had difficulty in opposing as towering a figure as Raicharan who had been a personal mentor to him and whom he, like scores of others, looked up to as their leader. However, he did not let his personal weakness or emotional vulnerability get in the way of a movement that was meant for the liberation and advancement of the collective. He was strongly convinced of the need to accept the opportunity of governmental protection for the Poundras because, without this, they would never be able to come at par with the caste Hindus, let alone compete with them. He believed that the governmental provisions would help the Poundras get electoral representation, educational advantages, and job opportunities. Unlike others, for him, the fight for recognition of the Kshatriya background of the Poundras was not in conflict with their inclusion in the list of protected castes. We should note that many backward caste communities, celebrating their past glory and high caste status, refused the government's proposal and were eventually excluded from the list. Their condition in postcolonial Bengal is pathetic and as Rajendranath as a practicing lawyer witnessed, many from these communities approached him later on to procure them false scheduled caste certificates for availing jobs, which he refused to grant (Sarkar, 2013, p. 76). The advancement of the Poundras today, whatever be the scale, owes much to the fight for reservation led by Rajendranath.

Such a radical move made by Rajendranath was deeply rooted, one could argue, in the dire poverty in the midst of which he, like many other Poundras, lived. His educational pursuit was repeatedly affected due to his inability to pay for school and college fees. He moved from Khulna to South 24 Parganas for schooling but eventually returned because the promise of fees being waived was not kept. Later on, he could study at a college only because the fees were reduced for him thanks to the intervention of Mahendranath Karan. In addition, he experienced caste-based discrimination and was maltreated as an untouchable on multiple occasions. In his autobiography *Jibankatha*—which is the second Poundra autobiography, the first one being Raicharan Sardar's *Deener atmakahini ba satya-pariksha*—he documents many such instances. First, when as a child he went to see a Durga idol and stood on the stairs of the temple, he and his companions were rebuked and were threatened to be beaten up had they stayed or returned there. While leaving, they saw that the stairs were being washed with cow urine (considered holy by the caste Hindus). Their touch was considered to have polluted the sacred Hindu space (Sarkar, 2013, p. 39). Second, in a school near Tala, Khulna, where he had been enrolled, the teacher told him in front of his classmates that he could not become anybody in life and that education was of no use to him due to his 'lower caste' peasant background (Sarkar, 2013, p. 38). Third, in his college days, he and his classmates participated in the Non-Cooperation Movement of Gandhi and all his classmates were admired by the principal of the college. However, when the principal came to know that Rajendranath was from a 'lower caste,' he immediately changed his behavior and an offended Rajendranath left the place and eventually distanced himself from the movement (Sarkar, 2013, p. 49). Many more instances of this kind, including how he was discriminated by his upper caste colleagues because he was a Dalit lawyer (Sarkar, 2013, pp. 65–66, 109–110) are grouped as *jater name bôjjati* (humiliating the 'lower castes' in the name of caste purity) in Rajendranath's autobiography.

The point here is that Rajendranath was one of the few Poundras who were not only very sensitive to casteism but also fully sensitized about how casteism functions and how it could be resisted. In the face of being maltreated as untouchables, it was not enough to make a counter-claim that Poundras were not untouchables or outcastes because historically they had been Kshatriyas. Such a claim for recognition of their glorious past would not, according to him, bring an end to discrimination. What was required was to empower the Poundras with financial capital and cultural capital—both of which were guaranteed by the protective measures of the British Raj—and thereby overcome their backwardness which was a socio-historical *reality*. In other words, Rajendranath's singular contribution to the Dalit resistance in Bengal was to ensure that the Poundras were on the receiving end of the redistribution of wealth, a possibility opened up by the new policies of the British Raj. For him, it is redistribution of wealth that was as important as the struggle for cultural recognition. Echoing critics Radha Sarkar and Amar Sarkar (2016, pp. 14–16) who, among others, developing on Nancy Fraser's theorization of recognition, argue that the question of material redistribution must necessarily be combined with that of cultural recognition in the context of Dalit politics, one could say that it is Rajendranath who, through demanding redistribution through reservation, completed the Poundra resistance and renaissance initiated through the politics of recognition by Mahendranath Karan, Raicharan Sardar, and others.

Rajendranath's contribution to anti-caste movement was much greater in scope than the above account. He contributed to the Poundra community in various capacities including as the founder of the Khulna Poundra Kshatriya Chhatrasangha (1922), President of Poundra Kshatriya Chhatra Parisad (1927), editor of the journals *Sangha* (1935) and *Poundra Kshatriya* (1938), first Poundra lawyer of the Khulna district, Poundra chairman of Khulna Local Board (1936), elected People's Representative (1931-1942 and 1946-1958) and Dalit candidate for the Congress Party (eventually becoming a minister in 1958). However, Rajendranath remained loyal to Congress for long and refused to join the Scheduled Castes Federation even after the insistence of Jogendranath Mandal who became a minister in the central cabinet of Pakistan after 1947 (Sarkar, 2013, p. 97).

Mahendranath Mallabarman (dates not available)

Mahendranath Mallabarman was a Malo thinker and not a Rajbanshi as has wrongly been claimed by Swaraj Basu (Barman & Sarkar, 2020, p. 33). Having the surname "Barman" does not necessarily mean one belongs to the Rajbanshi caste. Mahendranath was arguably the sharpest Malo thinker—a theorist even—of colonial Bengal and this is demonstrated in his masterpiece *Dwitiyo Varna Kshatriya O Jhal Mal Tôtvo* (1914). The term "tôtvo" here means "theory" and true to it, he theorizes the history and identity of the Malos as having Kshatriya roots. The challenge for him, of course, is to explain how an original Kshatriya group transformed into Malos, a fishing community. To accomplish this, he comes up with an extremely insightful critique of the Hindu scriptures.

His first critique is an interrogation of the Purusha-Sukta verse of the Rig Veda which mentions that four Varnas were born from four body parts of the Purusha or Brahma. Drawing on *Vishnupuran* which mentions that Brahma was born *after* the entire world was created, Mahendranath argues that Brahma, therefore, could not have been the creator of the world or of the Varnas (Mallabharman, 2020, p. 63). He questions the authenticity of the myth of Chaturvarna further by also mentioning, as in *Vishnupuran*, that Kshatriyas are said to have been born from the chest and not the arms of Brahma (Mallabharman, 2020, p. 61). As a matter of fact, he evokes the Vedic texts wherein even the peasant wives (Mallabharman, 2020, p. 49) are said to have composed hymns and wherein no birth-based caste division is mentioned except for Guna and Karma-based grouping (Mallabharman, 2020, p. 64). Thus, if the Vedas have to be considered as the most authentic texts or if *Manusanhita* has to be considered to be authoritative Sanhita then one has to also explain the inconsistencies and interpolations that might have corrupted these and other Hindu scriptures. He thereby concludes that the scriptures are to be taken with a pinch of salt and one needs to be careful while drawing any conclusion from them. Such interrogation of the scriptures reveals the potential *resistance* to the so-called “Sanskritization”—or emulating “the customs, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins, and the adoption of the Brahminic [sic] way of life by a low caste”—as formulated by the sociologist M.N. Srinivas (1952, p. 30). It is in this context that Mahendranath launched scathing criticism against *Brahmobibhârto Puran*. A few verses in this text describe the Mal (Malo) community as a mixed caste (anuloma/ pratiloma) being born from a woman of fishing community. He argues that these verses are interpolations (Mallabharman, 2020, p. 82) and that this Puranic text comprises 3000 such interpolated verses which could never have been written by Vedvyasa (Mallabharman, 2020, p. 82). The truth is to be found in Manu, he argues, who mentions the Mals (Malos) as having Kshatriya roots. He further adds that the Malos were Aryans by blood. In fact, Mahendranath Mallabharman engages in a critical hermeneutic approach to the scriptures and reaches the conclusion that the Malos certainly belonged to the high social status and had been Kshatriyas in ancient times. He quotes passages from Manu to argue that Jhals/Mals were actually the children of Bratya Kshatriyas and Savarna women. Malos were not anuloma or pratiloma or mixed caste. Rather, they belonged to *dwitya* or second Varna, that is, the Kshatriyas. However, according to him, they were a special category of the Kshatriyas, i.e. Bratya Kshatriyas.

How are the Kshatriyas and Bratya Kshatriyas different from each other? For Mallabharman, Bratya Kshatriyas were those Kshatriyas who could not, for whatever reason, undergo Upanayana or the sacred thread ceremony at the right age. Different Varnas (except the Shudras) had different ages for Upanayana (Brahmins: 16 years, Kshatriyas: 22, Vaishyas: 24), and those who passed a particular age limit without Upanayana became Bratya Kshatriyas. Similarly, there were Bratya Brahmins and Bratya Vaishyas. Bratyas were not Shudras, Mallabharman emphasizes; they were potential *dwijas* (twice-born). It is just that they did not undergo the ceremony of being born a second time. Unlike the Shudras, he argues, Bratya Kshatriyas were entitled to religious rites. He even refers to the fifteenth Kanda of *Atharva Veda* which praises the Bratyas as those who are worshipped by the *dwijas*; as having rights to learn the

Vedic wisdom again; as possessing positive attributes like generosity; and as being a harbinger of divine blessing to their hosts (Mallabharman, 2020, p. 91). All these indicate that being a Bratya Kshatriya was not a matter of shame or disrespect but it was a matter of pride. Calling oneself Bratya Kshatriya also meant that one was much above the Shudras in the *Varna* ladder. Thus, the Malos were not Shudras but respectable Bratya Kshatriyas.

One is struck by how Mahendranath Mallabharman's interpretation of Bratya Kshatriya is opposed to that of Mahendranath Karan. For the former, the term Bratya is not an attribute of disrespect while for the latter it is. But Mallabharman gives a proper scriptural justification for his claim whereas Karan, somewhat under the influence of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, gives a literal reading of the term and dismisses it as derogatory. The history of being Bratya, for Mallabharman, is not a history of shame; for Karan, it is. One should mention that the Poundras had originally started calling themselves Bratya Kshatriyas before Karan opposed it. Karan had furthermore demonstrated that the Poundras, unlike the Malos, are not included in the list of Bratya Kshatriyas mentioned by Manu, which is true. Nevertheless, the rejection of the term Bratya, for Karan, is not just based on its absence vis-à-vis the Poundras in the scriptures but also, as mentioned, because it is a pejorative term. For Mallabharman, it is clearly not a pejorative term. It is these internal debates and disagreements surrounding naming in the process of identity-formation that make the Dalit intellectual tradition so critical and independent of the Brahmanical discourse which could not, unlike what Sekhar Bandhyopadhyay thinks, subsume the imagination of the Dalits.

The final argument provided by Mallabharman about Malos being Kshatriyas is very innovative. If Malos were Kshatriyas then how come their profession is fishing? His primary argument is that a change of profession is allowed in the scriptures and unlike *byabhihar* (sexual promiscuity or lack of chastity), *swôkôrmotyag* (leaving one's assigned profession) does not cause a fall from one's *Varna* status. If the karma or occupation fixed by the Shashtras is not enough for a living then a Brahmin, for instance, can engage in the karma of three other *Varnas*. Sri Krishna likewise engaged in *gochôron* (looking after cows) or worked as *sarothi* (charioteer). It is only when sexual and marital relation happens outside the specific *Varna*, or sexual immoralities are engaged in, that one loses the *Varna* status. Accordingly, fishing is a profession that anyone from any of the *Varnas* can undertake. Fishing is also nothing to be condemned because Vyasdev himself was the son of a *dhivor* (fisher) woman, according to Mallabharman, and still was worshipped by the entire Hindu society. Arjun, a Brahmin, is shown in the Mahabharata, as aiming his arrow at a golden fish which, according to Mallabharman, symbolically implies that fishing was permissible to the Brahmins as well. Given that fish is a common food, all *Varnas* have engaged in fishing. However, it is the logic of the Kshatriyas being predominantly in charge of fishing as developed by Mallabharman that adds to his intellectual innovation. Fishing involves killing or catching the fishes with weapons. Weapons are for the use by the Kshatriyas. Hence, fishing suits as a Kshatriya profession—it is their Swadharma (Mallabharman, 2020, pp. 99, 103–105). Therefore, there is no contradiction in being a Malo fisher and being a Kshatriya at the same time.

It is the innovativeness, logicality, and sharpness of his argument that makes Mahendranath Mallabharman an important Dalit thinker of colonial Bengal. However,

from his interpretation, it is not clear whether Bratya Kshatriyas became who they became, in course of time or due to some societal injustice. The exact difference between the Shudras and the Bratya Kshatriyas is also uncertain because, as Babasaheb Ambedkar argues, Shudras too were Kshatriyas, the descendants of King Sudas, who were deprived of Upanayana by the Brahmins (Ambedkar, 2014, pp. 118–130, 150–151, 206–209). Nevertheless, what one finds in this analysis for sure is the desire on the part of Malos, similar to the Poundras, to highlight that they are not Shudras, nor are they untouchables. Their resistance to being treated as untouchables took them in search of their history and revival of scriptural references and socio-cultural reformation. How much it helped them to deal with the material backwardness is a different question and had perhaps been addressed by only a few (like Rajendranath, Harichand and Guruchand). But the revivalism and reformation engaged in by them is indicative of a vibrant but forgotten anti-Brahmanical renaissance that took place at the same time as the Brahmanical Bengal Renaissance.

Conclusion

Multiple Bengali Dalit communities organized and mobilized themselves, convened scores of conferences and meetings, opened independent journals, magazines, and newspapers, and published innumerable texts in the colonial period under the British rule. Thanks to colonial modernity, capitalism, use of the printing press, and intervention of the British in social matters (albeit in their own interests), Dalit communities like the Poundras, Namasudras, Malos, Rajbanshis (a major community represented by the well-known figure Panchanan Barma, among others, whose contribution to anti-caste movement in colonial Bengal could not be discussed in this article due to the paucity of space) and others plunged into self-respect movements. From closely analyzing and criticizing the scriptures to launching independent socially transformative religious movement and then debating and eventually accepting the colonizers' provisions for protective measures including redistribution of wealth and proportional representation, the colonial period was a series of politically, socially, and culturally vibrant moments for the Dalits. The reformation measures undertaken by the Dalit groups were nothing short of revolutionary and the theoretical debates produced by them were unprecedented. Thus colonial Bengal witnessed a Dalit or caste-subaltern or rural renaissance-cum-resistance that the official history of Bengal, dominated by Marxist, Brahmin/ Brahmanical, nationalist, and urban historians, has failed to adequately and sufficiently take a note of. The history of Bengal Renaissance—which reserved no place for the emancipation of the 'lower castes', outcastes, and Dalits—is still celebrated from school textbooks to university discourses as the greatest moment of Indian freedom movement. But whose Renaissance was Bengal Renaissance? Whose interest did it serve? From 1858 to 1900 not a single Dalit student was admitted in the University of Calcutta (Halder, 2015, p. 90). The Brahmin teachers of Sanskrit College resigned en masse when Kayastha students (not even the Shudras and Dalits) took admissions there. Vidyasagar resigned from a mainstream theatre committee of Calcutta when Girish Ghosh proposed that women actors from 'lower caste' and prostitute quarters will be recruited as actors (R. Bhattacharya, 1998, p. 9). Almost all

the reformers and revivalists were ultimately in favor for retaining the caste system and Brahmanical supremacy, and no effective resistance was built against the evils of casteism. Almost the entire landscape of Bengal Renaissance was populated, with a few exceptions, by Brahmin men (Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Bandyopadhyay, Keshub Chandra Sen, Debendranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and others) serving the interests of Brahmin patriarchy. Bengal Renaissance, therefore, was predominantly a Brahmanical Renaissance of, by, and for Brahmin men. An overemphasis on its glory would be tantamount to committing an epistemic violence to the Dalit renaissance and resistance that had taken place at the same time in the same province.

The above analysis has hopefully made it clear that, unlike what Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and others think, Dalit resistance and renaissance in colonial Bengal was not overshadowed by Brahmanical consciousness or controlled by Brahmanical imagination. The wide range and heterogeneity of Dalit thought and the long period of time across which the relevant debates evolved demand that we talk about an independent Dalit intellectual tradition and history that developed in colonial Bengal. In fact, the writings of Mahendranath Mallabarman and Mahendranath Karan, the latter being explicitly called a historian who wrote multiple treatises, go to the extent of developing anti-Brahmanical, sometimes even anti-scriptural methodology of history-writing and, therefore, an alternative Dalit historiography. But scholarship on colonial Bengal is largely silent about it. If caste Hindu historians from Bengal, who have been dominating academia for decades, are silent about the Dalit history and historiography of colonial Bengal, almost exclusively written in the vernacular language, then one cannot blame Kancha Ilaiah and others who have no access to the vernacular literature, for claiming that Bengalis have failed to diagnose the cancer of caste.

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