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Unfinished Yarn: Work, Technology, and the Ethical Subject in Kolkata

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Unfinished Yarn: Work, Technology, and the Ethical Subject in Kolkata

by

Abhijeet Paul

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in

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in

Critical Theory

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Raka Ray, Co-Chair
Professor Lawrence Cohen, Co-Chair
Professor Martin Jay

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Abstract

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Professors Raka Ray and Lawrence Cohen, Co-Chairs

This dissertation explores jute life and community through the repair and reworking of old and analog machines. This, I claim, has given rise to particular brands of microlocal or community practices and politics, including craft revival, tensions between the "body mechanic" and the "fragmented mechanic," repair and reuse as ethical work, strategies of dealing with "gray" infrastructure, "proverbial ethics," and "pension politics," which are different from the politics of unions and the "seamless" production theories of industrial capitalism as well as global capitalism. In short, the dissertation uses the idea of the local, tied to vernacular forms of thought, action, interaction, and interruption, to give a sense of shared values and tensions between individuals and the community in working neighborhoods. The community adapts to the ideas of recycling, flexibility, improvisation, and mobility, redefining the "fields of practice" in the domain of work and everyday life.

The five chapters of the dissertation trace the material culture of jute from medieval to neoliberal times. I begin with the many local narratives of raw jute or *pāṭ* and jute handicrafts or *pāṭshilpa,* overlooked in most studies of jute. This grounds the ethnography of (machine)-woven jute or *choṭ* and the jute industry or *choṭshilpa* in the first section, "Jute Works." The section begin with the total works, then moves in to focus on one machine, the *hāti kal* (elephant machine), and finally one tiny pinion of this machine. Moving out again from the jute works to "Jute Publics," the last two chapters explore the spaces and circuits of the *mohallā* (neighborhood/community) bazaar and *mohallā* politics in the context of nonelite globalizations.

Dedicated to my father and mother

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Note on Transliteration

I have used diacritical marks selectively in transcribing Bangla, Hindi-Urdu, and Bhojpuri words in the dissertation. I have used macrons to distinguish between short and long vowels and dots below the letter to distinguish between dental and retroflex consonants. However, I have not adhered strictly to any standard transliteration system, preferring to represent roughly colloquial and dialectal pronunciation. Proper names of individuals and deities have been represented according to common practices.

Acknowledgements

My father and mother, to whom I dedicate this dissertation, inspired this project with their lifelong experience of the hazards of employment in the jute industry in Bengal. My father in particular would have been happier than anyone to see this dissertation completed, but unfortunately, he passed away in the middle of my writing in 2013.

My jute mill *mohallā* (neighborhood/community) friends in Kamarhati and Naihati-Gouripur—too many to name here—compelled me to do this predominantly ethnographic piece of work. Closest among them are: Iqbal Ahmed, Aftab Rajababu, Munnabhai, Haji *chaiwālā,* Yadav *chāchā,* Ram Singh, Natwar, Tiwariji, Zakir Hussain, Raju, Raja, Hamid, Shahid, Mukul, Saurav, Sanjay Pandey, Upadhyay, Singhji, Bikram Shaw, Kartik Shaw, Bindu Singh, "Sir-ji", Manju, Tumpa, Rajshri, Mukhtar, Adil, Amin, Mushtaq, Rama Shankar Paswan, Subimal Palit, and Gaya *chāchā*. Special thanks go to Indu Singh, who opened the *mohallā* library, Maitreya Granthagar, and its invaluable literary, cultural, and community resources to me. I was fortunate to co-organize and participate in two seminars on jute life through literary texts and community practices at Maitreya Granthagar. Gour Goswami, Shyamal Roy, Debasish Datta, Gorakhnath Mishra, Narayan Dubey, Jiten Chatterjee, Shyamal Bose, and Mohammed Amin deserve special mention. Special thanks to Sushant Agarwal for his generous hospitality and giving me full access to his mill and mill premises for research. Three research assistants—Naghma, Tumpa, and Snehabrata—were exemplary in helping me access local archives, do interviews, and take photos whenever necessary.

My academic mentors, Raka Ray, Lawrence Cohen, Martin Jay, and Michael Mascuch, have been outstanding in guiding me in this work. Ethnography has been the bone of disciplinary contention throughout—anthropologists and sociologists favor ethnography, while historians and rhetoricians are suspicious of it—, and the multidisciplinary nature of the project owes much to this debate. I am glad that each mentor has upheld his/her priorities, giving me perspective on both sides. Rakadi ("di" or "elder sister" is a mark of respect in Bengali, my native tongue) has been central to the framing of questions in each chapter and in the dissertation as a whole. This project would have gone nowhere without her active support—especially by permitting me to write on labor, work, and ethics in a department heavily invested in textual and religious studies—and relentless criticism. Lawrence, with matchless fervor, has helped me recognize the nuances of ethnography and theory. And endless discussions with Marty on the Frankfurt School and Critical Theory have provided a much needed foundation for the practice of critical ethnography. Due to misunderstanding of a technicality, Michael could not be an official signing member of the committee, but his participation has been simply invaluable. I particularly dedicate the literary-cultural part of the dissertation and the conclusion to him, as I would never have thought about text, performance, and work in a related way without his constant prodding.

My home department, South and Southeast Asian Studies, has been generous in supporting me throughout the project. Munis Faruqui, Penny Edwards and Robert Goldman have been particularly supportive. The Center for South Asia at UC Berkeley has provided conference and travel grant support.

Of the many interlocutors with whom I have had the pleasure of discussing technology, ethics, work, and community, Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, Anne-Lise Francois, Anthony Cox, William Stafford Jr., Ishani Saraf, Daisy Rockwell, Dylan Fagan, Senthil Babu, Amitabha Sarkar,

Arunabha Sarkar, and Jack Whittington deserve mention. I thank Arnab Mukherjea for his friendship and his endless criticisms of “interpretive” research agendas in cultural studies (including ethnography), which have played a vital role in distilling my thoughts on the subject.

I want to thank the staff of local libraries and offices in the Kamarhati, Naihati, and Gouripur areas, in particular Usmanji of Kamarhati Staff Library; the Labor office record keepers in Kamarhati, Agarpara, and Prabartak jute mills; and the staff members of Kamarhati Municipality, the CPI library, Ganashakti Library, and especially the little magazines *Anik*, *Bhāshālipi*, *Padārpan*, and *Samakāl Kathā*.

My wife Rebecca has literally lived through this work. She also did some of the translations that appear in the dissertation. Our two-year-old daughter Kuheli, who loves to do “important work” in daddy’s office, will be surprised to learn when she grows up that it was perhaps not daddy but mommy who was doing real work, juggling motherhood with academic research of her own as well as helping daddy rethink his ideas in a communicable manner. To both of them, I owe the most. Other members of the family—Eric, Nicholas, and Shelby Whittington and Ariktam and Surajit Paul—will be happy to learn that this work is finally done!

And finally, thanks to Nicholas Whittington and Elodie Steffen for going out of their way to help me file this dissertation remotely.

Puducherry

24 July 2015

Introduction

Figure 1

Trilingual sign in Hindi, Bengali, and Urdu: "Work is *dharma*: please do not waste time sitting outside," by the author, 2011.

This dissertation explores the relationship between work, technology, and ethics in a growing informal economy[1] in India. Its focus is on the production of jute, which in its many vernacular forms has a rich history and present life little represented in academic studies.[2] This history can be located in two broad categories, *pāṭshilpa* (jute handicraft and industrial craft of revived

[1] Jute belongs to the organized sector, though, since Independence, there has been greater emphasis on jute as an SSI or small scale industry. Jute labor, the center of debate since the 1890s until the present, has also been viewed as organized though, as postcolonial authors have pointed out, there are differences between Indian and European organization of the industry. The most prominent of these studies are Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-class History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Ranajit Dasgupta, "Factory Labour in Eastern India: Sources of Supply," *Indian Economic and Social History Review,* Vol. 8, no. 3 (1976): 277-329; Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ranajit Dasgupta, "Some Aspects of Labour History in Bengal in the Nineteenth Century: Two Views," *Occasional Papers no. 40* (Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, October, 1981); Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Arjan de Haan, *Unsetttled Settlers:Migrant Workers and Industrial Capitalism in India* (Uitgeverij Verloren: 1994); Leela Fernandes, *Producing Workers: Gender, Class, and Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).
Based on ethnological and anthropological works, I suggest that a semi-informal economy like jute and jute work is tied to kinship and familial networks. See K. P. Chattopadhyay, *A Socioeconomic Survey of Jute Labour* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1952) for a fairly comprehensive survey of migrant labor and familial networks. Scores of jute labor historians have commented on the deeply familial and community-oriented nature of jute and other textile labor, and, in the case of anthropologists, jute work. See Sharad Chari, *Fraternal Capital: Peasant-Workers, Self-Made Men, and Globalization in Provincial India* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2004); Geert de Neve, *The Everyday Politics of Labour: Working Lives in India's Informal Economy* (Delhi: Social Science Press, 2005).

[2] On the vernacular, see Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, "The Rumor of Globalization: Globality-Counterworks and the Location of Commodity" in *The Rumor of Globalization: Desecrating the Global from Vernacular Margins* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 39-58; see also Mamadou Diouf, "The Senegalese Murid Trade Diaspora and the Making of a Vernacular Cosmopolitanism," trans. Steven Rendall, *Public Culture* 12:3 (Fall 2000): 679–702; and Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On "Japan" and Cultural Nationalism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 153–176.

handicraft) and *choṭshilpa* (industrial jute and repair and reuse of old machinery).[3] In both forms of jute, microlocal practices and semi-organized habits of repair work and reuse of materials have created the conditions for familial and community work for over a century. Such forms of work, in turn, have been connected to the chains of modern value and labor in old and new forms of global capitalism.

As part of a modern economy, jute, one of the semi-organized sectors of industrial development, is responsible for the livelihoods—farming, industry, and crafts—of about four million peoplein a billion-plus country, including a quarter million people employed in the urban areas of Kolkata and West Bengal alone. [4] But since the British imperial period to the present, the semi-organized nature of jute in modern capitalism has engendered debates on modernization, technology upgrading and related practices, employment of unskilled and low-skilled migrant labor, labor militancy and violence and social unrest. Irregularities and lack of symmetry between traditional and modern forms of work have allegedly created deep discord in the production of jute from the beginning. Political economists and Marxist historiographers have complained that jute, like other imperial industries, needs to upgrade its technology to keep up with the times. Postcolonial critic Dipesh Chakrabarty, following imperial observers of technology and industrial practices, has called jute a "Rip Van Winkle" of industries, meaning that it is anachronistic.[5] Critics of Chakrabarty like Arjan de Haan, Leela Fernandes and Samita Sen have also pointed out that jute production is anachronistic, clumsy, and in a constant state of disrepair, causing problems in social and political stability among the "unsettled settler" migrant populations.[6] However, few have engaged with jute's long-term associations with the handmade, repair and reuse of materials, old technology, and ultimately, the putting together of a community that has survived on the edges of microlocal forms of exchange and commodity-relations in a developing economy such as India's.

This dissertation wishes to unpack the meaning of allegedly anachronistic forms as well as important moments and hiatuses within the material histories of jute, abundantly represented in vernacular and local histories of home and factory as well as ethnographic work in the community from the 1950s until the present. I am particularly interested in explaining the differences and shared premises of jute's vernacular (traditional, communitarian[7]) forms and their

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[3] See Vasanthi Raman, *The Warp and the Weft: Community and Gender Identity among Banaras Weavers* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010). Raman discusses a variety of "Banarasi" *sāṛi* weaving practices on handlooms in Banaras, India. She explores the gendered politics of handloom weaving in the context of craft revival. For a *longue duree* of the Banaras weaving caste or the *julāhā* (*jolā* in Bengali), see Nita Kumar, *The Artisans of Banaras: Popular Culture and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

[4] See note 1 above.

[5] See Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*. Chakrabarty's reference to Rip Van Winkle, the title character of an 1819 story by Washington Irving who sleeps through the better part of his life and wakes up in a very different time, is intended to highlight how even after waking up from a long sleep, the jute industry continued to look for "its old position in a trading structure that no longer existed. This anachronistic nature of the industry—the trading mentality that guided its economic policies and technological choices—was to have a profound influence on the history of the labor force it created, especially in matters of discipline, authority, and, consequently, workers' protests" (p. 64).

[6] See Dasgupta, "Factory Labour in Eastern India;" Chakrabarty and Dasgupta, "Some aspects of Labour History in Bengal;" Chakrabarty, *Rethinking working-class history*; Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Colonial India*.

[7] Communitarian forms are considered to be niche areas in political theory. The tradition of communitarian thought and work is limited to a particular kind of post-Independence political philosophy—one that relates communitarian

relationship with modern global modes of labor and work. This is essential to understanding ethical relations informing work, community, and the so-called political life of the community, the latter gaining in prominence since the onset of developmental politics of "governmentality" or governmental reason[8] in South Asia and the global South.[9]

Research questions

Through this study, the critical questions I attempt to answer are: how are the small histories of repair work and technologies and reuse of materials in the community tied to ethics? Conversely, how do ethical forms inform the work and life-worlds of the community in global capitalism? And finally, what do they mean insofar as community politics is concerned, especially in the context of governmental reason?

To answer these questions, the dissertation explores the analog and the "anachronistic," represented by the retrofitted handloom as well as repair workshops, known as "the works". The works have a fair share in the creation of communities or "publics,"[10] a loosely bounded set of

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forms with mainly minoritarian identities. See Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[8] Governmental reason or governmentality owes its definition to Michel Foucault. It begins with a slow maturation of Foucault's notion of biopolitics, which is different from disciplinary power, although there are particular strains of disciplinary power in biopolitics and governmentality. See Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended : Lectures at the College de France* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France, 1977-78* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). Foucault privileges the non-determinism of discourse and critical thinking of language, techniques and technologies of power and governmentality (*Society Must Be Defended*, 241). The birth of the modern state is marked by the notion of the "biopolitical" (244). In this development, the difference between disciplining the body, the individualizing process, and the massification of a globalized body through technology is important to consider (242-3). Biopolitics displaces the premodern sovereign, whose realm in the old form lies in "thing, land" (*The Birth of Biopolitics,* 45). In the new form, biopolitics becomes the "government [that] must not intervene" but merely be "interested in interests" (*ibid*). Or, as Foucault said earlier (in *The History of Sexuality,* 1976/1978), the old right of the sovereign to kill was not exactly replaced by the new scenario of "make" live and "let" die, but complemented and permeated by it (*Society Must Be Defended,* 241). In short, the idea of governmental reason is connected to biopolitics through technological reason. Using this basic premise, Partha Chatterjee has attempted to develop the notion of governmentality in "most of the world" in *The Politics of the Governed* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014) by redefining political society beyond the tools and technologies of democratic, electoral, and representationalist politics. For Chatterjee, the technologies of political society, though rooted in bourgeois, print, and nationalist hierarches and sovereignties, work differently among creolized, subalternized, and "developmental" populations. He says,

> I will describe … several cases studied in recent fieldwork where we can see a politics emerging out of the developmental policies of government aimed at specific population groups. Many of these groups, organized into associations, transgress the strict lines of legality in struggling to live and work. They may live in illegal squatter settlements, make illegal use of water or electricity, travel without tickets in public transport. In dealing with them, the authorities cannot treat them on the same footing as other civic associations following more legitimate social pursuits. Yet state agencies and nongovernmental organizations cannot ignore them either, since they are among thousands of similar associations representing groups of population whose very livelihood or habitation involve violation of the law. These agencies therefore deal with these associations not as bodies of citizens but as convenient instruments for the administration of welfare to marginal and underprivileged population groups (40).

[9] See Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed*.

[10] The notion of publics has gained in importance since Michael Warner's critical work, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002). Warner takes a close look at the notion and reality of publics and counterpublics to understand the associative quality of gay and lesbian identities. Publics—the chief material of states and nations

migrant and "unsettled settlers" in industrial and globalized "slums"[11] with complex routes of access to commodities, services, and self-styled governance and microlocal politics. In the latter context, the *mohallā* or neighborhood plays a crucial role in everyday business and activities. [12] To establish the relationship between analog technologies, community, and politics, we will take a close look at the vernacular forms of material culture of jute. In order to understand the

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since the Enlightenment, which was founded on the notions of property, patriarchy and liberty—remains outside the scope of definitions. It is understood as a social totality (65), and is quite different from a "crowd", "audience", "people" or "group" (67). Warner suggests that publics are text-based entities, capable of organizing themselves around visual, aural, and sensory texts. The circularity and difficulty of the argument is played out throughout the text with numerous illustrations. Crucially, it is in contradistinction to Habermas's notion of public opinion that in due course of technological rationalities and advanced social communication is collapsed into a face-to-face communication (thereby forming the crux of communicative rationality). Such a movement, according to Warner, makes any special context of publics disappear from analysis. Such an erosion of publics is necessarily detrimental to understanding gender and sexuality (56). Warner proposes a stronger modification: publics can be identified within a larger public, where alternative protocols and dispositions are structured. This is known as counterpublics. Warner walks us through the various sexual activist movements and camps, and their relations and differences with subcultures (*ibid*) and subalterns (57). Warner is far from dismissive of Habermas's rich account of the norms and practices of publicness in modernity (57). That is a site for exploring relations between the personal and the political. The pragmatic way, Warner suggests, is one in which counterpublics can do more than represent gender and sexualized subjects—it can mediate the most intimate and private meanings, associations, styles of embodiment, etc. to the public, being indebted to the bourgeois public sphere for its background and conditions but not its rational-critical structures (due to identity-formations through domestic-private family norms). The crucial difference lies in understanding the associative quality of counterpublics of gay and lesbian people that they author as an elaborative process, and in which social markers are situated within the counterpublics (120). In short, membership in counterpublics happens at one's own risk (121), for there are no given subalternities, but membership forms and transforms the subject's identities within the associative discourse. In this dissertation, subalternization and stylization are essential components of the creation of the publics in jute communities or jute *mohallā*. The difference these communities have with Warner's counterpublics is that in a *mohallā*, unlike LGBT publics, the contingencies are tied to governmentality, civic, and other basic needs and relations.

[11] We need extra care to discuss slums. See Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact* (London: Verso, 2013) and particularly "Housing and Hope," *Places journal,* March 2013, accessed December 2014, https://placesjournal.org/article/housing-and-hope/. In note 7, Appadurai cites Sandeep Pendse, "Toil, Sweat and the City," in *Bombay: Metaphor for Modern India,* ed. Sujata Patel and Alice Thorner (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1995), 8. Pendse says, "in the crowded urban slums, where demolition, eviction, criminalization, and urban upgrading projects entail de-housing the very poor, the social dimensions of citizenship — questions of status, rank, trust and connectivity — are thinned out. For those who doubt that even the poorest of groups operate through conventions of dignity, rank and prestige, they need only to consult studies of hierarchy within rural untouchable communities in India;.see, for instance, Michael Moffatt, *An Untouchable Community in South India: Structure and Consensus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979)." See also Robert Neuwirth, *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, A New Urban World* (New York: Routledge, 2004). For works on Dharavi, allegedly Asia's largest "slum," see Kalpana Sharma, *Rediscoving Dharavi: Stories from Asia's Largest Slum* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000); J. Engquist and M. Lantz, ed., *Dharavi: Documenting Informalities* (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2009); A. Jockin, S. Patel and S. Burra, "Dharavi: A View from Below," *Good Governance India Magazine* 2:1 (2005).

[12] For a more general appreciation of how economic and other activities contribute to the construction of the economy (as well as political economy), see Michel Callon, *The Laws of the Markets* (London: Blackwell, 1998). Callon says that a market, for example, implies a "peculiar anthropology, one which assumes a calculative agent or more precisely what we might call 'calculative agencies'" (3). Perhaps the most important interpretation of markets and economics comes in Callon's suggestion that "economics" performs, shapes, and formats the economy (2). Callon proposes to understand beyond disciplinary measures not how economics and economy function but how "economic activities" need to be carefully separated from "economics" per se (2).

material richness of jute and its associated communities, it is necessary to look beyond wages and employment figures and histories alone to engage the complexities of its past and present.[13]

Specifically, the dissertation looks at individual and community use, reuse, and repair of hand-crafted and semi-industrial materials and commodities to develop our understanding of the ethics of repair technologies, "improvisation,"[14] and the material politics of jute. These help us assess the changing face of politics, which has become increasingly citizen-oriented through wider participation in informal spaces like *chai-pānī* (tea shops) and *manch* (forum or makeshift stage) rather than a straightforward dependency on unions, wages, and labor politics. While these changes have not solved the problem of inequality in income, wages, and opportunities among the working and the non-working poor in Kolkata and the global South, they have brought us closer to questioning the motivations and aspirations of individuals and communities who have learned to manage risks through critiques of governmental reason.[15] This can be seen in the evolving nature of *māng* (demand/desire) for commodities, which is no longer traceable through the Nehruvian reason of post-Independence development or union politics of labor, the central concern of political-economic and Marxist historiographies.[16]

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[13] Local histories of jute pay a great deal of attention to the nature of the works in vernacular forms of jute. See Mohanlal Gangopadhyay, *asamāpta chaṭābda* (*The Incomplete Century of Jute*) (Kolkata: Grantha Prakash, 1369 (1963)); Gorakhnath Mishra, *Jute: udyog evam shramik (Jute: Entrepreneurship and Labor)* (Kankinada, West Bengal: 2010).

[14] Improvisation has gained attention because of its influence in jazz, Black traditions, and ideas of human creativity and geography. See Walton M. Myumba, *The Shadow and the Act: Black Intellectual Practice, Jazz Improvisation, and Philosophical Pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) and Gary Peters, "Scrap-Yard Challenge--Junkyard Wars," *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 9-20 for a more or less comprehensive mapping of "improvisation" as theory and practice. Peters outlines the basic premise of improvisation as perceived as "pejorative" in the US and the UK (9-10). Peters works with this notion through the idea of spectacle mainly through reality television, where Do-It-Yourself activities are turned into games. Similar ideas of improvisation discussed in the domains of music and creativity, human geography and space, concepts and technologies, etc. point to the notion of "creativity" and the human subject. However, in each of these quintessentially "Western" examples, the question of livelihood is marginal; in the non-Western contexts, junkyard wars and improvisation go beyond spectacle and some form of pseudo-rationality of the anachronistic but is tied to livelihood, where creative thinking becomes a thing of the present condition of possibilities and not an anachronism.
Also see, Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, *The Rumor of Globalization: Desecrating the Global from Vernacular Margins* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) for a rethinking of "use" value in nonelite globalizations. Mukhopadhyay departs from Appadurai's notion of methodological fetishism or the "semioticity" of things, challenging the idea that materiality must be restored to some form of original innocence or the Marxian use-value. "As Marxists, they worked hard to peel off the 'ideological' layers of meaning surrounding things, hoping to reach its kernel – a degree zero – where the thing would be equal to itself. Released from the burden of representation, it was hoped, the thing will reappear in its primordial clarity whose *locus classicus* was laid out by the Cartesian *res* as modified by the Kantian ontological bipolarity of the transcendental ego and the mute thing-in-itself. … The materiality implicated in the Marxist critique of 'commodity fetishism' understood as an 'objective illusion,' is the materiality of the *res*. It demands that things be restored to their primal innocence (use-value) by being related directly and transparently to their master, man, without the mediation of market. This nostalgia for a world of simple objects is grounded in a myth of presence, which informs much of contemporary 'materialist' idealism. It is my contention that materiality must be understood as materiality effect – the *res* is a worldless no-thing" (36-9).

[15] See note on governmental reason above.

[16] See Dasgupta, "Factory labour in Eastern India;" Chakrabarty and Dasgupta, "Some aspects of labour history in Bengal;" Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-class History*; and Sen, *Women and Labour in Colonial India*.

"Works" and "Publics/Politics"

In this dissertation, ethnography of the analog through the "works," i.e. the neoliberal practices of the handloom and the jute repair workshop—static or mobile—helps us understand how seemingly simple processes involving menial and manual work (productive or unproductive) belong to a material chain—from raw materials to processing to repair and reconstitution of objects and materials.[17] The meaning of "publics" is more diverse in this ethnography, as caste, migration, work-functions, family, community-life, and other factors are interdependently linked to the notions of space, place, and belonging, both to the workshop and to the *mohallā* (neighborhood; community). I examine the makings of the "works" that produce the material conditions for the "publics" or the community.[18]

The thread that connects works and publics via the workshop and the neighborhood has been traced in the little-known work of ethnologists in post-Independence India in the late 1940s through 1960s, who have repeatedly pointed out the intimately local nature of jute—in both its past and its present forms. Particularly crucial to this dissertation's premise is K. P. Chattopadhyay's observation in *A Socioeconomoic Survey of Jute Labour* (1952) that in jute, the "home" is practically in the "factory area."[19] This insight not only points to the semi-organized nature of jute, but also opens up possibilities for discussing kinship, familial, and community relationships in spatial terms, a primary focus of this dissertation. The relationship between domestic space and work space also raises the question of productive and unproductive labor and work, which has been at the center of feminist critiques of labor. Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum argue in *Cultures of Servitude* (2009) that forms of domestic work—traditionally known as service—must be considered productive as they involve labor markets, commodification, and ultimately, the creation of value.[20] But the invisibility of domestic workers (and work) glaringly points to the gaps in the debate on productive-unproductive work relations, especially in middle-class society in India. Laura Bear in her recent essay on dollar-a-day contract dock workers in Kolkata, "*E shorir amar shorir* (This Body is my Body)" explores work-relations through "vital kinships."[21] Bear investigates the transitive powers of rituals and fertility in the domains of both domesticity and metal work on ships and shipyards in Kolkata. This dissertation, similarly, by exploring the relationship between repair work and material culture of jute, helps us see how interdependence between individual, family, and community creates opportunities to explore ethical moments in work and everyday life.

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[17] In Marx's *Capital Vol. I* (New York: Vintage, 1977, orig. 1867), the "works" appears in numerous material forms. While Marx depended for the most part on commissions, reports, naturalist novels, and possibly conversations with Engels, his narratives of technology, production, and work are marked by omniscient narration. This is not to make disparaging remarks about Marx's methods, but more importantly, to point out that Marx used an arsenal of narratives of work to produce the dialectics of labor and capital.

[18] The notion of material politics has found a new place in the works of geographers like Andrew Barry in *Political Machines and Material Politics: Disputes Along the Pipeline* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). Barry's mode of analysis is to rethink simple and minor points, often sidetracking the big issues—in contemporary NGO politics, oil politics, and state politics.

[19] Kshiti Prasad Chattopadhyay, *A Socioeconomoic Survey of Jute Labour* (Calcutta: Department of Social Work, Calcutta University, 1952).

[20] Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009).

[21] Laura Bear, "'This Body is Our Body:' Viswakarma Puja, the Social Debts of Kinship and Theologies of Materiality in a Neo-Liberal Shipyard," in *Vital Relations: Kinship as a Critique of Modernity*, ed. Fenella Cannell and Susan McKinnon (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2013), 155-178.

Ethnography as method: problems and perspectives

The method this dissertation employs in four out of five chapters is ethnography of two jute districts in the Kolkata metropolitan area: Kamarhati and Naihati-Gouripur in West Bengal. The sites of the ethnography are semi-industrialized revived looms, analog workshops, junkyards, bazaars, and communities living in urban slums or *mohallā* and hanging out in *chai-pānī* (tea-stalls). The total area covered is one square kilometer in each locality. There are three jute mills in the Kamarhati area and five in the Naihati-Gouripur area. In Kamarhati, all three mills were running at the time of this ethnography, while three of the five in Naihati-Gouripur were closed. This gives us the opportunity to compare and contrast two kinds of jute works and communities. A total of fifty individuals were interviewed out of a population of approximately 20,000 working in the jute economy and about 40,000 working in allied economies of repair, small trading, and informal economies in jute neighborhoods. The age groups of interviewees range from 18-86. The gender division of the ethnography is about 65 per cent male and 35 per cent female. Age, education, employment status, income, religion, gender, marital status, and place of origin were relevant to the study.

Surveys, ethnology, and ethnographic research on jute in India can be traced as far back as the late 19th century, when imperial observers studied jute as plant cellulose for the emerging imperial jute industry. With the spread of photography, the study of the processes of jute cultivation and making from "seed to finished cloth" became popular.[22] In the following decades, ethnography and ethnological studies of jute were mainly used as means to an end, as jute had been identified as one of many cash crops. Now, over a hundred years later, the question arises as to how effective ethnography is as a method of studying contemporary material practices of jute and jute communities? While ethnography allows us to observe participation of subjects (and in this case, objects like the loom and repair-work and tools) in real time, its focus on the particular and the specific sometimes makes us lose sight of the larger pictures of the economy and community.

Anthropologists have debated *ad nauseum* the efficacy of ethnographic theory and knowledge, as well as anthropology's "obsession" with ethnography. Abhijit Guha, an Indian anthropologist, in a paper on Tarak Chandra Das, the eminent Indian anthropologist known for his ethnographic work on the Purum Kukis of Manipur (1945) and a contemporary of the jute ethnologist K. P. Chattopadhyay, has written on Das's armchair anthropology of fish in Bengal.[23] According to Guha, Das was interested in connecting the micro (fish) with the macro (culture) on a pan-Indian scale. To this end, Das has presented a rich anthropological narrative through textual, ritual, and material histories of fish in the subcontinent without budging an inch from his "armchair."[24]

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[22] See Thomas Woodhouse and Peter Kilgour, *The Jute Industry: from Seed to Finished Cloth*

[23] Abhijit Guha, "T.C. Das Sitting in the Armchair: The Other Side of the Fieldworker Anthropologist," paper presented at UGC sponsored seminar, "Fieldwork and the legacy of Tarak Chandra Das," organized by the Department of Anthropology, Vidyasagar University, in collaboration with the Anthropological Survey of India, 11-12 March 2015.

[24] Abhijit Guha cites Barbara Tedlock's classification of archetypes in ethnography. See Barbara Tedlock, "From Participant Observation to the Observation of Participation: The Emergence of Narrative Ethnography," *Journal of Anthropological Research* Vol. 47, No. 1 (Spring, 1991): 69-94. Tedlock classifies four archetypes in the history of anthropology, which are the amateur observer (Christopher Columbus, Marco Polo), the armchair anthropologist (Frazer and Tylor), the professional ethnographer (Malinowski) and the "gone native" fieldworker (Verrier Elwin).

Evidently, Das, the ethnographer *par excellence*, had decided to give ethnography a break and focus on the material culture of fish—eating, rituals, and representation—through a pan-Indian exploration of the object.

Arjun Appadurai, writing from the perspective of globalization and its "life-worlds," emphasizes "the importance of embedding large-scale realities in concrete life-worlds" together with "the possibility of divergent interpretations of what *locality* implies."[25] Bhaskar Muhopadhyay in *The Rumor of Globalization* and Laura Bear in "'This Body is Our Body' " have similarly attempted to situate the larger realities of "nonelite" globalizations in the concrete forms of rituals and practices. But recently, Tim Ingold in "That's Enough about Ethnography!" has critiqued the very premise of ethnography in contemporary anthropology.[26] Ingold argues that the ethnographic "encounter" has been subsumed by the problem of "representation," and that ethnography is an "overused" term in anthropology, even as it is unconsciously reduced to a method of fieldwork; for Ingold, true ethnography will include other encounters (outside of the chosen ethnographic field). Ingold suggests that ethnography is dependent on data and collection, but it is above all a facilitator of conversation.

In my research, the ethnographic method has facilitated many types of conversation in the field, which have "co-produced" other limited "ethnographic" opportunities with academics, activists, and colleagues across a variety of lines and barriers. The problem of representation still remains: it is impossible to translate the singular and the vernacular of the field, and so it is the relationship between the particular and the universal (the local and the large-scale or the ethnographic and the global) that should be under scrutiny.[27] In the dissertation, ethnography is supported by material and local histories of work to fill in the gaps between encounter, remembered pasts, and present local histories.

Ethnography and informality in globalization: questions and issues

Michael Burawoy and Joseph Blum in *Global Ethnography* (2000) have created a benchmark for investigating ethnography of informality in global work. The work of globalization is seen primarily in informalization, reorganizing, and reconstitution of piece-rate work and an en masse reskilling of workers under the new regimes of contract laws.[28] Thus, global ethnography often uses concepts such as the skilling and deskilling of work, which reduce work to designated functions rather than something connected to the notion of the community at large. Equally pertinent, global ethnography, which is by and large the product of Euro-American "globalization," is unhelpful in assessing the nonwestern and nonelite forms of globalization and work, in which individuals, family, kinship, and community-relations create interdependence in

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Tedlock concludes by stating that the modern ethnographer in anthropology combines elements from all the four archetypes.

[25] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 55. See also Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact*.

[26] Ingold, "That's Enough about Ethnography!" *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* Vol 4, No 1 (2014): 383-395. Also see, Charles Briggs, "Ethnographic approaches to narrative." In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. by David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan, (London: Routledge, 2005), 146-51.

[27] To recast Naoki Sakai's observation, cited in Mukhopadhyay's *Rumor of Globalization,* that a particular (vernacular) cannot contest the universal; its particularity is already subsumed by the universal.

[28] Michael Burawoy, Joseph A. Blum, et. al. eds., *Global Ethnography: Forces, Connections, and Imaginations in a Postmodern World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).

producing work as well as in consuming cheap and global items (from mobile phones to clothing), engage in localized politics involving informal gatherings, and maintain a special place for community rituals, both on work-sites and outside.

In the eyes of governmental reason and capitalism, informality is not desirable and therefore needs to be monitored, reconditioned, reconstructed, and managed whenever and wherever possible. Almost reconfiguring itself like ideology,[29] the community founds its own institutions, to draw on Partha Chatterjee's idea of "community institutions."[30] This means that community members have a voice in their internal matters, which may or may not coincide with electoral, constitutional, and policy reasoning. Chatterjee uses community institutions in a general sense, though his examples include caste and religious minorities in urban and semi-urban India. His views are limited to minority identity politics and do not enter the dynamic field of work, from which communities derive their sense of ethics and belonging. Chatterjee misses this point because he, like the Subaltern Studies Collective, does not employ ethnography, but only cases (often culled from popular print media and the archives) to study community. Through ethnography, one sees how communal, religious, and other non-work identities are inextricable from techniques of work, creativity, and improvisation.

For Arjun Appadurai in *The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013) and in "Housing and Hope" (2013), there is much to be said about the material life of community institutions like the *mohallā* bazaar and "slum"-like spaces in industrial neighborhoods. According to Appadurai, there is a "cultural fact" hidden in the everyday struggles of slum dwellers in spaces like Dharavi in Mumbai or the favelas of Rio in Brazil.[31] Importantly, he wishes us to consider his "view from Mumbai" with the understanding that it will not disorient others viewing from their respective places—Rio, Johannesburg, Manila, even New York or other "Western" spaces. Appadurai's confidence springs from the notion of "the structure of the conjuncture," derived from Marshall Sahlins

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[29] See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989). On the question of the subject's autonomy and subjectivity, Žižek continues the ideology debate in the contexts of philosophy, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and cultural criticism. He revisits Marx's "invention" of the symptom to highlight the critical, symbolic, and reproductive questions that Marx raised in *The German Ideology*. He associates Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation with that of Foucault's notion of discursive practice and micro-power. Like Althusser before him, Žižek's reading of ideology is Lacanian in that he considers the question of subjectivity essential to ideology. In Žižekian terms, the self's representation does not follow from a simple identity of the object that resides outside the self. The self, or the "I," is neither represented, nor dialectically totalized, but is filled by the imaginary and the symbolic, which have ideological valence. In "I or He or It (the Thing) Which Thinks" in *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Duke University Press, 1993), Žižek shows that the Cartesian subject of the "I" to whom "I" appears is actually empty. This is Lacanian emptiness, where the positive empirical content is nothing but "a contingent variable" (29). Here, the "I" is neither reflective nor constitutive of reality, but is, in most instances, a void to be "filled" by material from "the big Other." This big Other is the imaginary and symbolic order of tradition and ideology (69, 76-78). But when that order breaks down, we become aware of the emptiness at the heart not only of our moral world, but also of ourselves, and thus of the contingency of meaning, which only the critical intellectual can mediate. In this context, Žižek shows the importance of theorizing contemporary capitalist cultures in a poststructuralist environment of knowledge characterized by openness to using deconstruction, philosophy, and anthropology as means of analyzing the experience of culture.

[30] Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed* (2004).

[31] Appadurai's envisioning of "culture" does not come from the position of an academic anthropologist *per se*—he displays ambivalence towards the disciplinary boundaries, preferring to call much anthropological work as a "cabinet of curiosities" (*Future as Cultural Fact* 5). Instead, Appadurai is interested in the potential of "culture" to create the "capacity to aspire' (126) through the dimension of a "social life of design" (275ff).

(1981), for he views the world as being made of many lines, mainly informational.[32] This makes the local part of a confluence of many lines and not a messy "stage" of development, especially if the local happens to be a "view from Mumbai," or in the present case, a "view from Kolkata's *mohallā* and *mohallā* bazaar" in jute localities.

For Appadurai, however, the lens of governmental reason itself stands for a lack of engagement with the lifeworld of the community. This has a different set of consequences in thinking about governmentality. Appadurai argues that lack of engagement with the lifeworld means that there are no minimum assurances of democracy and rights. Appadurai insists that this admission comes from an explicitly ethical obligation that does not necessarily do right to those violated but is an appropriate place to start thinking about the unthinkable: the slum lifeworld. And yet for Appadurai, between reality and argument, there is a place for intuition which is difficult to theorize.

Between Chatterjee and Appadurai, or between political theory and cultural anthropology, lies another position from which to view the *mohallā* bazaar: that of critical realists such as Ranabir Samaddar, for whom the local, including the urban slum, appears as mimicry of the reason of the State itself, manifest in municipal and other schemes. Since the 1990s, critical realists like Samaddar have built archives of population and demographic data based on "transborder", "circular," displaced, rehabilitated, and many other kinds of "sub-urban" populations without losing sight of the need for viable interpretive frameworks to explain what may be deemed as the "translocal." For Samaddar, these forms of economic and political life are not usually "pure bred" (i.e., conducted through the usual channels of licensing, exchange, demand-supply, etc.), but a mixture of legal and illegal practices that mimic the legalities and illegalities of the State in its local and micro-forms.[33] This means that in its contemporary practices and forms, legality produces illegality, the licit produces the illicit, and so on, and the "State" of all entities is fully aware of this. For my purpose, this line of reasoning helps me establish that *mohallā* spaces are not so weird or violent that they need to be restructured through "civil" and "political" means. On the question of difficulty of restructuring these categories above, Samaddar is on the same wavelength as Appadurai, but he does insist on the need to deal with the everyday "accommodations" between the marginal and the governmental through the "fault lines" of enumeration and dissemination of information related to caste, religion, race, gender, and other modern markers of the community itself.[34] I wish to push Samaddar's point further here to make

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[32] See Appadurai, *Modernity at Large,* 32. Appadurai is interested in the idea of technoscapes in the context of "shifting ethnoscapes" (34), meaning the flow of technology (high and low) channeling people, and along with them, finance, capital, and global flows.

[33] In *The Materiality of Politics Vol. I* (London: Anthem Press, 2007), Samaddar discusses legality and illegality as well as regularity and irregularity through the genesis of the colonial state, which has affected about "200-year development of basic law" (98). He says that just as the colonial state established illegality and irregularity to govern and rule, populations too began to use similar tactics, though often heavy legislation quickly turned population groups into illegal entities. Samaddar insists that, born of illegality, the colonial state founds its premises of legality, which "never came to terms with what can be called actions in the public space symbolizing opposition to law" (ibid.). Notably, Samaddar's openness to the idea of space as opposed to sphere (though he allows for popular nationalism to occupy that position and category), allows for greater latitude of materiality of politics—his goal in the book.

[34] These are modern markers, the older markers being ritual, familial, marriage, *jāti*, and village (place) links. As Samaddar says, "The basis … may be on moral grounds, on ideas of friendship, on practices of accommodation, on accepting as 'normal' the borderland existence in societies and polities, and finally on the rules of what I have explained elsewhere in this book as *minimal justice*" (244).

my claim that governmental reason, with its own genesis in a combination of legality, para-legality, and illegality,[35] is clearly aware of these licit/illicit local practices because they often mimic the State's own rationales for selecting, controlling, and dominating populations and power groups in "small" localities with abnormally large population density. The jute *mohallā*, I suggest, needs to be viewed as straddling such a place.

Samaddar is not alone in recognizing the legality/illegality nexus in governmental reason as aberration but as a convincing rule. Janet Roitman's work on wealth creation in Cameroon and the Chad Basin region of Central Africa may be cited as an example. Roitman's ethnography is based on the premise that unless the economy is apprehended as a political terrain, the problem of legitimacy cannot be addressed.[36] Roitman is questioning the reasons of state or nation-state that pretend to be incapable of explaining the complex relations between a deregulated economy and the generation of wealth that in classical terms would be deemed "clandestine." In reality, the centralized regulatory bodies only aggravate, control, or limit citizens' participation in the wealth that is viewed as public or "open"— in the case of jute industrial neighborhoods, the *mohallā* bazaar embodies such kinds of openness or the *khule ām*. I discuss the "open" spaces in the *mohallā* bazaar and their relationship to basic issues such as land rights through the lens of *aslī/naqlī* or the licit/illicit in Chapter 4 and local politics in *chai-pānī* in Chapter 5.

Overview of the chapters

This dissertation explores jute life and community through the repair and reworking of old and analog machines. This, I claim, has given rise to particular brands of microlocal or community practices and politics, including craft revival, tensions between the "body mechanic" and the "fragmented mechanic," repair and reuse as ethical work, strategies of dealing with "gray" infrastructure, "proverbial ethics," and "pension politics," which are different from the politics of unions and the "seamless" production theories of industrial capitalism as well as global capitalism. In short, the dissertation uses the idea of the local, tied to vernacular forms of thought, action, interaction, and interruption, to give a sense of shared values and tensions between individuals and the community in working neighborhoods. The community adapts to the ideas of recycling, flexibility, improvisation, and mobility, redefining the "fields of practice" in the domain of work and everyday life.[37]

The five chapters of the dissertation trace the material culture of jute from medieval to neoliberal times. I begin with the many local narratives of raw jute or *pāṭ* and jute handicrafts or *pāṭshilpa,* overlooked in most studies of jute. This grounds the ethnography of (machine)-woven jute or *choṭ* and the jute industry or *choṭshilpa* in the first section, "Jute Works." The section begin with the total works, then moves in to focus on one machine, the *hāti kal* (elephant machine), and finally one tiny pinion of this machine. Moving out again from the jute works to "Jute Publics,"

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[35] Samaddar, 219.

[36] Roitman, "Introduction," *Fiscal Disobedience: An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central Africa*, (Princeton University Press, 2004). This is so because conflict over regulation and redistribution means active engagement with the rules that "organize and govern economic life, such strife can only be understood by examining the very conventions that give rise to the concepts of objects of an economy" (6).

[37] I adapt this term from Raka Ray's Bourdieuan use of "field" to historicize and analyze the fields of women's movements in Calcutta and Bombay in *Fields of Protest: Women's Movements in India* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

the last two chapters explore the spaces and circuits of the *mohallā* (neighborhood/community) bazaar and *mohallā* politics.

Chapter 1, "Vernacular histories of *pāṭ*," traces the many lives of raw jute in Bengal, from premodern poetry through nationalist politics to neoliberal craft revival. Beginning with the vernacular word *pāṭ* rather than the English "jute" opens us up to diverse meanings and small histories often neglected in standard narratives of the jute industry. In particular, the diversity of *pāṭ* types and their uses in local communities challenges the simplistic colonial characterization of jute handloom work as caste-bound. A brief exploration of premodern and modern literary texts shows that the edible leaves and fine weaves of *pāṭ* figure in the local imagination as materials deeply entwined with ritual and domesticity, region and community. Turning to the nationalist elevation of the *moṭā*—coarse, handspun, and handloom—in the Bengali Swadeshi and pan-Indian Gandhian movements, the absence of *pāṭ* in the discourse and practice of indigenous textile production points to the disruption and near-erasure of these histories of *pāṭ* by the mass industrial production of jute fabric—ironically much coarser than the preindustrial handloom weaves. The chapter ends with a close look at the post-Independence revival of *pāṭ* crafts through hybridized reconstruction of traditional looms, in which Gandhian ethics meets the neoliberal market for "ecolabel" products. Appendix II explores in more detail representations of edible *pāṭ* in premodern poetry and its reinvention in neoliberal ethnic eateries.

Moving from *pāṭshilpa* or jute craft to *choṭshilpa* or the jute industry, chapter 2, "*kāmārshālā* or the works," explores the material of *choṭ* or woven jute in the context of the jute repair works. The chapter centers on the figure of the *boḍi mekanik* (body mechanic), who has performed critical "engineer-like" functions since the birth of the jute industry in colonial times, but now must compete with the *ṭūṭā-fūṭā* or "fragmented" mechanic of semi-automated machinery and retail commodities. Unlike the already-fragmented, increasingly disposable figure of the mechanic in global ethnography, the mechanic in the global South, including the *ṭūṭā-fūṭā mekanik,* pursues a livelihood thoroughly relevant to the community. Local ethnography of body mechanics and repair workers inside and outside the space of the *kāmārshālā* reveals the interconnectedness of work, family, and community in recruitment, semi-apprenticeship, and everyday work. Work in the *kāmārshālā* on "anachronistic" machines involves envisioning the total works while working on an isolated part; the mechanic also envisions his work as part of the work of creation of the "worldmaker god" Viswakarma. Yet this relationship is part of a field of everyday practice that extends beyond ritual to proverbs and to habitual movement between modes of work. Threatened by the *ṭūṭā-fūṭā mekanik*, whose separate skillset at first seems likely to replace that of the *boḍi mekanik,* the latter nevertheless insists that the former shares his mode of attention and place in the community. The chapter stresses the importance of local ethnography in understanding the global, leading into the next chapter's discussion of the local repairs that keep global production going.

Chapter 3, a view from "Inside the elephant machine," takes up the metaphor of *ṭūṭā-sūtā* or broken yarn to understand contingency[38] and ethics in repair work. Along with other

[38] Recognizing contingency is necessary to understand the "patterns of change," to quote Douglas Haynes, who has persuasively written on the histories of artisanal capitalism (based on cotton textiles) and its relationship to the informal economy in Western India. See Douglas Haynes, *Small town capitalism in Western India: artisans, merchants and the making of the informal economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), xii.

contemporary scholars of work, I contend that the contingency of repair work does not make it unproductive; rather, it produces particular ethical relations between workers in and beyond the worksite, their work, and the works. A prime example is the problem of "heart damage" or moisture in baled jute, leading to yarn breakage and associated loss of both profits and wages. Due to poor quality control on the part of the selection bosses, the problem can nevertheless be mitigated at other stages of processing with the help of the *mistrī,* who replaces and reshapes machine parts "with a true heart" in the knowledge that other workers' livelihood depends on salvaging the situation. The chapter moves in for a close look first at the *hāti kal* or "elephant machine," a cumbersome relic that places high demands on the *mistrī*'s knowledge and attention, and then at the individual bolts and pinions, which need to be repaired time and again to keep the machine running smoothly. Zeroing in on this machine and its parts gives access to the ethical implications of repair work: the *mistrī*'s care for his fellow mill workers, shown in the care he takes with the work of repairing the machine; his care for the work itself, shown in his respect for senior *mistrī*s and a dynamic, hands-on model of learning; and his care for the nearly obsolete machine, shown in his repeated reshaping of old Scottish steel parts. While it is not uncommon for young repair workers leave the jute mills for work in the Gulf, *mistrīs* remain committed to the jute community at work and in the *mohallā,* the community space explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 investigates the infrastructure of the gray in the *mohallā* bazaar through the lens of "*aslī/naqlī,*" or "real/fake." Based on ethnography in two localities, the chapter looks at the *mohallā* living spaces and infrastructure, land-capital relations, and the circulation of cheap commodities in the bazaar. In the *mohallā*, infrastructure such as electricity and markets and their associated risks are manipulated and managed every day through a wide range of makeshift strategies and informal agreements in order to meet the real or *aslī* needs of the community and "community institutions." In this "gray" space of informality, the *naqlī* (fake) or the illicit takes many forms and valences. Living in spaces so cramped that the private "spills its guts" into the public, *mohallā* residents deal with everyday vulnerabilities, violations, and lacks by recycling and repurposing materials, and by dynamically engaging with governmental reason. The so-called "clumsiness" and risks of the *mohallā*'s informal infrastructure creates a complex ecosystem, as in the practice of electricity "hooking." With the violence of land-grabbing in Bihar and West Bengal fresh in their minds, people doing business in illicit stall-spaces in the bazaar see their micro-scale encroachment of *mohallā* land as a legitimate survival strategy and opportunity for advancement in the context of sub-urban land dealings. Finally, the influx of new commodities—global brands and local knockoffs—in the *mohallā* bazaar is like an injection of a new "hormone" into a market where the discourses of *aslī/naqlī,* pure/adulterated, and licit/illicit are familiar. The *mohallā* bazaar can be understood as a translocal space, in which an evolving local accommodates global commodities within its own logic.

The closing chapter discusses *mohallā* politics based on conversations over tea in the local *chai-pānī* shops, hotbeds of community news and political chatter often overlooked in ethnographies of jute and other industrial and nonindustrial working-class communities. Three inter-related aspects of *mohallā* political life emerge from the ethnography in the chapter: "proverbial ethics," or the illocution of ethical speech-forms; jokes and slang as everyday performance of politics; and the shaping of pension politics in diverse neighborhoods. I trace the circulation of a proverb from the mouth of a *mistrī* (mechanic) through the speech of a media-savvy politician to a construction of the Bihari "folk" and back again to explore its illocutionary force as an ethical

form and invocation of belonging. A more cynical speech-form, urban slang, stages a hyper-masculinized, but vivid political commentary on the everyday that contrasts with the formal language of political meetings. Finally, conversations with two activists of different generations and backgrounds involved in "pension politics" point to the emergence of new styles of politics in the *mohallā*—signaled by a new usage of the word *māng* or "demand" as "desire." We also get to see *mohallā* politics in action, as news of an upcoming program radiates out of the *chai-pānī* shops.

The conclusion explores the dimension of performance as a means of explaining values and tensions within the category of modern work, focusing on the folk/urban open theater form *nauṭankī* and the notions of "*nokariyā*" (job) and *biraha* (mourning)—the latter representing women's voices in the household. The histories and legacies of performance in voicing these tensions endure and gain new force in the neoliberal context. Exploring trends in performance pushes us to reassess the arresting insight of early ethnologists like K. P. Chattopadhyay in the 1950s that, in jute labor, the home is in the factory area. The vernacular forms of *biraha* and *nauṭankī* rail against this blurring of the line which social scientists and outsiders studying labor and capitalism in the global South have come to see as normal.

Chapter 1
Vernacular histories of *pāṭ*: pasts in the present

Vernacular keywords: *pāṭ* (raw jute), *choṭ* (woven jute), *chhālā* (coarse jute cloth), *tāt* (medium fine cloth), *pāṭkal* (jute works), *tesuti kal* (three-yarn mill), *chaṭkal* jute mill), *kāmārshālā* (foundry), *pāṭshilpa* (jute craft), *shilpī* (craftsman, artist), *paṭṭabastra* (jute cloth to wear), *gappo* (story)

Introduction: Jute or *pāṭ?*

When I first spoke with the octogenarian Gour Goswami,[1] a veteran leftist organizer with about fifty years of experience organizing labor in one of the most heavily industrialized parts of Kolkata, over the phone, the first thing he asked me was, pointedly,

> *gappo*[2] *likhben? choṭ niye?*
> (Are you going to write a story? About jute [shorthand for jute labor]?)

I answered in the affirmative. Gour continued,

> *jāni. kintu pāṭ chenen?*
> (I know. But do you know raw jute? [implying, do I know the *purātan* or archaic/medieval pasts of raw jute?])

In three local languages, Bengali, Hindi, and Bhojpuri, *pāṭ* is raw jute and *choṭ* is woven jute cloth used for sacking, gunny, and hessian.[3] "*choṭ*/jute" also stands for industrial production of the raw material and is often used as shorthand for jute labor in modern factories, neighborhoods, and local narratives.[4] Subsequent conversations with Goswami[5] resulted in fascinating but piecemeal histories of *pāṭ,* related to its edibility, medieval poetic forms, imagery, and local and revived handloom works, as well as the more "organized" and class-based urban histories of jute.[6] Jute (from Oriya, *jhouṭā*),[7] the heartthrob industry of imperial India,[8] is a neglected

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[1] Gour Goswami, interview, Kolkata, August 31, 2011.

[2] *gappo* is colloquial for *galpo* (story). By invoking *gappo* at the start of our conversation, Goswami, a Bengali intellectual and a Marxist-Leninist, is implicitly recognizing the small history of the word and its potential in the context of *pāṭ* communities. See Appendix II for a short history of *gappo*.

[3] See Nibaran Chandra Chaudhury, *Jute in Bengal* (Calcutta: Newman & Co. Ltd., 1921 [originally published as *Jute and Its Substitutes* in 1908]). In Chapter III, Chaudhuri gives detailed classifications of jute, including its vernacular names in a variety of regions of Eastern and Northern Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and Assam. See especially pages 10-19.

[4] See Mohanlal Gangopadhyay, *asamāpta chaṭābda* (*The Incomplete Century of Jute*) (Kolkata: Grantha Prakash, 1369 [1963]) for such a use. Mohanlal compounds *choṭ* with *abda* (century) and makes it *chaṭābda*. Mohanlal is one of the few modern authors who narrates the life of raw jute in the context of the everyday working of the jute mill.

[5] Subsequent interviews took place on 2, 4, and 8 September 2011; 28 October, 22 November, 2011.

[6] Gour Goswami, Interviews, August-October, 2011. Also see Chaudhury, *Jute in Bengal*. Jute's local name, *pāṭ* in Bengal and Bihar (*pāṭua*), bears meaning in relation to local customs and rituals. Some of these are represented in medieval verbal forms, especially proverbs and Bihari/Bhojpuri *Lorikī* (a ballad about the folk hero Lorik). The *Lorikī* songs have a background and resonances similar to the *mangalkābyas* (Bengali narrative poems about local deities supposed to bring *mangal* or good fortune to the listener). Both have a system of referring to the *Bhagvat Purāna* and other master-epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata *kandas* (episodes).

[7] See James Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1883), 305–306. See also, Shourindra Kumar Ghosh, *Bāngāli jāti parichay* (*An Introduction to Bengali Castes*) (Kolkata: Sahityalok, 2006), 27 for a detailed account of agricultural castes involved in the growing of jute, rice, wheat, and other crops.

handloom- and medium-scale industry in neoliberal India. In its vernacular form, *pāṭ*, jute has sustained a considerable presence, from premodern poetry and edible forms to contemporary global ethnics—the latter a result of the phenomenon of craft revival in modernity.

This chapter trains our eyes to focus on the small and micro-histories of the material of *pāṭ* in the vernacular. Nationalist, Marxist, and postcolonial histories of capital and labor have mainly treated *pāṭ* in its modern form, jute, which indicates that the small histories of the vernacular *pāṭ* and its relationship with the community are largely missing in their accounts.[9] This has had an impact on their understanding of the relationship between "handloom" and "powerloom," which are usually believed to exist in two different orbits.[10] The artificial separation of the two spaces is impractical, because the relationship between the two has been evident in the domain of work and community from the premodern to neoliberal times.

As Geert de Neve in *The Everyday Politics of Labour: Working Lives in India's Informal Economy* (2005) and Douglas Haynes in *Small Town Capitalism in Western India: Artisans, Merchants and the Making of the Informal Economy, 1870–1960* (2012) have suggested, both informal and artisanal forms of work relations (especially in textile and garment industries) are essential to the everyday practices of modern forms of capitalism. De Neve and Haynes show how the theme of artisanal and kinship-based textile knowledge has been essential for the creation and sustainability of "artisanal" economies like cotton and textiles in South and Western India respectively.

While de Neve's and Haynes' works are timely and inform the present chapter and work, I am particularly interested in tracing vernacular forms, thereby highlighting a wider circulation of the life-histories of *pāṭ*—from the premodern to the neoliberal. From this perspective, jute has more than purely "economic" uses and circulation. I further stress here that the task of tracing elements of the past in the neoliberal present, which—to sum up the dominant perspective of the Subaltern, postcolonial, and cultural anthropologists in South Asia and the global South—is arguably more disjunctive and ruptured, is always challenging.[11] But instead of merely rehearsing the narratives of labor politics, class, and peasant histories, the chapter seeks to

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[8] See Anthony Cox, *Empire, Industry, and Class: The Imperial Nexus of Jute, 1840-1940* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012). Cox sums up the imperial nexus between Dundee and Calcutta based on jute manufacturing and trade.

[9] See D. R. Wallace, *The Romance of Jute: A Short History of the Calcutta Jute Mill Industry* (Calcutta: W. Thacker & Co., 1928), Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), Leela Fernandes, *Producing Workers: The Politics of Gender, Class, and Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Subimal Palit, *Jute Industry* (Kolkata: Firma KLM, 2007), Gorakhnath Mishra, *Jute: udyog evam shramik* (*Jute: Enterprise and Labor*) (Kankinada, West Bengal, 2010), and other works for a detailed historiography of industrial production and labor processes. Mishra and others are more mindful of local histories of labor but others are more interested in the master-narrative of labor and capital relations.

[10] Recognizing contingency is necessary to understand the "patterns of change," to quote Douglas Haynes, who has persuasively written on the histories of artisanal capitalism (based on cotton textiles) and its relationship to the informal economy in Western India.[10] See Douglas Haynes, *Small Town Capitalism in Western India: Artisans, Merchants and the Making of the Informal Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), xii.

[11] The theme of resistance within communities, especially textile communities, goes a long way. Of the large body of work on textile capitalism in India, Raj Chandavarkar's study of the Bombay mills needs special mention. See Raj Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance, and the State in India, 1850-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

establish a vital connection between material and the local and/or the vernacular. By delving into the vernacular and small histories of the material of *pāṭ* and its surrounding narratives and practices, the chapter hopes to connect with the everyday practices of the community. The small histories of the material and community can often be seen progressively resisting, co-habiting, blending, and manipulating the problematic histories of capital and modern labor in neocolonial as well as neoliberal contexts.

Further, and more to the point of establishing the vitality of the local, I hope to show how material, ritual, and aesthetic practices participate in the construction of the economic. Recognizing the vitality or the life-histories of material, rituals, and practices is necessary to question the oft-rehearsed relationship between cultivation of local cash crops like indigo (*nīl*), rice, cotton, and *pāṭ* and the formations of caste, for example. This relationship of interdependence, to extend Louis Dumont's logic of caste in India, is not straightforwardly traditional but largely "foreign," as Nicholas Dirks argues in *Castes of Mind* (2002).[12] Caste formations and organizations are evidently based on the notion of classification and scientific organization of society, popularized by imperial and colonial surveyors, as Sekhar Bandopahday and Padmanabh Samarendra have argued.[13] Based on these emergent debates on caste and work, I argue that the economics and science of jute have ultimately contributed to the erasure of the vernacular notion of *pāṭ,* with its sensuous, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions.

And finally, the chapter, in reemphasizing the vernacular story of *pāṭ*, gives opportunities to explore the other histories contained in the micro-practices of the community. In particular, we encounter food, ritual, storytelling, and other local forms of imagination wedged between the modern and the premodern.[14] In the larger context, we can situate these histories/practices in relation to the Gandhian indigenous politics of the handmade and the handloom, which consciously opposed mercantilism and industrial production in the first half of the 20th century. In rethinking the relationship between the premodern and the modern in the *pāṭ* context, it is essential to see the complementarity of the two kinds of weaves of textile materials: *moṭā* (coarse) and *sukkho* (fine). Though *pāṭ*'s local glory as a desirable coarse hand spun cloth is not reaffirmed in the Gandhian era of *khaddar* or handloom cloth via the simplicity of the *charkhā* (spinning wheel), the mystique of the handloom and the hand-made have affected, on a limited scale, the aesthetics of industrial production, and more importantly, neoliberal design practices in the context of globalization. Globalization, as discussed in the Introduction, is entangled in its

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[12] See Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchichus* (1966); Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 13-15.

[13] See Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Sage, 2004), 17; see also, For an excellent analysis of caste and its relationship to colonial knowledge especially through enumeration and statistical framing, see Padmanabh Samarendra, "Anthropological Knowledge and the Statistical Frame: Census in Colonial India" in *Caste in Modern India: A Reader, Vol I,* ed, Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2013), 255-296.

[14] The terms modern and premodern are placeholders, indicating relational boundaries between an array of textual and cultural practices, often embodied in rituals, songs, performances, and everyday culinary and market practices of the material of *pāṭ.* See the works of Bernard S. Cohn to understand the relationship between ritual, cultural, and social boundaries in traditional and modern Indian society. See particularly, Bernard S. Cohn, "Approaches to the Study of Indian Civilization" in *India: the Social Anthropology of a Civilization*" (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 4-5. Further, Dipesh Chakrabarty makes an interesting argument in "Translating Life-Worlds into Labor and History," in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (New Delhi: Oxford U Press, 2000), 72-96, where he discusses the incongruity of Indian secular and religious rituals in traditional, and especially, modern-day production systems and relations. The metaphor of translation fits here.

relations with the past, often mired in a complex network of ruptures, interdependences, and play.[15] In the *pāṭ* context, this is evident in imperial and colonial reports on cultivation and caste, semi-vernacular reports and narratives of markets, vernacular (medieval Bengali) poetry, and ethnographic sources.

Pāṭ as caste-work: colonial, imperial, and semi-vernacular discourses

In the colonial and imperial imagination, *pāṭ* has long been treated as a raw material for mercantilist and trading purposes.[16] Thus, the main objective of colonial and imperial reports is in line with the desire to lay the foundations for governmentality,[17] the latter drawing much on scientific and technological research (and jargon).[18] Strong cases were made for research and scientific forms of farming the raw material. Economic historians have provided justifications for the East India Company's intentions of cash cropping and export-oriented cultivation of crops like *pāṭ* during the early days of economic expansion in Bengal. Latter-day exploitation of commercial cropping, complete with the use of scientific agricultural methods, use of chemical substrates for higher yield and fiber strength, and the creation of large-scale dependency on electric-powered machinery for local, regional, and global markets have been well-documented as examples of progress in imperial India.[19]

But within the above debate on scientific and economic governmentality, there lies another debate on Indian society that originates in the work of accounting for castes and their respective occupations, such as *pāṭ* cultivation. The field is thoroughly inundated with mapping, statistical framing, and accounting—some as a matter of course, others deliberated over long stretches of time, notably the period of census creations from 1892 to 1931. In the case of *pāṭ*, observers like James Wise, H. H. Risley, W. W. Hunter, and others have written that before large-scale cultivation of *pāṭ* in Bengal began for export and industrial uses, there was small-scale and backyard cultivation of the plant. They associate premodern and preimperial *pāṭ* growing and making with the caste-population called the *baishya kapālīs* of East Bengal and surrounding areas. They also refer to them as the "poor people" in the region.[20]

While this is not the place to enter the larger debate on the interrelationship between caste and occupations, the relationship between jute and the *kapālī* caste is problematic, as the work of the

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[15] See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*: *Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) and Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, *The Rumor of Globalization: Desecrating the Global from Vernacular Margins* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

[16] See H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal: Ethnographic Glossary, Vol. I* (Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Press, 1892); James Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Tribes of Eastern Bengal* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1883); William Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal* (New Delhi: D.K. Publishing House, 1973 [orig. 1875-77]).

[17] See Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France, 1977-78* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004) and *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008) for a basic understanding of governmentality. Also see, Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[18] See Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, "Forced Commercialisation in Early Colonial Bengal: A Model and Beyond," *Calcutta Historical Journal* (Dept. of History, University of Calcutta), Vol. XV, Nos. 1-2 (1991): 28-82.

[19] See Chaudhury, *Jute in Bengal*; Dvijadas Dutta, *pāṭ bā nalitā* (Jute in Bengali and in Sanskrit) (Calcutta: Kuntalan Press, Asadh [June-July], 1318 [1911]). Also see Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*, 305–306.

[20] See Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*; William Hunter, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908-1909), and Risley, *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*.

semi-vernacular sources written by Indian scientists and agriculturalists show. Arguably, Indian scientists, though working within the logic of governmental reason (for they were employed in imperial departments like the Department of Agriculture, Commerce, etc.), were in a better position to assess the complex relationship of the material with local populations, occupations, and customs in the precapitalist society of Bengal. Their work may therefore be identified as semi-vernacular discourses of raw materials such as jute, which they identify in detail as *pāṭ*. For example, in *Jute in Bengal* (1908, 1921), N. C. Chaudhuri, an agricultural scientist in the Department of Agriculture, sensitizes us to the vernacular forms of the material without stressing the caste-occupation linkages in a static manner. Further, whenever scientific categorizations and administrative instruments present difficulty in representing the local, Chaudhuri enters into relative details about the manifold ways in which the material of jute has been named, made, and used in small communities on the *kapālī* loom for generations. Chaudhuri, uniquely works his way through the complex vernacular that jute represents.[21]

To counter the relatively homogenous accounting system of the *kapālīs* as the jute-caste in Wise's and Risley's work, two such moments in Chaudhuri's works can be cited: the futility of finding a singular English name for the variety of material called *pāṭ*, and the intuitive (and ideological) construction of what "the poor" and caste-occupation meant in the context of small cultivation of *pāṭ*. The problem of naming—also a problem of translation—makes it appropriate to switch from the English word jute to the vernacular word, *pāṭ*, because the vernacular expresses more diversity in local forms.

Both the instances above in Chaudhuri's work, while maintaining the decorum of academic neutrality of empirical research, subvert the tabular and classificatory forms of materials research by complicating the discourses of the locality of the material and yield related to the plant and fiber. For example, Chaudhuri writes how *pāṭ* in its coarse forms has been used for clothing by a majority of the rural population since earlier times, giving a clear sense of each strand, variety, yield, and other technical information related to the local, including customs and rituals associated with each whenever possible. Another agricultural scientist, Dvijadas Dutta, who writes in the vernacular Bangla, further breaks down the scientific expressions in the vernacular in *pāṭ bā nālitā* (Jute in Bengali or Sanskrit, 1911).[22] Datta's focus is mainly on familiarizing the reader with the idea that *pāṭ* culture is diffused all over Bengal, although the best variety of the plant grows mostly in the East Bengali districts of Narayanganj, Backergunj, and Mymensingha. These places, Datta indicates, have also been memorialized in oral storytelling practices based largely on local flora and fauna, which includes *pāṭ*. In a specific sense, both Chaudhuri and Datta prepare us to explore *pāṭ* in a variety of vernacular forms, from edible *pāṭ* to the *pāṭ sāṛi* (a long cloth that South Asian women wear) as well as other locally spun cloths. The archaeology of medieval texts and rituals presents great potential in assessing the life of precapitalist *pāṭ* forms. For the rest of this chapter, I will continue to use mainly the vernacular expression, *pāṭ*, occasionally alternating it with its modern expression, jute.

[21] Chaudhury, *Jute in Bengal*.
[22] Datta, *pāṭ bā nalitā.*

Pāṭ and the local imagination: eating, weaving, poetic, and textual traditions

Pāṭ shudhu poche abiral
(*Pāṭ* just rots incessantly)[23]

-Jibanananda Das, *Rupashī bānglā* (Bengal the Beautiful)

Examining colonial surveys through the vernacular lens, it becomes clear that the vernacular is more capacious in determining the locality of *pāṭ*. Textual traditions in Bengali since the medieval to the modern times show rich traditions of *pāṭ* culture and life. In its premodern and vernacular forms, *pāṭ* represented considerable heterogeneity in its uses and practices: as food, fiber, and aesthetics. Most importantly, the uses of the plant are almost entirely non-industrial, which adds greater diversity and richness of interpretation of *pāṭ* as a local material and form of life.

Pāṭ eating: lesser histories

For example, the uses of *pāṭ* leaf are the least known and discussed in the histories of the plant. But the *pāṭ* leaf has had a rich past and has an intriguing present in the rural and urban community contexts in India. The past is especially marked by local pre-agrarian, agrarian, and other small community growing and use of the leaf as food. Its representation in poetic forms in medieval texts in Bengal is common. The globalizing present is marked by the revival of ethnic food, which is part of a gimmicky reconstruction of traditions and authenticity practices, especially in the context of new urbanisms in neoliberal India.[24]

As a rather common culinary and cultural item in the small household economy with few or no links with the commercial market, *pāṭ* leaves were mainly consumed as *sāk* or common seasonal leafy greens. *Pāṭ* greens, a good source of nutrients with ample betacarotene, iron, calcium, and Vitamin C, is familiar among agrarian and non-agrarian populations in Bengal and the countryside as well as among the post-Partition refugees from East Bengal.[25] The leaf's culinary reputation goes beyond Bengal and can be traced in pan-Asiatic and pan-Afro-Arabian cultures too.[26] In many of these cultures, the bitter-tasting leaves of the capsular species, called "*tītā* (bitter) *pāṭ*" in Bengali and Hindi, are dried and used for medicinal purposes. The cylindrical fruit-bearing plant, called "'*mīṭhā* (sweet) *pāṭ*" in Bengali and Hindi, is edible in many forms as a pot herb. Also known as *tossa pāṭ* and identified as an Afro-Arabian variety, it is used in a mucilaginous dish called *molokhiya* in Arabic. The *pāṭ* leaf is seasonally sold in local markets by small farmers who get their supplies from *pāṭ* cultivators, usually without middlemen, for *pāṭ* leaf does not have industrial but only local use. In local bazaars it is usually sold by bazaar

[23] The actual process is called retting. See Chaudhury, *Jute in Bengal*.
[24] On the relationship between the local and the manufacture of the gimmicky, see Mukhopadhyay, *The Rumor of Globalization*.
[25] Datta, *pāṭ bā nalitā*. The local geographical sub-divisions are particularly necessary, as intensive cash-cropping of Bengal *pāṭ* in the British period became widespread based on the variety and yield. Based on agricultural research techniques of *pāṭ*, N. C. Chaudhury in his celebrated *Jute and its substitutes*, Dwijadas Datta in *pāṭ bā nalitā*, and others have showed interest in the leaves of the plant. This is so because the leaves were and still are consumed by peasants and farmers, artisans, and other rural folk in an area where the plant grows.
[26] Besides East Bengal, *pāṭ* leaves have been consumed as dietary fiber and vegetable in many parts of the world—Egypt, Nigeria, Sudan, and Southeast Asia. See Datta, 3-7.

"aunties" (*māshī*) as one of many local types of greens.[27] Today, in urban and semi-urban households, unless one is an eclectic home cook, *pāṭ* leaves will not make their way into the kitchen.

Though there is little scope here to explore the edible uses of the plant and its representations—from medieval poetry to the jute *"pakoṛā*" available in neoliberal ethnic eateries in metropolitan spaces today—there is ample scope to discuss the representations of material, weave, and their affects in the medieval poetic, nationalist, and neoliberal imaginations.[28] With this goal in mind, learning about jute's not-so-well recorded pasts as *pāṭ* life and community might help us trace its localized, craft, and craft-like identities, from premodern forms to contemporary ethnic revivalism and neoliberal reconstructions of the "authentic."[29]

Mangalkābyas and premodern *pāṭ* weaves

Māke dobo pāṭer sāṛi
bābāke dobo ghoṛā.
shoimā go koro nā goshā
tomāke dobo puṭi mācher roshā.
(I'll give my mother a *pāṭ sāṛi*
I'll give my father a horse.
Girlfriend, don't be angry
I'll give you a *puṭi*-fish gravy.)

Bengali proverb[30]

Medieval poetic traditions including the *mangalkābyas*, particularly *Dharmamangal* (dedicated to the god Dharma) and *Chaṇḍīmangal* (dedicated to the goddess Chaṇḍī), and other narrative poems such as Chandravati's *Rāmāyana* (16th century) from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) have habitually treated materials such as a *pāṭ sāṛi* or *paṭṭabastra* (*pāṭ* cloth) in a narrative and ritual context. *Pāṭ sāṛi* appears in a variety of forms, such as *sunn-pāṭ/shon* with shiny fibers, hemp, etc. This section specifically explores these forms, focusing on the *sukkho* or fine weave, in contrast to the recasting of the *moṭā* or coarse, especially in the Swadeshi and nationalist contexts, as more desirable. Looking at the material history of the fine weave of a coarse material like *pāṭ*, we can rethink the difference between the local and the national.

The *moṭā* as ordinary handspun cloth is usually presented in the medieval poetic forms as aesthetically pleasing, ritually appropriate, and practical. The folklorist Satyakinkar Chattopadhyay points out that the examples of *pāṭ* sāṛi in medieval poetry indicate that the weaves were actually finer and more detailed with local life-forms as compared to machine and mechanical weaves during the industrial era.[31] Further, as commentators on the *kābyas* and the *bāromāsyā* (tales of twelve months) tell us, the patterns and life-forms on the material are

[27] See Datta, *pāṭ bā nalitā* for a detailed picture of small cultivation of *pāṭ*.
[28] *Pāṭ* as an example of edibilism needs to be taken seriously.
[29] Revivalist ethnics has been visible since the nationalist times.
[30] Kalyani Dutta, *Prabādmālā (*Kolkata: Thema, 2012). The words *goshā* (anger) and *roshā* (gravy) could identify this proverb as East Bengali. However, the transitive verb, *dobo* (I will give) can be identified as West Bengali; the East Bengali variant is *dimu*.
[31] Satyakinkar Chattopadhyaya, "*Prācin Bāngalā-kābye kutirshilpa* (Cottage Industries in Premodern Bengali Poetry)," in *Bangiya shilpa parichay,* ed. Mihir Bhattacharya and Dipankar Ghosh, 98 (Kolkata: Tahthya o adibasi sankriti Kendra, 2004).

connected to the ritual presence of *pāṭ* among the caste Hindus of Bengal, due to its vegetarian nature (compared to silk, which is an animal product).[32] We can conclude that not all handloom *pāṭ* cloth was coarse, as *pāṭ* weavers were able to produce what is known as *pāṭ* silk—silk here understood as fine yarn—out of *sunn-pāṭ*/*shon*. The silk-like weaves of *pāṭ* appear in domestic and everyday contexts in the works of poets, folklorists, and storytellers from East and North Bengal and other adjacent areas writing in the vernacular.

In her *Ramayana* situated in the folklore of Mymensingha in East Bengal (now Bangladesh), Chandravati highlights the purity of Sata (a pious fisherwoman who brings the mythical egg containing Sita to Janaka's court) by describing her *sāṛi* made of the "silky fabric of jute."[33] Here *pāṭ* is associated with ritual purity and is used as a common cloth during the work of everyday domestic rituals. The modern translators of this oral epic have attempted to keep the local color and flavor of the original—hence there is room to believe that jute silk was used to make *sāṛi* for everyday and aesthetic uses.[34] But *moṭā* habitually indicates the work of ritual life, entangled with the fabric itself. In *Kabikankan Chanḍī,* Mukundaram suggests that Abhayā's (another name of the goddess Chanḍī in *Chanḍīmangal*) sixteenth year is memorable because she wore a *pāṭ sāṛi*. *Pāṭ*, here as in *Dharmamangal,* could refer to wild silk or to *pāṭ* silk; the latter could also be a variety of silk cultivated in Assam, but is probably a reference to *sunn-pāṭ* grown in Bengal, which is strong and lustrous.

> *hunkāre chinṛiyā ḍori*
> *poriyā pāṭ-er sāṛi*
> *shorosho batsorer hoila rāmā*[35]
> (Tearing the cord with a roar
> Wearing a *pāṭ sāṛi*
> she became a girl of sixteen)[36]

The *kābyas* are most certainly emphātic about clothing traditions in their everyday contexts.[37] They perform manifold tasks of describing, dramatizing, and making themselves relevant to the

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[32] *Pāṭ* is viewed in rituals as a "pure" material. A variety of silk cloths too are believed to bear marks of virtue.
[33] See Mandakranta Bose, trans., *A Woman's Ramayana: Candrāvatī's Bengali Epic* (London: Routledge, 201), 23, 66n.
[34] *Ibid.*
[35] *Kabikankan Chanḍī*, Calcutta: Girishchandra Das, 1868. http://hdl.handle.net/10689/5823. This is an 1868 print of a *chanḍīmangal* text probably written in the 16th century by Kabikankan ("Jewel of Poets") Mukundaram Chakrabarty. The quoted text is on page 38 of this edition.
[36] Cited in Chattopadhyaya, "*Prācin Bāngalā-kābye kuṭirshilpa*," 99, 103.
[37] For the sake of textual clarity, I wish to note here that I have come across two versions of the text and they represent the figure of the girl in two different ways, though the effect insofar as the representation of *pāṭ sāri* is concerned remains more or less unchanged. In the 1868 version of *Kabikankan Chanḍī*, the reference is to a young girl, probably Abhayā, tearing her bondage in the form of a deer who had been captured by Kālketu a few episodes earlier. The other version is a citation in the work of Satyakinkar Chattopadhyaya, who refers to the figure as Bama. Bama is Vama Kali, the terrible form of Kali, who is known for her wrath and could be treated as the other side of *Abhayā*, the benign. Whatever the exact reference to the figure is, the important consideration is that the observation above is made for a woman, so the poet's male gaze falls on the detail of the dress she is wearing. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has taken up the phenomenon of the worship of small deities. She says, "When cathected in ritual, each small goddess is the great goddess." See "Moving Devi," *Cultural Critique* 47 (Winter 2001): 136. Spivak does not pay attention to the aesthetics of the *pāṭ sāṛi,* though it possibly signifies the same ritual aesthetics that she is interested in.

narratives.[38] But representation of *pāṭ* cloths and materials take more complicated forms in the 19th and 20th centuries—several generations after the *Mangalkābyas*.

In another *mangalkābya* poem, *Dharmamangal*, *pāṭ kapoṛ* (*pāṭ* cloth) and objects made of *pāṭ* make regular appearances. As David Curley notes, in Ghanaram's 18th century text, *Dharmamangal*, the King, Lausen, gives Kalu Dom (a man of the untouchable caste who burn the dead) and the Dom men and women *pāṭ dhuti* and *pāṭ sāṛi* (probably silk or silk-like *pāṭ*)[39] when he takes them into military service. This is a rich context for situating the poetic tradition in material life and practices in other readings, such as the reading made by the untouchable caste, the Doms themselves. The 17th-century text by the low-caste author, Ram Das Adak, not surprisingly more sympathetic to the *Doms*,[40] notes that the women were shamed when they sold goods in the marketplace because the cloths they wore did not cover their heads, as also when they were standing in King Lausen's vicinity. He sent the *Doms* to the market to buy decent clothing (*bastra*), but the material is not specified. However, Lausen gave Kalu Dom's wife *tasarer bhuni* (raw silk weave).[41] Curley suspects that this is a careful statement that she was given more honor than the other Dom women, and she is specifically given a role in Dharma's worship.[42] Of course, this brief textual survey of a medieval text like the *Dharmamangal* does not do justice to the complexity of rituals, caste, sublimity, and occupations in the Rarh (present-day Birbhum) area—a place and culture given an equally permanent status in the mid-19th to the 20th century literary-cultural traditions authored by the *bhadralok* Bengalis. For example, Kaliprasanna Sinha's *Hutom penchār nakshā* (1862), considered one of the important forerunners of the modern Bengali novel, refers to *gunchoṭ*, a slightly finer weave than *chhālā*, being used in *Chaṛak pujā* during the festival of *Gājon*—reminiscent of the long-held oral tradition of the *Dharmamangal*.[43] In Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's *Hānsuli Bānker Upakathā* (*The Tale of the Hansuli Turn*, 1946-1951), a prominent modernist ethnographic novel often grouped with several works by contemporary authors under the heading of "river" novels, a minor incident involving a local *pāṭ* and *choṭ* trading family takes us closer to the question of difference between the Mondols, low-caste subaltern traders in jute, and the Kahars, lower caste "subalternized" palanquin-bearers and occasional share-croppers on the *pāṭ* fields.[44] Though Tarashankar is interested in showing "interdependency" between castes, an essentially Dumontian position, he is keen to show difference based on material practices of cultivating, hand-making, and trading of materials like *pāṭ*.[45] In short, representation of *pāṭ* in the nineteenth-

[38] Chattopadhyya, "Prāchin bāngalā kābye," 98.
[39] See David Curley, *Bengali Mangal-kavya and Social Change in Precolonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2008).
[40] The conceptions of the ancient caste system that constitute the work of Indologists and anthropologists are based on imperial differentiation of caste, whereas textual scholars use poetic texts in the vernacular as well as in the classical languages.
[41] Ghanaram Chakrabarti, *Sridharmamangal*, (Kolkata, Published by Yogeshchandra Basu, 1884), 152.
[42] Conversations with David Curley, July 15, 2014.
[43] Kaliprasanna Sinha, *Hutom penchār nakshā* (*Owl's Sketches*) (Kolkata: Subarnarekha, 1990 [orig. 1862]). Also see, Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta: modernity, nationalism, and the colonial uncanny* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005).
[44] See Benjamin Baer, *The Tale of Hansuli Turn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
[45] Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, *Hānsuli bānkera upakathā* (Kolkata: Bengal Publishers Limited, 2010, orig. 1946-51).Tarashankar is interested in showing the material processes of dispossession and subalternization of particular communities exposed to imperialism, militarization, and capitalism in a marginal colonial community in Birbhum during WWII.

and twentieth centuries had become problematic because the relationship between the local, regional, and the national had become politically affected by caste, nationalism, gender, etc.

The *moṭā* or handspun: the political realm of the nation

juto shelāi theke chanḍī pāṭh
(From mending shoes to chanting the mantra of Chāndi)
Bengali proverb

As indicated above, medieval poetic sources like the *mangalkābyas* lead us to significant histories of the uses of *pāṭ* fiber, namely cellulose cultures and weaving as well as ritual and aesthetic uses.[46] In the premodern context, even though the material of jute was coarse, its fine and finer weave was extolled as something desirable and practical. With industrialization since the 19th century, the finer weave was erased from the local imagination and replaced by industrial and mass weaving of the material for commercial uses.[47] The industrial weaves, hessian and sacking, were coarse, as imperial commentators on jute weaving have amply demonstrated.[48] But there is another kind of *moṭā* or coarse weave—the hand spun—which progressively became more desirable in the early to late nationalist period. A word of caution is due here. Though *moṭā* or coarse textiles became desirable during the nationalist era, *pāṭ* never acquired the same stature as cotton or silk, for example. This was because the tradition of weaving *pāṭ* for clothing was lost with mass production of woven jute or *choṭ*. Thus, *pāṭ* never quite became part of this nationalist desire for the *moṭā* in the sense of coarse handloom cloth. This would remain unchanged until the moment of craft revivalism under various governmental and non-governmental schemes from the 1950s and especially the 1960s onwards.

Moṭā and *sukkho*: the warp and weft of the Swadeshi movement and the Gandhian *charkhā*

Though the categories of *moṭā* and *sukkho* are visible in the medieval forms, they come to prominence in the nationalist period, when the "fields of protest" related to cultural nationalisms provided a significant political form-factor. Recycling Raka Ray's determination of political modernity in *Fields of Protest* (1999), particularly in the context of women's movements in the two cities in India—Calcutta and Bombay (also representative of homogeneous versus heterogeneous political cultures respectively)—I suggest that the field of protest is ineluctably intertwined with the fields of practice.[49] In the nationalist period, these practices were created through a recycling of populist terms like *moṭā* and *sukkho* that everyone would understand. *Moṭā* and *sukkho*, primarily textile terms, expanded to include the recreation of nostalgia that was employed full time to instill a sense of the "folk" through the form of "craft." While craft was still in practice in the form of local and handloom productions on a limited scale, its image was reconstructed to fit the nationalist identity of a greater "folk" (perhaps in resonance with the *bhadralok*'s combination of German Romanticism and Anglo liberalism).[50] Further, idealizing

[46] See Curley, *Bengali mangal-kavya.*
[47] See Indrajit Ray, "Struggling against Dundee: Bengal jute industry during the nineteenth century," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 49 (2012): 105.
[48] See, for example, H. R. Carter, "Jute Baling," in *Jute and Its Manufacture* (London: Bale & Danielsson, 1918).
[49] Raka Ray, *Fields of Protest: Women's Movements in India* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). For a more detailed note, see my Introduction.
[50] For a dialectical understanding of German Romanticism and its relationship to the *völkisch* purveyors of "aesthetic politics," a term borrowed from Schiller, and to which, we might say, the colonial *bhadralok* aspired, see

the *moṭā* created a double recognition: first, it helped recognize the material life of the *sukkho* (fine/machine made/standardized) commodity-form (as predominantly European). This is particularly relevant because the early nationalists were aware that the indigenous tradition of *sukkho* in a nonstandard but aesthetically desirable form had been significantly challenged by imperial mercantilism and commercialization of the agrarian and artisanal, symbolizing the countryside—real, imagined, or simplified.[51] Examples of these craft forms included the legendary muslin (a fine cloth in East Bengal), pottery, masonry, painting, architecture, iron-crafts, and many other forms of village crafts that could be located in complex caste, *jāti* (numerous classifications of clans, tribes, populations, etc.), ritual, and work functions from the "ancient" and "medieval" forms to the troubled present.[52]

Secondly, and more to the point, reviving the *moṭā* through a systematic reemployment of craft in national life meant a return to the *sukkho* sensibilities of *samskriti* (culture)[53] that recognized the need to recreate a political culture of resistance to the imperial and anti-colonial realities of the time. The ideals of *moṭā* and *sukkho* therefore recreated a field where material, social, and particularly, gender relations were recast. This is even evident in the tunnel vision of the patriarchal politics of regional nationalisms like the Swadeshi (*swa=own; deshi*=country or home rule) movement. Later, in more gender-inclusive politics—particularly in the pan-Indian nationalist mass-movements triggered by Gandhi, which accommodated a panoply of followers from widows to low-caste *chāmārs* (whose low-caste status is linked to their being associated with leather-working) to Oxbridge returnees like M. A. Jinnah, J. L. Nehru, and many others—*moṭā* would be reconstructed as essential to the fields of protest time and again.

Swadeshi movement and many paradoxes of the ideals of *moṭā*

As indicated above, the Swadeshi movement, an example of indigenous and cultural idealism and nationalism in the teens of the 20th century, focused on the revival of locally made, *moṭā* cloth, alongside systematic cultural interventions among urban and suburban consumers, who were persuaded to boycott European goods and consume Indian goods instead. This phenomenon had significantly contributed to the fetishizing of the Mother figure[54] as rural, earthy, and benign (remember the *mangalkābya*) during the Swadeshi movement, especially during the first Bengal Partition or the Bangabhanga Andolan in 1905, as is evident in the famous devotional song in the 17th century *Shākta* (worshipping female power) tradition of *shyāmā sangīt* (songs in praise of Shyama or Kali, the fierce mother goddess):

māyer deyā moṭā kāpoṛ māthāy tule ne re bhāi

Martin Jay, "Discourse of Totality before Western Marxism" in *Marxism and totality: the adventures of a concept from Lukács to Habermas*, 50-52 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California press, 1984). See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) for a detailed history of the *bhadralok* in the context of Anglo-liberalism; also see Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in global concept history* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) for the notion of aesthetic politics and its relationship to a "cultural" legacy project in 19th century Bengal. Studies of the *bhadralok* have dominated the field of cultural history in India as well as within the diaspora.

[51] See Mukhopadhyay, "Forced Commercialisation" on the subject of filature in silk and commercialization of silk as filature.

[52] See Samarendra, "Anthropological Knowledge and the Statistical Frame."

[53] For a discussion of *samskriti* and 19th-century Bengali nationalism, see Sartori, *Bengal in global concept history*.

[54] See Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

(pick up the coarse cloth given/made by your mother [or in your motherland])[55]

As Sumit Sarkar, one of the most influential scholars of the Swadeshi movement, has argued, the debate during the Swadeshi movement had a "constructivist" and an "extremist" side.[56] The trigger was mainly anti-Western feelings rather than "total nationalism."[57] Rabindranath Tagore's well-known novel set during the Swadeshi movement, *Ghare Bāire* (*The Home and the World*, 1915), provides an early critique of the conflict between constructivism and extremism. Discussing boycott—the preeminent weapon of Swadeshi—Sandip, the rebel, villain, and one of the three narrators of the *ātmakathā* (soul's story or autobiography)[58] in the novel, tells Bimala,

> In the good old days, when these gaily coloured foreign shawls were unknown, our peasantry used to manage well enough with plain cotton quilts—they must learn to do so again. They may not look as gorgeous, but this is not the time to think of *looks* (emphasis mine)

The Swadeshi movement, according to Tagore, was perhaps not equipped enough to create an alternative to the European commodity-production; this is important because around the same time of the writing of the novel, Tagore, with his Nobel Prize (1913) money, had started replenishing the cooperatives and micro-lending establishments in Shantiniketan to help the peasants and the rural poor.[59] In fact, Tagore was aware of the plight of the *pāṭ* growers at the time, though neither the Swadeshi activists nor Tagore considered the local histories of *pāṭ* as essential to indigenous projects like the Swadeshi, cooperatives, and beyond.

The Gandhian *charkhā* and the *motā*: the absence of *pāṭ* in the nationalist imagination

The idea of boycott during the Swadeshi movement was not always matched by an equal emphasis on household production—a problem that Gandhi would attempt to solve in the next decade or so, thereby transforming rhetoric and nostalgia into a political and ethical reality capable of becoming a mass-movement. By the early 20th century, Gandhi and his followers approached the idea of Swadeshi and the handloom in a more basic form—the *charkhā* or the spinning wheel.[60] The fervor of Gandhian politics of the *charkhā* produced symbolic and real

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[55] Rajanikanta Sen (1865-1910), born in Pabna (now Bangladesh), composed this song during the Swadeshi movement in Bengal in 1905. The song recognizes that Bengal's gift is coarse cloth, which is better than the machine-knit of Manchester that thrives on mercantilism. Tagore's *Ghare Bāire* (The Home and the World, 1915) exemplifies this cultural tension, problematizing the nationalist premise of treating *motā kāpoṛ* as a symbolic rather than a pragmatic option—one could consult a large body of historical literature discussing this problematic. Gandhi's activism through the charkha, a hand spinning method of coarse fabric called khadi, would drive home the point from the early 1920s onwards about the "true" meaning of self-reliance. Evidently, the nationalist appropriation of the "coarse" is perhaps more symbolic than material, with the exception of Gandhi, who initiated the small works of spinning *khādi* on a pan-Indian scale. The point is that the dismissal of imperial representation of handspun cloth as coarse and fine—based on selective weaving patterns—is yet another example of invasive ideologies on local economies and lifeworlds.

[56] Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908* (Ranikhet: Orient Blackswan, 2011, orig. 1973).

[57] *Ibid.*

[58] Brinda Bose, "Of Desire and Dissensus," Seminar 623 (July 2011). http://www.india-seminar.com/2011/623/623_brinda_bose.htm

[59] See Rabindranath Tagore, *Ghare Bāire* (1915).

[60] See Sadan K. Jha, "Charkha, 'Dear Forgotten Friend' of Widows: Reading the Erasures of a Symbol," *Economic and political weekly*, Vol. 39, No. 28 (Jul. 10-16, 2004): 3113-3120.

powers of resistance to the idea of "Western" science, technology, and practices that had produced colonialism, capitalism, and centralization of power and authority.[61] Notably, by returning to the form of a basic loom—the *charkhā*—Gandhi invited the widow, the minorities, and 'subalternized' castes and people, who symbolized the most downtrodden and pathetic figures of nineteenth-century rural and urban India,[62] to take charge of the "exquisite piece of machinery" that is the spinning wheel.[63] The genius in this move was that Gandhi favored the "total works," from spinning yarn to the making of handspun *khādi* or *khaddar* cloth—the latter a Gandhain trademark. The hallmark of *khaddar* was its inimitable and intimate locality—nothing was outside the reach of the local: from raw material to maintenance of the *charkhā* to its sustainable uses and consumption.

But the Gandhian fervor did not result in a resuscitation of *pāṭ* handloom because *pāṭ* memory had yet to be revived. As mentioned earlier, Gandhi, like the Swadeshi organizers and activists, did not consider *pāṭ* as part of the *charkhā* movement—his reasons were "economic" and "utilitarian."[64] Besides, for Gandhi, the moment demanded quick and effective adaptation of a past. Jute was not viable because of economic reasons—the number of employable households was more limited than cotton and most jute cultivators, already under the spell of commercial cropping, were seriously impoverished. One can surmise that the past of jute was too regional and localized and hence, for Gandhi, it did not promise intersections between pan-regional and pan-Indian possibilities.[65]

Reviving *pāṭ* memory through jute craft in post-Independence India: reconstructing memory with metal and alloy works

Though Gandhian politics did not affect jute handloom during the nationalist era, the Gandhian ideology of the handloom contributed to post-Independence jute handloom works. The culture of reviving *pāṭ* craft since the post-Independence era has been largely based on institutionalizing memory of weavers' techniques and household knowledge under the general rubric of "Village and Small Industries (VSI) also known as "cottage industries" or *kuṭirshilpa* in Bengali. To make the latter effective, the Gandhian model of handspun and *khādi* as ethical work has been both explicitly and implicitly adopted in the revival of handlooms of *pāṭ* and other materials in the post-Independence era. The post-Independence *pāṭ* works, sponsored by local self-help groups as well as research and design institute like the National Institute of Research in Jute and Allied Fibre Technology (NIRJAFT) in Kolkata show the Gandhian trace of ethics in their works as they employ the local through the handloom. Like Gandhi, they retain the "utilitarian" aspect of such forms of work, visible in their sworn commitment to practical and pragmatic solutions for

[61] See Isabel Hofmeyr, *Gandhi's printing press: Experiments in Slow Reading* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2013) for a discussion of Gandhi's emphasis on the singular, material, and the concrete. Hofmeyr's book emphasizes Gandhi's skepticism of the "distant" and his advocacy of the "neighbor" or neighborliness. Also see pages 1-29 for her discussion of Udai Mehta, Ajay Skaria, and Tridp Suhrud on Gandhian practices inside and outside the ashram.
[62] S. K. Jha, "Charkha," 3113-3120.
[63] M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, 17 March 1927.
[64] C. F. Andrews, "The Ethics of Khaddar," *Mahatma Gandhi: His Life and Ideas*, 98-110 (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2003).
[65] Gandhi was well aware of the conditions of labor in the Indian mills. He was a fervent supporter of jute entrepreneurs like Hukum Chand and Prem Chand; he was also a supporter of G. D. Birla. See Ritu Birla, *Stages of Capital: Law, Culture, and Market Governance in Late Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

household economies through design and implementation. Today, the "cottage" is strutted for its "green" status in the context of neoliberal markets.[66]

The loom and traditional craft: definitions, techniques, and modifications

Like the variety of weaves (fine and coarse) discussed earlier, the term "handloom" is open to multiple interpretations. Often, these interpretations affect its material existence. The obverse is true: its material also affects its interpretation. Thus, an organic reed and cordage loom appears more layered than a steel and alloy loom, perhaps. For example, Kabir, the 15th-century Bhakti poet, spun his metaphysical *dohā* (couplets) on a pit loom, obviously non-electric. Gandhi wrote that the wheel of a *charkhā* (a basic loom and non-electric too) with organic materials was an "exquisite" tool for all and sundry. Perhaps one cannot say the same for a "revived" loom today—derived from a mixture of premodern and nationalist/Gandhian handloom, retrofitted with steel, alloys, nylon, and other synthetic materials.

There is a mixture of *kapālī, tāntī*, and other looms, including the simple pit loom in a redesigned hybrid form. For example, the difference between the *tāntī* caste and the *kapālī* caste loom, to cite Risley's classifications in *Tribes and castes of Bengal* (1913), is that the *kapālī's* loom was "clumsier."[67] The *kapālī* loom used a hand shuttle instead of a pedal. The NIRJAFT loom is based on a pedal, though it is, in principle, still a traditional loom, though parts of its function may be electric powered. The emphasis, however, is in its human-centric activity related to handicraft. More importantly, such a loom is a 'generic' handloom, which has both Indian and European roots. And yet, since NIRJAFT scientists are more or less aware of the medieval traditions of *pāṭ* weaving in Bengal, they perceive their work as a continuation of the premodern *pāṭ* cloth-making in a neoliberal context, with strong Gandhian ethics straddling the two.[68]

Traditional looms are run by the mechanism of a "treadle." In treadle looms, the weaver controls unadorned weaving patterns by the simple act of pedaling to create rotational motion for the movement of the warp and weft. The process is slower than "Dobby" and "Jacquard" mechanisms in looms. "Dobby" is a mechanism that controls all the warp thread, long proven to be an effective alternative to the treadle loom. The "Jacquard" loom, invented by Joseph Marie Jacquard (1752-1834), is more advanced than the Dobby loom, though it was invented only forty years after the Dobby. In Jacquard, the weaving technique is given greater flexibility by raising the warp thread for individual control. Though the design and implementation of basic looms

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[66] *kuṭirshilpa* or *palli shilpa*—the category is too specific to be ignored in Bengal and its adjacent areas. During the First Five Year Plan in India (1951-56), clear differences were made between the "small scale industries (SSI)" and the "village industries," though the scope of these definitions has left the VSI to be included into the SSI. Notionally and practically, "small scale" means 50 persons working in an electric powered works or a 100 persons working in a non-electric powered works. The cap on capital is Rs. 5 lakhs (or about $8,500) per annum. Thus, a household "verandah" non-electric handloom employing less than 50 persons would qualify, as would a mechanical-powered small scale unit manufacturing small parts of large machinery under varieties of piecerate contract work. Employment and capital criteria are the main reasons why the village industries like the handloom have remained a loose category that are associated with the informal sector. See "Feasibility study of jute products with a view to develop[ing] ecolabel criteria through LCA and stakeholder coinsultation," powerpoint presentation: www.jute.com/ecolabel.

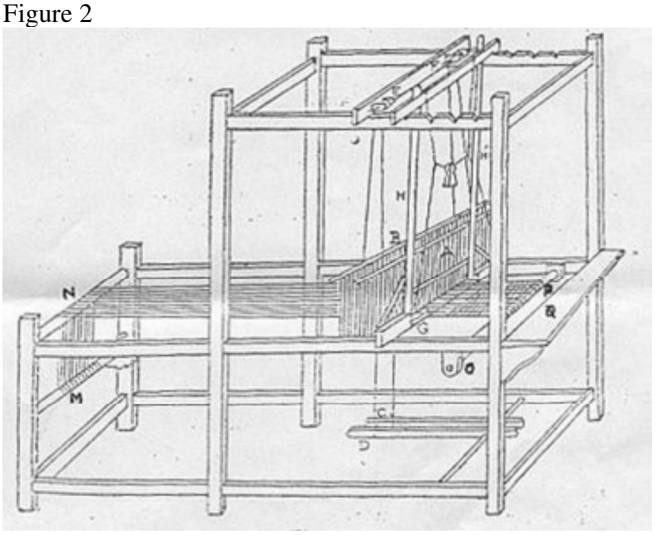
[67] It is important to note that the notion of the clumsy or bricolage is essential to understanding the idea of difference in modernity.

[68] It is worth noting that NIRJAFT scientists are driven by the sense of virtue in reviving such a loom; few seem aware of the deep ideological nature of the project.

today are inspired and often derived from old looms found in village and semi-urban households, more modern industrial materials like nylon, iron frames, and other alloy-based bars and shuttle-boxes for loom work form the core of the handloom experience today.[69] The NIRJAFT loom discussed below is a Dobby loom that has all the above characteristics.

Retrofitting the Dobby at NIRJAFT

Figure 2



Sketch: coarse handloom with dobby[70]

Today, we can only view some of the generic forms and features of the traditional *pāṭ* handloom in West Bengal using the Dobby. The Dobby (especially pit, but also frame) is quite suitable in this context. The Dobby with a frame is more stable than the pit loom, though it needs more space to operate. As indicated a bit earlier, the Dobby loom has more control over warp threads than the treadle looms. The advantage of the Dobby is that it employs more family members—after all, revitalizing the handloom economy is considered to be a solution to rural and non-urban unemployment, for it gives families opportunities to make their craft knowledge count towards livelihood. The handloom today produces both fine, medium, and coarse weaves. It is as much market-oriented as the products of the powerloom.

In several studies, Surajit Dasgupta and Alok Nath Roy et. al., research scientists at NIRJAFT, discuss the possibility of reconstructing and retrofitting a traditional Dobby loom. The NIRJAFT loom, a structural modification of a cotton loom for jute weaving purposes, with a dobby of 25 levers instead of the standard 21 for wider design possibilities, shows extensive modifications, adjustments, restructuring, realignment, and repair of the "original"—from the size of the *pirn* (a rod used to wind weft), shuttle, and shuttle boxes to the actual woven cloth. The reed and cordage of a basic loom is retrofitted with alloy, steel, and other inorganic materials to give the

[69] See "Vision 2030," NIRJAFT, Kolkata, 2010. The institute is working on stabilizing handloom design frames. Vision 2030 is project report that describes in detail the processes necessary to attain ecolabel—the benchmark for green textiles—by 2030.

[70] According to the Office of the Development of Handlooms, Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, the different kinds of handlooms are: loin loom, dobby loom, pit loom, 'other' pit loom, pedal loom, and 'other.' See "Handloom by types," *Handloom Census of India*, 2009-10 (Development Commissioner, Handlooms, Ministry of Textiles, Government of India).

loom more stability and design usability. In some cases, they are open to running the loom with electricity. In this sense, the traditional handloom with electric-power falls between the traditional and the modern, without losing its Gandhian "essence." These are considered "structural adjustments" within the VSI and the cottage in today's neoliberal handloom market.

The new Dobby is characterized by retrofitting old designs with new features and recreating as well as retraining the traditional weaver castes in villages and semi-rural places. Further, since no *kapālī* weaver caste exists anymore, other weaver castes that work with a variety of materials (like reed, coir, etc.) are chosen for the task. In many instances, urban and semi-urban students with textile-related hobbies and interests are trained to perform the task so that they can oversee the more "traditional" employees on the loom. We can conclude that the trend in new foods and new textiles ethnics is to work together in a mixed form, a phenomenon that is necessary for textile work, as we shall see in the later chapters.

The changes in the mode and agents of weaving are equally matched by the changes in the fabric itself. It is noteworthy that handloom *pāṭ* fabric is not a pure form today but comes with a blend of synthetics to improve its warp texture. The question arises, how much is too much to preserve the organicity or purity of *pāṭ*, or as global marketing gurus would say, for it to deserve an "ecolabel" benchmarking?[71] This is easily visible in NIRJAFT and other publications publications like *Vision 2030* (2012), where great emphasis is given on research on geo-textiles and biodegradability of jute to figure out alternatives to synthetics, so as to cater to present and future industry "ecolabel" benchmarking. Such labeling is at the center of globalization, which, as studies indicate, goes beyond production and markets to involve a wide array of small works, familial knowledge-circulation, and community interests. In this specific sense, several millions of individuals involved in *pāṭshilpa* (jute handloom) are involved in "nonelite" globalizations.[72] The essence of nonelite globalization is that local and particular practices of weaver and nonweaver families form the crux of dependency and subsidies involving state and non-governmental funding, which in turn is now an important area of study.[73] So it is a question of the incentive[74] given to individuals, families, and communities by the not-so-local businesses and networks that give the local *pāṭ* works an air of authenticity in both owned and borrowed looms.[75] In this sense, while the loom is situated in the familiarity of family space, it has a strong function as a neoliberal object governed by markets and consumer desires. Notably, such forms of loom sustainability are different from the aesthetic and ethical constitution of medium and fine weaves in traditional looms that seem only to exist in memory—popular and textual--today.

Conclusion

As evident from the discussions of premodern, modern, and neoliberal forms of *pāṭ* making and its representations, the small histories of the material appear entangled with the community. Such entanglements are different from the notion of "cultural" relations and hegemony that constitute

[71] See "Feasibility Study of Jute Products."
[72] The idea of nonelite globalizations can be traced in the works of Jairus Banaji.
[73] Abhijit Paul, "Jute Cluster at Hapania: Interactive Design Study Cluster Level Report MSME Scheme, 2012." The report is part of a "design clinic" on jute. Hapania is in the eastern state of Tripura in India.
[74] See Dibyendu Maiti, *Reform and Productivity Growth in India: Issues and Trends in the Labour Markets* (London: Routledge, 2014), 170-2.
[75] The question of authenticity can be examined more clearly if we look at the studies on handlooms sponsored by the textile governance bodies.

middle-class domains of consumption (for example ethnic food, global ethnics). Yet, the community is never free from external influences in its modern and neoliberal contexts. Three things intervene: culture, techniques, and markets. This is not only true of the commercial interventions the material of jute has been subject to since the early 19th century, but equally of the cottage and local forms that are revived for political and economic purposes or both. So, while something like edible jute leaf today is treated as part of global ethnic food revival movement in micro-local contexts, ethnic cloths and handloom have been entangled with nationalism in the past and are entangled with neoliberal production and consumption in the present.

I end this chapter with a problem that jute and industrial histories of capitalism in India have inadequately addressed: the problem of obsolescence and revival of the hand-powered loom or the hand-powered craft of repair and the redesign of old looms and works today. These practices exist in the borderline spaces of artisanal, semi-industrial, and industrial works all over India and the global South. In broader terms, they exist on the fault lines of artisanal, formal, and informal capitalisms.[76] Thus, while a loom or a particular kind of works may look anachronistic in itself because of hand-crafting and extensive use of analog machines, they have continued to exist as sources of livelihood for millions within the folds of late capitalism and neoliberal markets, thereby affecting, in many cases, perceptions of globalization in "nonelite" forms.[77]

In the next chapter, I continue to explore vernacular forms related to the material of *choṭ* (woven jute) in the context of artisanal memories and representation that have contributed to the small histories of the *kāmārshālā,* jute repair works or foundry. These histories, like the histories and practices of *pāṭ*, have been largely neglected in the study of capitalism and labor.

[76] See Mukhopadhyay, *Rumors of Globalization* and Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.
[77] *Ibid*.

Chapter 2
kāmārshālā or the works: the small worlds of the "body mechanic"

juto shelāi theke chanḍī pāth
(from mending shoes to the chanting of the mantra of Chanḍī, the goddess)

-Bengali proverb

Introduction: The river, the works, and the "body mechanic"

When one teaser, one finisher card, four drawing frames, two to eight roving machines with forty-eight spindles each, and two-five inches of spinning frames with forty-eight spindles each finally arrived on the banks of the Hooghly river in Serampore in the Hooghly district of Bengal in 1854, the saga of modern jute and a modern industry had begun. As George Ackland, a failed tea-planter and an ex-East India Company (EIC) employee, financed by Bysumber Sen, a Bengali businessman or *banian*,[1] brought this brave new world to life on the banks of the quiet Hooghly, he effectively contributed to the displacement of the small uses of the plant in the form of *kapālī pāṭshilpa*.[2] As *pāṭshilpa* was replaced by *choṭshilpa* or the jute industry (*shilpa* in Bengali is both art/craft and industry),[3] new forms of livelihood, modes, and technological practices began to emerge.[4]

Two such developments are immediately apparent: forms of livelihood and wages related to the new "mode" of production, and practices of maintenance and repair of analog machines and technology, usually on-site.[5] The chapter focuses on the latter, namely the work of analog repair technologies, housed in the small and micro-works, locally known as *kāmārshālā,* foundry, works, or workshop. The *kāmārshālā*, essentially an extension of Taylorist practices in India, especially since the 1950s, posits more complex scenarios than the standard procedures of "motion economy" and "scientific management" assume.[6] Both the nature of the space as well as

[1] Almost every commentator on jute and related industry in colonial India has mentioned the figure of the *banian* and the social and economic power he represents. But there are few works on the *banian*'s moves, motives, operations, and impact. However, the *banian* in the post-Independence context has shifted from a loose group of local and itinerant merchants and traders with strong family ties wielding significant social power to a class of traders who trade in manufactured commodities as well as financial commodities. And practically no writing exists on the role of the Bengali *banian* and the large manufacturing and trading houses like the Bhaigyakuls of East Bengal, who owned shipping, jute, real estate, and other businesses in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. See Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ranajit Dasgupta, "Functions of the Nineteenth-Century Banian—A Document," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol IX, No. 35, August 31 1974, 73-75.
[2] See James Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Tribes of Eastern Bengal* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1883) and William Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal* (New Delhi: D.K. Publishing House, 1973 [orig. 1875-77]).
[3] See Indrajit Ray, "Struggling against Dundee: Bengal Jute Industry During the Nineteenth Century," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 49 (2012): 105.
[4] See Subimal Palit, "Origins of jute: early history," *Jute Industry: A Historical Perspective* (Kolkata: Firma KLM, 2007), 1-36. Palit discusses the early history of jute in both Dundee and Calcutta.
[5] See William Walker, *Juteopolis: Dundee and its Textile Workers 1885-1923* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1979). See also Anthony Cox, *Empire, Industry, and Class: The Imperial Nexus of Jute, 1840-1940* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012). Cox sums up the imperial nexus between Dundee and Calcutta based on jute manufacturing and trade. Also see, D. R. Wallace, *The Romance of Jute: A Short History of the Calcutta Jute Industry* (Calcutta: Empire Press, 1909, reprinted 1921).
[6] See S. N. Kar and S. K. Lahiri, *Work-Study in Jute and Textiles* (Calcutta: Book Society of India, 1964) on scientific management and machines.

the recruitment of "body mechanics" of particular and peculiar types makes the *kāmārshālā* a unique place in global capitalism today.

The chapter connects the space of the *kāmārshālā* to the work of the *boḍi mekanik* or "body mechanic" in local lingo, responsible for "ordinary routine maintenance" of the jute machine. As commentators from the colonial to the postcolonial periods, such as S. G Barker (1934), Dipesh Chakrabarty (1989), Samita Sen (1999), and Nilanjan Das (2004) have remarked, the expression, "ordinary routine maintenance" is a euphemism for making do with old technology and machines for a variety of purposes—from cost-cutting to cheap labor utilization as a result of the *banian* or merchant mentality.[7] Conversely, the works and maintenance have allowed local and migrant populations to "eke out a living" for several generations.[8] However, with minor exceptions, such as the work of the ethnologist Kshiti Prasad Chattopadhyay in *A socio-economic survey of jute labour* (1952), the "cultural biographers" of jute such as Mohanlal Gangopadhyay in *asamāpta chaṭābda (The Incomplete Century of Jute* 1963) and Gorakhnath Mishra in his more recent *Jute: udyog evam shramik (Jute: Entrepreneurship and Labor,* 2010), and a few others, little work exists on the figure of the body mechanic in labor histories and ethnographies. But lately, in the context of "globalization" and related ethnographic work, the work of repair has been gaining more attention.[9]

The chapter draws on the work of local ethnographers, global theorists, and semi-autobiographical writing in the vernacular, in addition to original ethnographic work in the community of body mechanics in Kolkata. The first two sections define the "body mechanic," give relevant background, formulate the research questions, and summarize the existing debates on the mechanic in the South Asian and the global contexts. The last section focuses on the ethnography of the works and the body mechanic.

Definition of the "body mechanic," historical and sociological backgrounds

The Indian "body mechanic" or *mistrī* can be defined as a repair mechanic who is responsible for the maintenance of analog machines in the "total works" in a foundry or workshop. The body mechanic, drawing on a legacy of colonial power and technical knowledge in the 19th and early 20th centuries, perceives himself (very rarely herself) as "like an engineer" who has access to a wide variety of metals, machine parts, and broken-down machines. He also participates intuitively in designing and redesigning broken down and virtually unusable machines. Imperial writers like S. G. Barker and D. R. Wallace praised the Scottish mechanics in Indian jute mills, but ignored the informal work of the semi-apprenticed native workers. In local settings, however, the cultural "biographers" of jute, Mohanlal Gangopadhyay in his classic *asamāpta chaṭābda*

[7] "Ordinary routine maintenance" is a euphemism for not upgrading machinery and depending on the mechanics to keep machines ticking. See Samita Sen, *Women and labour in colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 118; S. G. Barker, *Report on the Scientific and Technical Development of Jute Manufacturing Industry in Bengal with An Addenda on Jute, Its Scientific Nature and Information Relevant Hitherto* (Calcutta, 1935), 42; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking working-class history* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989); and Nilanjan Das, *Of Dust and Distress:* (Delhi: Indian Publishers' Distributors, 2004).

[8] Is this an example of subsistence capitalism? See Nilanjan Das, *Of dust and distress*.

[9] See Michael Burawoy and Joseph Blum, et. al., eds. *Global Ethnography: Forces, Connections, and Imaginations in a Postmodern World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000); also see Laura Bear, "'This Body is Our Body:' Viswakarma Puja, the Social Debts of Kinship and Theologies of Materiality in a Neo-Liberal Shipyard," in *Vital Relations: Kinship as a Critique of Modernity*, ed. Fenella Cannell and Susan McKinnon, 155-178 (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2013). See also ILO publications.

and Gorakhnath Mishra in his more recent *Jute: udyog evam shramik* give a sketchy sense of the "ground up" reality of jute mechanics and floor workers. They say that the body mechanic is "engineer-like"—a placeholder term for the machine operators, machinists, and repair-workers who have ensured the smooth "running" of the machines from the Scottish to the post-Independence periods.[10]

But the advent of neoliberal markets has put the body mechanic in a tight spot where he must contest for space with the "*ṭūṭā-fūṭā mekanik,*" or the fragmented mechanic of the utility and semi-automated worlds of cheap retail commodities and repair. Counter to the global perception of utility and semi- or automated retail as part of "flexible" market capitalism,[11] the version that exists in the global South is a source of constant repair and reuse of what in organized capitalism is known as "junk."[12] The tension between the body mechanic and the fragmented mechanic is therefore a dynamic one.

Based on the background of the body mechanic and his relationship to the community through a variety of non-industrial links, the question arises how do the artisanal forms of work and practices of the body mechanic inform the world of work in contemporary capitalism? And how do these analog habits shape the 'community' of repair practices in general? Looking at the composition of the body mechanic in the local and global contexts through existing and new ethnographies, the chapter analyzes the figure of the body mechanic and his relationship to that space. The chapter shows how the body mechanic envisions a world where the fragmented mechanic will be adopted, despite the ubiquity of globalization and cheap retail.

Methodology: Global or local ethnography of the mechanic?

In the context of the emerging critical discussion about mechanics, repair, and global networks, the chapter briefly draws on the notion of the "fragmented mechanic" of semi-automatic and other forms of semi-analog technologies, locally known as *ṭūṭā-fūṭā mekanik*. The dilemma this classification poses is: shall we treat the 'fragmented' mechanic as part of the discourse of the global or the local mechanic? The question is relevant because the figure of the mechanic in "global ethnography" is itself believed to be automatically fragmented. Recently, it has become the object of sociological attention, especially in Michael Burawoy and Joseph Blum's *Global Ethnography* (2000).[13] In the sociological imagination, the mechanic in the global context needs

[10] See Leela Fernandes, *Producing Workers: The Politics of Gender, Class, and Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997). The other player in the Indian jute mills was the *sardar*, or loosely, the Indian jobber, who has occupied more space in the history of the jute industry from the work of imperial historians to postcolonial critics as well as jute biographers. But as Fernandes notes, in the post-Independence era, the *sardars* have increasingly reinvented their roles as mechanics, as recruitment patterns have drastically changed since the colonial times. See also Amiya Kumar Bagchi, *Capital and labour redefined: India and the third world* (London: Anthem, 2002), 194.

[11] See Rick Baldoz, Charles Koeber, and Philip Kraft, eds., *The Critical Study of Work: Labor, Technology, and Global Production* (Temple University Press, 2001).

[12] The history of junk in organized capitalism is a contested one. Junk is unusable material, waste, and ecologically degrading.

[13] Burawoy and Blum, *Global Ethnography.* Also see Paul Dimaggio and Walter Powell, "The Iron Case Revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields," *American Sociological Review*, 47 (1983): 147-60.

to be seen in a variety of contexts in contemporary capitalisms.[14] The sites of these kinds of sociological research are the newly recruited former Eastern Bloc countries in the European Union and the industrialized and "individualized" economies in the West.[15]

In the above context, the mechanic is already a fragmented and redundant figure, living between jobs, despite decades of experience in his trade. The mechanic is a mere human handler, who will be made redundant inevitably because of capitalism's need to produce junk and move on to new modes of forms and commodity-production. This emergent scenario is an acknowledgment of the shift within the economies and societies in transition within a broadly construed notion of "globalization," a phenomenon that has been criticized for being predominantly Euro-American.[16] Thus, in Euro-American "global ethnography," mechanics in the West are construed as "utility workers," declassified, reclassified, and ultimately, disposable. Concomitantly, the individual and collective sites of the mechanics' work—industrial machinery—are relegated to the archives of "industrial memory." Industrial memory unleashes a new creativity among the general populace, who reinvent junk as artefact in spaces like Maker Faire, Do-It-Yourself hobbyists' garage spaces, and organized and specialized communities of recycling and "freecycling." Notably, these latter-day reinventions are often imagined in their "spectacle" forms or corporatized as a new service industry that requires specialization in effluent and recycling management, rather than as everyday forms of livelihood in connection with larger communities directly dependent on survival.[17]

Contrary to the general condition of deskilling, reskilling, declassification, and archiving of the mechanic's analog machinery for reinvention of leisure activities, hobbies, and organized forms of recycling in the loosely designated "West," in the global South, the mechanic and his analog machinery have a different fate. Not only is the mechanic not disposable in the latter world, his relationship to "use" and "reuse" is extensively connected to the livelihood of "repair" of semi-industrial, industrial, and everyday commodities for reuse by large populations. Connecting livelihood to repair automatically qualifies the community of repair workers to be directly related to the community at large.

Concomitantly, as the ethnography of analog repair workers in South Asia (India) discussed below demonstrates, the opposition between the body mechanic and the fragmented mechanic, however sharp in the "global" context, appears increasingly blurred in the context of repair

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[14] Iain Boal, "Specters of Malthus: Scarcity, Poverty, Apocalypse: Iain Boal in conversation with David Martinez." *Counterpunch*, September 11, 2007. http://www.counterpunch.org/boal09112007.html

[15] See Burawoy and Blum, *Global Ethnography*.

[16] One of the lesser studied forms of globalization in South Asia is Sharad Chari's notion of the "decentralized factory" in *Fraternal Capital: Peasant-Workers, Self-Made Men, and Globalization in Provincial India* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2004) With the term "decentralized," Chari indicates the informality of a "factory town" such as Tiruppur, which stands as an example of globalization connected through by "radial roads from the countryside" (3), "bullock carts plying between firms" (19), etc. Chari calls attention to the phenomenon of "globalization of capital as a spatial process" thereby linking the global to the provincial through a clear articulation of the "politics of development" (33). Chari is ultimately interested in debunking the myth of undifferentiated "globalism" or the general idea of cosmopolitan globalization. Arjun Appadurai and Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay approach globalization as an infinitesimally local phenomenon.

[17] These are not the same as "horizontal" forms of "flexible specialization" based on "capacity contracting" prevalent in new economic policies in India during neo-liberalization of the economy since the 1990s. Instead, these have traces of artisanal forms, pasts, and rituals that are as varied as practices can be. See Sharad Chari, "A Worker Path to Capital?" in *Fraternal Capital*, 35-37.

communities as well as the community at large. The body mechanic demonstrates how the fragmented mechanic is increasingly adopted by the community's need for repair and reuse of junk—industrial, semi-industrial, and household. Here the distinction between global and local ethnography becomes important: while the mechanic and his analog machines are obsolete in the loosely designated "West," they are very relevant in so-called "nonelite global" contexts and communities.[18]

Having briefly introduced the work of the mechanic in the repair world in South Asia and the global context, the following ethnography is divided into two parts: the first part explores the spaces of the *kāmārshālā* or workshop in a jute mill in Kolkata; and the second part discusses the creation and work of the body mechanic in an existing *kāmārshālā*. The last section discusses the relationship between the body mechanic and the fragmented mechanic in the context of the *kāmārshālā* as well as other kinds of work outside the workshop. Together, these suggest the importance of the local as a tangible place in capitalist modes and global production.

Mapping an old *kāmārshālā* (the workshop) through ethnography

āpnār kal āpni bāchān (save your own works [usually "machine," but also machine works])
--signage in a jute mill in Kolkata

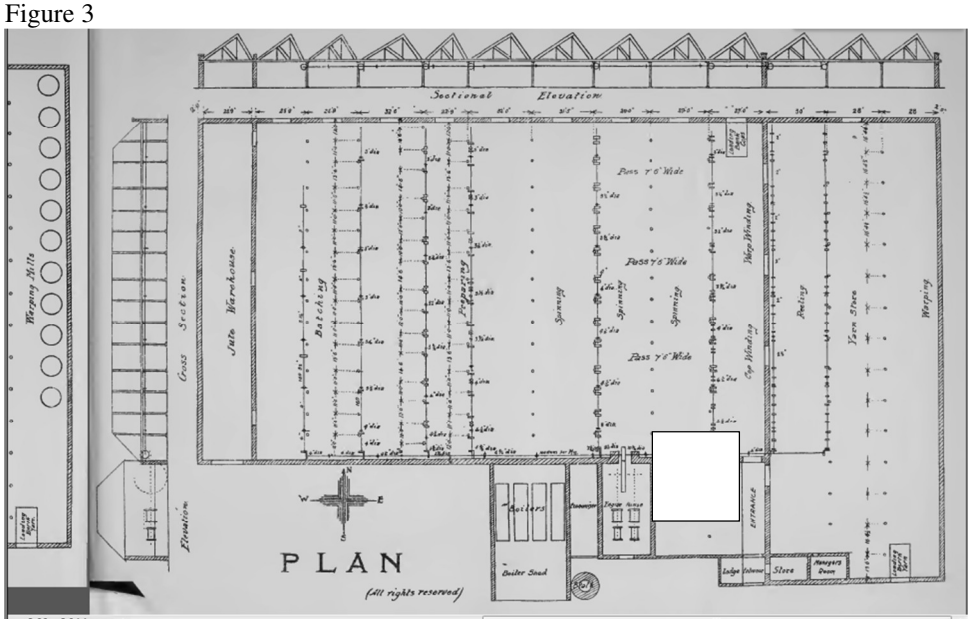
Mapping an old workshop requires access to machines, mechanics, repair-histories, as well as the rumors that circulated among the workers. These are usually intertwined and require deft guidance, because personal knowledge of each particular piece of metal and part is essential. It is noteworthy that though the spaces of a jute *kāmārshālā* may look disorganized, it is a fairly well-regulated place. Access is restricted for non-*kāmārshālā* workers. My access to the *kāmārshālā* was facilitated by the mill-side *mistrī*, Iqbal and a couple of other *jugāḍ* or helpers (temporary or "permanent"), with whom I hung out for more than two months prior to my visit to the *kāmārshālā*. Besides, I was already friendly with a Bengali mill-side lathe mechanic, so workshop mechanics were aware of my presence. Jute mills are heavily rumor-prone, as both ethnographic work and literary and cultural texts in Bengali, Hindi, Bhojpuri indicate. Rumors, as ethnographers and jute writers have suggested, determine how informal community knowledge is generated and circulated in older industrial neighborhoods in India.[19]

Despite its archaic structure and composition, and postimperial genealogies of analog machinery and Taylorist practices, the jute *kāmārshālā* is a modern place, as jute historians and industrial sociologists like D. R. Wallace, S. G. Barker, H. H. Carter, Charles Myers, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Arjan de Haan have often pointed out.[20] The *kāmārshālā* in this ethnography, in a medium-sized jute mill in Kolkata, has traces of the imperial *kāmārshālā,* envisioned by early technician-engineers like James Robertson as a total space where machines are both "made" and "remade" for both local and supra-local wants. In this *kāmārshālā*, the works extends to about three

[18] See previous chapter for a discussion of non-elite globalizations.
[19] See Kshiti Prasad Chattopadhyay, *A Socio-Economic Survey of Jute Labour* (Calcutta: Department of Social Work, Calcutta University, 1952). See also Mohanlal Gangopadhyay, *asamāpta chaṭābda* (*The incomplete century of jute*) (Kolkata: Grantha Prakash, 1369 [1963]); Gorakhnath Mishra, *Jute: udyog evam shramik (Jute: Entrepreneurship and Labor*) (Kankinada, West Bengal, 2010); and Samaresh Basu, *Jagaddal* (1966).
[20] See Wallace, *The Romance of Jute*; also see Chakrabarty, *Rethinking working-class history* and Cox, *Empire, industry, and class*.

quarters of an acre in area and is about two and a half stories tall, housing planted machinery—small, medium, and large.[21]

Figure 3



Drawn to 1/32nd =1 foot scale, the *kāmārshālā* or the mechanics' workshop (the square-shaped diagram at the bottom in white) is an integral part of a jute mill. Source: "Plan of Jute Mill: Showing arrangement of machinery and width of Passes," Leggatt, *Jute Spinning*, 8-9. Note the shed-system on top of this diagram. The mill in which the ethnography was done has a similar design and layout. The number of machinery varies.

Equally relevant, this *kāmārshālā,* where I met with at least twenty-three mechanics, has been halved as a result of reduction of mill and machinery size. The *kāmārshālā* is mainly peopled with rehired Bengali Hindu mechanics and Bihari Muslim mechanics and helpers or *jugāḍ*. The average age of the rehired mechanics, 80 percent of the total, is about 60 years. The average *kāmārshālā* work experience for most rehires is about 32 years—almost seven to eight years more than the average experience of workers on the floor of other departments.

The shrinkage mentioned above can be explained by the very slow phasing out of old machinery, known as "planned obsolescence" in industry lingo, over the last two decades or so.[22] Well-known machinery in the *kāmārshālā* include two Glaswegian crane shafts, one humongous American radial arm borer, six to seven original and hybrid master lathes, two to three small- to

[21] Wallace, *The Romance of Jute*; Thomas Woodhouse and Peter Kilgour, *Jute and Jute Spinning: Production of Fibre, Batching and Carding* (London: Macmillan, 1929) and *The Jute Industry: From Seed to Finished Cloth* (Library of Alexandria: 1921).

[22] See *Jute Chronicle, Vol. 1-2* (Calcutta: Indian Jute Mills Association, 1965-67) for a detailed picture of planned obsolescene in the jute industry. Also see Subimal Palit's essay on jute technology in the transitional periods during Independence in *Jute Industry: A Historical Perspective* (Kolkata: Firma KLM, 2007). See particularly IJMA meeting reports, 1961-62. IJMA meetings were focused on the scientific management of efficiency in an all-round manner. See *Jute and Gunny Review*, April 1961-October 1962, particularly the August 1961 issue, in which IJMA even advocates the reuse of old burlap for wrapping babies and domestic animals as well as for a wide array of other purposes. The jute industry has also diversified by moving into paper manufacture. Incidentally, handloom jute commodities included paper from the preindustrial days; the industrial diversification of jute into paper was mainly a post-Independence scheme.

medium-sized drillers, plating machines, welding booths, and hybrid cutting machines of various shapes and sizes.[23] Most machines are personalized with names like *phānsi kāth* (hanging stand), *gāch* (tree) drill, etc., lending the space an air of deep familiarity, memory, and history.

"The home is in the factory area": interconnectedness of work, family, and community among mechanics

The composition of the community of mechanics in a *kāmārshālā* and the interconnectedness of work, family, and community need mention. In *A Socio-economic Survey of Jute Labour* (1952), the social anthropologist Kshiti Prasad Chattopadhyay writes that the local and migrant populations of presumably "working-class" industrial origins that "eke out" a living in jute belong to a mish-mash of agrarian and artisanal populations. Thus, it is not surprising to find that the same populations have familial connections in rural, local, and supra-local recruitment groups, usually headed by the *sardār* (roughly, Indian jobber). For Chattopadhyay, as an anthropologist interested in ethnological studies of the familial roots of labor recruitment, these connections largely make up the "intermediary" groups, dependent on seasonal and other forms of work. In this specific context, Chattopadhyay acknowledges that, for a majority of jute workers, the "home is practically in the factory area." Such a phenomenon, as Chattopadhyay has argued persuasively, is caused by "affiliation" based on the "older pattern" joint families, prevalent in agrarian, semi-agrarian, artisanal, and semi-artisanal communities in India. So, familial and household links have had an impact on recruitment in something as secular as the factory workshop and the floor. It is worth mentioning that in Chattopadhyay's work, there is no indication that marriage links between families and communities are in any way determined by "prebourgeois" or "premodern" types. Chattopadhyay, on the contrary, is trying to show how the decision to migrate from the upcountry is often based on inter-familial links, a point that early agrarian labor migration historians and anthropologists too have made. Such forms of recruitment, as later commentators and unofficial cultural "biographers" of jute like Mohanlal Gangopadhyay in *asamāpta chaṭābda* (1963) and Gorakhnath Mishra in *jute: udyog evam shramik* (2010) have shown, have equally affected work in the "public" spaces of the works and the floor.

The relationship between recruitment, work, and family, and if I may add, the community at large, in post-Independence *kāmārshālā* today can be seen even in more qualified ways. For example, the shared nature of work and community of repair workers is expressed in the notion of "*milājulā kārīgarī*" (mixture of skills or mish-mash of skills), to borrow a term from Murarilal Tiwari, a self-styled engineer in an existing jute works in Kolkata. Further, the mish-mash nature of repair work and its relationship with the individual or "intermediate" workers may also be associated with everyday proverbs and linguistic associations. During my interactions in 2011 with Bengali mechanics in the *kāmārshālā*, a Bengali proverb often came up: *juto shelāi theke chaṇḍī pāṭh*, meaning "[everything] from mending shoes to chanting the mantra of Chaṇḍī (the household goddess of the famed 16th-century *Chaṇḍīmangal*, discussed in the previous chapter in relation to *pāṭ* in premodern rituals). The mechanic in this narrative does not engage in "multi-tasking" in the contemporary sense of work and organization,[24] but is involved in a near-total

[23] See Wallace, *The Romance of Jute* for a complete list of machines that mills brought. Also see Carter, *Jute and its manufacture*. See *Jute Chronicle* and *Jute and Gunny Review*Vol. 14, No. 7 (Calcutta: R. N. Dhandharia, 1962) for details about particular departments under repair schedules, especially after the 1950s and 1960s.
[24] See Kar and Lahiri, *Work-Study in jute and textiles* on scientific management and machines.

"reorganization" of work as something like "handiwork" with analog tools and parts. The tracing of handiwork in modern and global forms of work forms the essential link to imagining and performing a piece of work that runs counter to the dominant mode of "Taylorization" of the jute floor and works.[25] This is plainly evident when we see how often the mechanics' work today often entails a wild goose chase for obsolete pieces of metal to hammer and shape to "fit" the already beat-up machine.[26]

Figure 4

Left: a Bengali rehired retiree mechanic working on the master lathe; right: conveyor belts and large machinery in *kāmārshālā*; junk. Photos by author, 2011.

Envisioning, enactment, and entanglement: the making of the "*boḍi-mekanik*"

From the brief discussion above, it should be clear that the *kāmārshālā*, essentially a junk yard of the analog, is also a peculiar workplace with secular and non-secular roots and bindings around metals, parts, and junk. It equally constitutes a tangle of belief-systems, rituals, materials, and manifold forms of interaction to be practiced every day, as we will see below. It is not surprising therefore that the figure of the "body mechanic" is forged in the physical space of the *kāmārshālā*. This can be explained by showcasing individual and individuated interactions below through the ethnography of a body mechanic, Ratan-da, and several others in a jute mill in Kolkata.

Introducing Ratan-da: a body mechanic in a *kāmārshālā* in Kolkata

A Bengali mechanic, Ratan-da, who became my tour guide for about ten days in the *kāmārshālā*, undertook the task of familiarizing me with the world of repair work in a jute mill. The task was daunting, because he had to start somewhere in the huge pile of junk. In the absence of a system to be easily shared with strangers and observers, Ratan-da wanted to know if I was interested in counting the machines and usable parts. I explained I was less interested in counting machines and parts or even documenting the *kāmārshālā* than in his thoughts on the machines and the nature of work in that space. He began by showing me around the layout of the workshop, which

[25] Kar and Lahiri's *Work-study* explores jute mills based on based on "process layouts" and "motion economy" in the 1960s.

[26] Kar and Lahiri particularly oppose this practice. They propose a systematic organization of repair work if modernization is not possible.

had been more than halved since the 1980s. Then he said that all these machines are *māndhātār āmaler*, which may be translated as "anachronistic." I felt I had to ask the obvious question, why? Almost all the twenty-three mechanics, including a few helpers, said in unison, "*aisā hī hai/erokomi*" (This is what it's like.) This set the limit to the ethnography and interactions with the mechanics.

After a day of debriefing about the layout of the machines and the field of junk inside the workshop, it was time to get real. Conversations on work-shifts were piecemeal, so I had started to keep a tab on the types of machine parts that underwent the most repairs. It turned out that one of the most common parts for repair in a general workshop is the pinion.

Ratan-da confirmed that the pinion, upon which rotation and a variety of cyclical motion depends, is perhaps the most worked upon part in a *kāmārshālā*. I asked, why?

> *ekhāne shob hoy—puro mill ekhāne tairi hoy*.
> (Everything happens here. The entire mill is made here.)

Or more like "remade." On further inspection, a Glaswegian machine—a crane shaft—was doing *tāl bhānga* (break the tilt), as Ratan-da's *jugāḍ* or helper pointed out. The helper has been at this specialized work for more than fifteen years; he explains:

> *kāmārshālā ek jaisā nahīn hai.*
> (The workshop is not the same everywhere [meaning in all jute mills.])

The helper wanted me to comprehend that even though everything looks the same in each foundry, there is hardly any similarity between one kind of cutting and the other. Each cutting is specialized, even though pinion shapes and sizes do not vary a great deal. Specialized treatment of metal parts resonates with third-party repair specialists' emphasis on specialized repair-functions.[27] For Ratan-da, the ability to intuit how much cutting is necessary without precision instruments makes the work of cutting something demanding the utmost attention.

> *miliye dite hobe.*
> (you have to make it fit.)

Therefore, the cutting of each machine part requires modes of attention and envisioning of the total machine even if the total machine is not being worked upon directly, as is often the case. The helper gives yet another example of the cutting of the "*chābi ghāṭ*" or "key slot" of a pinion. When each pinion undergoes plating or cutting, the cutter or the plating operator must recognize the pinion by its appearance and probable location in the larger machine design. It is in this specific context that Ratan-da and his *jugāḍ* are exemplifying the phenomenon of the total mechanic—a local figure connected to work on the machine and machine parts for repair and

[27] For example, see Palit, *Jute Industry* for discussions on technological changes in jute processing since Independence. Palit emphasizes the importance of third-party repair specialization by companies such as Lagan Engineering Works. Lagan came into operation as a subsidiary of after James Mackie of Belfast, continued their operations until 1978 when the Government of India (GOI) took over. In 1987, the company became a fully owned subsidiary of Bharat Udyog Nigam Limited (BBUNL) under the Ministry of Heavy Industries, GOI and has thus become a Central Public Sector Undertaking (CPSU). Lagan was disinvested in 2000 and has now become Lagan Engineering Company Limited.

maintenance as a whole. This means that even if a mechanic is working on a small pinion, he must envision the entire machine or at least a large part of the machine to be effectively hand-crafting the object to restore its proper function.

"We are not engineers": the case of the body mechanic's apprenticeship

The above situation involving the notion of the total mechanic still does not resolve the question, "how many design and drawing functions does each *mistrī* know?" After all, imperial foundries made machine parts as well as machines, as D. R. Wallace shows in the case of the Angus Jute Mill. Have mechanics lost that art altogether as a result of dwindling parts and the dilapidated nature of the machine workshop itself? Do they draw designs or only intuit or both? I ask,

> *āpni machine design jānen?*
> (Do you know machine design?)
>
> *Machine khule joṛā lāgiye debo—dekhe bole dite pārbo kothāy ki lāgbe—tobe āmrā engineer noi*
> (We can take a machine apart and put it back together again—we can tell what parts are needed—but we are not engineers.)

As several jute commentators have pointed out—S. G. Barker, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Leela Fernandes and others—jute workers and mechanics are mainly unapprenticed and, in some cases, semi-apprenticed. The critical point of distinction between the body mechanic and the engineer is that the body mechanic is unschooled and in most cases, semi-apprenticed[28] and has learned the work through familial and other community ties. Except for the workshop manager, none of the mechanics in the workshop has learned the work on his own; all were semi-apprenticed to someone they knew in their early boyhood or as a young adult.

Learning the use of tools, techniques, and work involves following a regimen that is not often found in textbooks, as the workshop does not have a library. Most importantly, workers do not have access to the "staff" quarter library at the other end of the mill. The restricted access is mainly because of the long tradition of class and status boundaries between the "engineers" and the "engineer-like" mechanics. It is noteworthy that most engineers in jute mills do not hold a four year bachelor's degree in engineering or a specialized area, but have some form of technical diploma from the Jute Technological Institute in Kolkata. Mechanics, as a result, have traditionally depended on everyday conversations, ritual associations, and simply learning the trade, if they felt they had a "thing" for it.

What emerges from such kinds of localized semi-apprenticeship systems and practices is that while the system follows a *guru-shishya paramparā* or an *ustād-shāgird* tradition, the *ustād* is not a higher-up manager, but a *mistrī* or mechanic himself, who is technically a wage worker. "Class" boundaries are largely absent—the critical thing is to "follow" the guru or the *ustād*, so that one can learn hands-on. Moral and ethical worlds are tightly knit in such forms of work because of the absence of a top-down approach to apprenticeship, knowledge-sharing, and

[28] On the nature and question of the modern dynamics of apprenticeship and its relationship with "situated learning" in industrialized countries, see Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Also see Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practce: Learning, Doing, and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

learning.[29] Thus, caste, religion, and community "differences" are entangled in ethnoreligious and ethnocultrual terms. Ratan-da confirms that he learned his work from a "Mohammedan" (Muslim) *mistrī*, who he followed for nearly a year back in the early 1970s. His uncle had given a verbal referral or "character certificate" to his friend, the senior "Mohammedan" mechanic. This is also yet another instance of the entrenched *sardāri* style system, where word of mouth matters a great deal in labor recruitment in industrial capitalism, early through late.

"Engineer-like" body mechanics: the case of the mechanic as "worldmaker" a.k.a. *Visvakarma*

While the semi-apprenticeship practices of the mechanic have been discussed in limited ways in jute stories (history, ethnology, and literary works), the case of the "engineer-like" mechanic as an embodiment of the "ritual work of worldmaking" has been largely ignored. Jute critics and historians have mentioned the public or *baroārī* festival of the "worldmaker god" Visvakarma. For example, both Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Rethinking Working-class History* (1989) and Leela Fernandes in *Producing Workers* (1997) have presented Visvakarma as a representation of difference based on class and gender. But Visvakarma is more than a representation of difference embodying the two kinds of capitalist work—Western (where there is no Visvakarma, only secular rituals of absence and presence of labor) and non-Western (where work is both secular, as in the wage form, and a mantric ritual, as in worshipping metals and metal work literally every day).

Once again, Ratan-da's work in the workshop provides a good opportunity to find out how two seemingly incommensurable positions overlap.

Though Ratan-da says that neither he nor his colleagues are engineers who can boast formal degrees or even a passage through a formal apprenticeship system, he is comfortable discussing design works as part of his "training" in envisioning the total machine. Besides, the mechanic's mantra is trial and error—and the mechanic will not hesitate to try out. Trial and error in the mechanic's world has a powerful ritual context, especially since the body mechanic is akin to the Hindu engineer/architect god, Visvakarma, whose presence is found in the Puranas as well as the

[29] See Richard Biernacki, *The Fabrication of Labor: Germany and Britain, 1640-1914* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), especially his discussion of the cultural difference in adjustment to machine cultures in Europe from the 17th through the early 19th centuries. Apprenticeship systems were particularly important developments in such changing technological cultures. In the Indian case, European observers of Indian industry seemingly replaced the apprenticeship system with a *mā-bāp* (parental despotism) practice, seen as the reason for the success of managers in India—but such observers do not explain why the workers would conjure up a *mā-bāp* relationship in their minds. Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Rethinking Working-Class History* has erroneously read the *mā-bāp* phenomenon as a one-sided parental despotism maintaining the *status quo* in the Indian mills. Also see Cox, 5-6, in which the expression is also used for trade unions. Local surveyors and commentators, however, have long observed, contrary to Chakrabarty's (and Cox's) claims, that *mā-bāp* is based on the notion of the milk of human kindness, which does not so much indicate the inherent "difference" between Europe and India as suggest that the Europeans adapted to local forms of authority and exchange. K. P. Chattopadhyay's detailed picture of familial relationships within a non-normative family set-up provides a clear context for the *mā-bāp* phenomenon. Amiya Bagchi in *Capital and Labour Redefined* makes a pointed critique of *mā-bāp* as representation of difference; he suggests instead that it is part of the technique of resistance. Bagchi's reading is akin to James Scott's argument in *Weapons of The Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

16th century Bengali *mangalkābya*s such as *Manasā mangal*. The body mechanic believes that his own work belongs to Visvakarma's larger work of creation; hence the critical part of the ritual is to worship not only the god, but also the tools that he holds for making the world, including *hātuṛi* (hammer) and *chheni* (chisel)—tools of handicraft and the analog. The Visvakarma worship (*pūjo* in Bangla, *pūjā* in Hindi/Bhojpuri) occurs in the early to mid-fall, usually the second or the third week of September of each year; however, the festoons from the previous year's Visvakarma *pūjo* as well as other pan-Hindu and local gods and goddesses, such as Ganesha, are evident in daily worship. This is comparable to the performance of *pānchāli* and other domestic rituals done by women. Both forms of worship are akin to rituals mentioned in the *mangalkābya*, some of which involve eating and weaving *pāṭ,* as discussed in Chapter 1 (Vernacular *pāṭ*).

Let me now discuss rituals in "working-class" neighborhoods. A vague religiosity is often attributed to the relationship between ritual and work, but in reality, the act and performance of ritual itself takes center stage, often with no hidden or larger meaning behind the scenes. Understanding the material culture of ritual helps us avoid over-determining ritual-work as part of an arcane religiosity, as often done by postcolonial critics.

Following Dipesh Chakrabarty and Leela Fernandes, Laura Bear has recognized the ritual worship of Visvakarma as a key part of the formulation of the mechanic's lifeworld in metal-work and workshops in India. In her paper on Bengali ship workers constructing a Norwegian ice-class steel ship in Kolkata, Bear argues that Visvakarma (worshipped also in his domestic form in *rānnā pujo* or "cooking puja") can be seen supporting the worker's sense of self and identity both at work and at home.[30] Bear mentions the workers' belief that *Visvakarma pūjo* and *rānnā pūjo* are two sides of the same story: men's work/machine and tool puja celebrates the creation myth *a la* Visvakarma and women's cooking puja celebrates the snake goddess Manasa in the medieval *Manasā mangal* story.[31] But while Bear identifies the purpose of both the rituals as deriving a certain kind of productive power that is born of *bishāsh* (trust) rather than monetary and "material" exchanges alone, she misses the full meaning of the actual act in each of the ritual forms from which the desired *shakti* (power) for men and women is derived. The ritual act in women's *rānnā pūjo* involves the abandonment of all old (metal) utensils for cooking, which is done with *tāl gācher chhāl* (the branch of a date palm tree) instead. Ritual purity must be observed—I would like to point out the importance of ritual purity of the *pāṭ sāṛi* here as well—though there are ways to make up for minute lapses in such observances. On the other hand, Visvakarma puja is all about metals; as noted earlier, hammers, chisels, and other tools are worshipped during the puja. Worshipping the tool invests meaning in a material that is bounded by the ritual itself.

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[30] Laura Bear, "'This Body is Our Body:' Viswakarma Puja, the Social Debts of Kinship and Theologies of Materiality in a Neo-Liberal Shipyard," in *Vital Relations: Kinship as a Critique of Modernity*, ed. Fenella Cannell and Susan McKinnon, 155-178 (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2013).

[31] In the *Manasā mangal*, a folk-ballad involving the wooing of Chānd sadāgar (Chand the merchant), a Siva worshipper, by Manasa, the snake goddess, Visvakarma appears as the architect of an iron palace that Chānd sadāgar wants to build to save his last son, Lakhindar, from being bitten by snakes on his wedding day. Visvakarma builds an invincible fortress but cannot seal the entire structure off—he has to leave one tiny hole for the system to "breathe." Manasa sends in her snake to kill Lakhindar, but Behula, the chaste wife, brings her husband from the realm of the dead with her piety. The point of this story is that even Visvakarma, the creator of the universe, is not infallible.

Bear tears the term *bishāsh* away from its thoroughly everyday meaning, denoting trust of a purely everyday ritual nature. Bear claims that such rituals, especially for women, carry the significance of the "flow of life." But it may not be productive to generalize ritual under the rubric of "flow of life" or *shakti* or even *bishāsh,* as this flow or power or trust has no life outside ritual as such.[32] This is particularly relevant because Bear uses ritual productivity to measure actual life at work in the next section of her essay. Ritual is a stand-alone thing, an act that begins and ends in its own performance. Of course, ritual has a social life, because offerings to idols and gods are made as part of personal and community habits and expectations of well-being.[33] But to trace the ritual's productive powers to actual performance in the field of modern work, as Bear suggests with the phrase "the *shakti* that transfers from men to the ship," is a bit too instrumental.

Compared to those of earlier and later critics of rituals, worship, and social/community life in industrial neighborhoods, my claim in the body mechanic formulation and its concomitant relationship to the deity of Visvakarma (and *rānnā pūjo*, by extension) in the jute neighborhoods is more diffuse. There are two reasons for this. First, it has been customary among imperial and postcolonial critics alike to look at the "event" of a puja to concretely establish the actual "ritual" dependence of individuals in work-life and other social and community rituals as markers of difference. This usually leads them to associate rituals with the community and particular forms of work. The phenomenon is not different from identifying caste with occupations, and other forms of organization based on typologies alone.[34] Further, connecting events and rituals with particular forms of work identity usually misses the everyday mundane relations of work with ritual, without any scope for religiosity as such. Those relations, I would argue, are instead more concretely associated with ritual proverbs, *pānchāli* reading, and rituals "meant" to ward off evil powers with no *actual bishāsh* or trust in its transitive powers necessarily beyond the performance of the saying or the ritual. It would be hard to show that Ratan-da actually believes that ritual prayers to Visvakarma or some other deity provides an extra layer of security while

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[32] In fact, such forms of "ritual" existence are often connected to ethics and compassion (like the Bengali ritual of *brata* or vow taking by women in the domestic spaces). See June McDaniel, *Making Virtuous Daughters and Wives: An Introduction to Women's Brata Rituals in Bengali Folk Religion* (Albany: State University of New York, 2003). Also see, Mary McGee, *feasting and fasting: The Vrata Tradition and its Significance for Hindu Women* (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1987).

[33] For this to make more sense, one would have to enter the archaeology of the small deities of localized rituals. See particularly, Selva J. Raj and William P. Harman, "Introduction: The Deal with Deities—Ways Vows Work in South Asia" in *The Deal with Deities* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006) for a comparative study of religious spaces, deities, and beliefs (Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, etc.) Raj and Harman discuss the fallacy of imagining religiosity (or "vows") as internal experience; instead, they wish to find expressions and articulations of the internal experience in a public space, including drawing on everyday economics like "down payment" investment," etc. They critique the overwrought relationship between public and private religion (dismantling the Weberian notion of private religious experience), while focusing on the actual practices of rituals often made through everyday social practices. This is just one example of a reading which, contrary to Bear's, is more interested in "displays" that are not laden with deep meanings but are forms of interactions—often without the involvement of the priest or the official religious figurehead. And yet, the binding nature of the vow or the display is connected to one's personal way of life and work. Raj and Harman cite several other studies to show how marginalized groups such as ascetics, women, and prostitutes often carry out their vows without official sanction. Marginalized members of the Hindu and Muslim communities have similar practices in places of work because of the blurring of the boundary between the home and the workplace (remember Chattopadhyay's "home is in the factory area" comment).

[34] See Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Tribes of Eastern Bengal*; Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*; and Ray, "Struggling against Dundee," 105.

doing lathe work or some other metal cutting work in precarious scenarios. But even if he did, it would still be beside the point, because how can the ethnographer be privy to that kind of belief?

Perhaps more to the point, forms of belief are not always manifest in a community puja as such, but are diffused throughout the seasons and are enacted and performed routinely. Putting these together, I am therefore less interested in a particular moment of worship and celebration than in the everyday mode of work forms that show traces of Visvakarma in proverbs, without attempting to delve into hidden meanings. Ratan-da, the mechanic in the Kolkata mill, helps me out here. As mentioned earlier, he has a Bengali proverb to support his claim about the nature of work he performs everyday:

> *"juto shelāi theke chaṇḍī pāṭh" korte hoy*
> (we do everything from mending our shoes to chanting the mantra of Chaṇḍī)

The proverb means here that you need to know everything about your work, from the *mantra* to the actual doing of it. We may recall from the previous chapter on vernacular *pāṭ* works that this Bengali proverb is associated with the work of the handloom, the household, and the local. The mechanic is known to do everything from menial work, such as mending a broken shoe, to the ritual act of chanting the *mantra* of Chaṇḍī. This capacity to switch from one mode to the other demands an understanding of three modes—menial, abstract, and the spiritual. The relatively blurred boundaries between these three categories often make it hard to figure out the exact meaning of work beyond the category of "the familiar" among communities that have been immersed in tradition, industry, and ritual forms of life over a considerable period of time.[35]

Further, in Ratan-da's case, the ritualistic interactions between the three categories may be identified as the trigger for the optimism evident in his citation of the ritual proverb as well as the work of the "engineer-like" functions he performs. After all, Ratan-da, who is the master cutter on the borer and the plating machine (switching from one family of cutting to another is not uncommon in a foundry), assumes collective identity as he narrates how he is capable of assembling and disassembling a machine for repair work. In the case of the pinion and envisioning of the machine design, he indicates he is comfortable with cutting individual pinions and knowing where they will ultimately go. For mechanics like Ratan-da, degrees of familiarization transform pieces of cogs and wheels made of heavy gauge steel, establishing specific relations with the self, family, and community. Repair on such contraptions automatically implies handiwork of some sort, which brings the artisanal element in the industrial setting alive.

However, the totality of work or repair work—or at least the everyday perception of it—seems to be ruptured with the appearance of a different kind of mechanic in the urban and semi-urban neighborhoods in India. They are known as *ṭūṭā-fūṭā mekanik* or "fragmented mechanics," and, despite their shared faith in local rituals and deities, threaten the older mechanics.

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[35] Literary and cultural texts explore the work of such communities in detail: see Gangopadhyay, *asamāpta chaṭābda*; Basu, *Jagaddal*; and Gopal Prasad, *chaṭkalia dohe*, 1978.
[35] This is quite clearly a question of identity. See Sen, *Women and labor in colonial India.*

The case of the fragmented mechanic and the threat to the "worldmaking" of the body mechanic

Envisioning totality is encapsulated by intuition, nature, and rituals—this marks the difference between Ratan-da as *boḍi-mekanik* and the fabled and rumored *ṭūṭā-fūṭā mekanik* (fragmented mechanic), who is yet to arrive or may already have arrived on the scene with the introduction of cheap China-looms in jute and other factories since the late 1990s and early 2000s in India. Repairing semi-automatic consoles requires a different set of skills, which practically no one in the old factory works currently has.

But before we can arrive at the fragmented mechanic, a deskilled worker, and a lost world of what in Western Do-It-Yourself (DIY) hobbyists' contexts and practices would be dubbed as "old world charm," we need to hear a little bit more about how Ratan-da is trying to problematize the category of the fragmented mechanic in light of what he knows best: the analog mechanic's "engineer-like" techniques of putting things back together again. According to Ratan-da, the body mechanic is not entirely limited to the specialized space of the industrial works alone. Far from it, the body mechanic is ubiquitous in the local forms of life, typical of community work and worker.[36]

Resolving the tension between the two types of mechanic: extended family of the body mechanic

Ratan-da, in a rush of optimism, wonders, how long, as a singular category, the *ṭūṭā-fūṭā mekanik* will be able to endure the abstraction of piecemeal and fragmented repair work, where the *mistrī* will not be able to "see" the work as well as the works in totality.

Ratan-da carefully founds his logic of how the *ṭūṭā-fūṭā mekanik* would be adopted by the philosophy of the body mechanic at work through the logic of an extended family of repair-mechanics working in the semi-formal and informal economy in the neighborhood. This is visible in a horde of other kinds of repair-work on the "outside," characterizing the life of the household, *pāṛā/mohallā* (neighborhood or locality). As examples, Ratan-da cites the repair-mechanics of manual, semi-automatic, and automatic household appliances from broken mixer-grinders to color television sets that have set up micro-repair shops in his *pāṛā* in Nawadapara on the south-eastern flanks of the mill since the 1980s or so.[37] Having lived in the same locality in

[36] See Martin Carnoy, "The new family and flexible work" and "Redefining the community in a flexible economy" in *Sustaining the new economy: work, family, and community in the information age* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2002), 105-189 and 190-218. Carnoy, paying his intellectual debt to Manuel Castells (*The information age*), discusses the new forms of work and the economy, especially in the context of globalization. While Carnoy's field is the United States and the other developing nations' perception of the community, his work tries to lay the foundation of inflexibility. According to him, the communities today will need better infrastructure for globalization. Those with problematic infrastructure will generate "conflict" and be unsustainable. Carnoy says, "Communities reconstruct social integration in response to new conditions in the workplace and the family, a process that is worked out through political conflict" (193). The relationship between community, infrastructure, and politics in the communities in the global South is not based on the idea of "integration" but more on the idea of sharing as we have seen above. The community continues to survive and make its way through the same "information" age in this manner.

[37] For a more extensive analysis of the subject (though not exclusively dealing with the community, but with a subalternized culture of 'informals'), see Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural dimensions of globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); also see Kum-Kum Bhavnani, John Foran, Priya A. Kurian, and Debashish Munshi, eds., *On the edges of development: cultural interventions* (New York: Routledge,

the 1980s and 1990s, I knew they existed. These micro-shops thrive all over the city of Kolkata, especially concentrated in socioeconomically disadvantaged pockets. This is not the place to survey the existence of informal household appliances and their repair genealogies, but I would like to showcase one slice of that genealogy to help us situate better the steps in the body mechanic argument above.

Hearing Ratan-da speak about the body mechanic so convincingly, I stopped visiting the mill for about a week. I decided to confirm Ratan-da's idea of the extended family of the body mechanic before returning to the jute works again. Among other things, I visited one of our old television mechanics, Shahid, who used to be the on-call mechanic for fixing our television set when I was living in the same neighborhood in the 1980s and 1990s. Shahid, who has upgraded into computer hardware repair now, used to make a living out of repairing old television sets—a fallout of the flooding of the television and electronic media market since the 1980s. Of the scores of TV repair-mechanics in the locality, Shahid, one of the sons of a jute worker in the batching department, had made a strong reputation for himself at the time. Shahid's clients extended well beyond the micro-*mohallā* and the *galli* (narrow bye-lane) in the jute bazaar locality to include the circles of the central repair-bazaar mechanics in the Chandni Chowk area, a heavily congested neighborhood along Lenin Sarani near Dharamtala in the heart of Kolkata. Chandni Chowk is also the place to find used and new electronics audio, video, and computer-related consumer items, contraband stuff, and a wholesale market for electronics assembly parts. Shahid's background and achievements easily qualify him as a reliable interlocutor in this field.

Shahid, I learned, never has and still does not replace and "repair" assemblies and circuits by using a sensor arm or replacing entire printed circuit boards (PCBs), but works on individual sites (of the PCB) with soldering irons and solder, common methods of repair in the electronic DIY work of hobbyists. This kind of work requires a deliberate dismantling of ICs, capacitors, transistors, and a thorough visualization and re-visualization of a copper-clad PCB. This is necessary to be at the cutting edge of the work. The advantage of such kinds of micro-repair is that costs can be kept down, as replacement of entire PCBs is expensive and often costs nearly as much as the unit itself. In micro-repair processes of PCBs, therefore, each part is hand-tested, crafted, and fixed as per circuitry needs and requirements. Technologically, this method is different from "wire" technology in electronics, based on the "single-capacitor" method. Shahid says,

> *andāz zarūri hai. dekhne kā kāydā honā chāhiye*.
> (Intuition/gauging/discerning is essential. One needs techniques of seeing.)

The "ways of seeing" and discerning a TV or computer motherboard circuitry is admittedly different from seeing pinions on clunkers like the *hāti kal* or the jute softening machine or mechanical processing machines in jute factories. Most importantly, a TV repair mechanic needs some form of technical certification that can be costly. But what is common to both kinds of repair work—regardless of apprenticeship and training methods—is the mode of attention as well as the envisioning of the individual and micro-site(s). In both the repair cases—pinion repair to PCB or IC—a large enough field to include a "total" view regardless of the manifold

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2009) and Partha Chatterjee, *The politics of the governed* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). Chatterjee discusses "community institutions" that he identifies as "political society" (because as members of (minority) communities, most members continue to speak within the community.

ruptures in the work itself is necessary. In the case of the PCB repair, it would be a qualitatively different experience if the repair-worker merely disassembled the circuit board and replaced it with a similar working board. According to Shahid, third-party repair units engage in such kinds of repair. He thinks that such forms of replacement are expensive for the customer, though *mālāmāl* (loaded) customers might prefer such kinds of repair. But most importantly, for Shahid, it is "lazy" work, as it does not sufficiently show one's capacity and wizardry with a difficult, obstinate, inoperable, and near-impossible-to-repair circuit board. For Shahid, such challenges make up the stuff of

> *zindagī kā kām*
> (life's work)

In conclusion, Shahid's opinion of his own work echoes that of Ratan-da's and the many other mechanics in the *kāmārshālā* for whom each hammering, cutting, chiseling, and many other forms of "mechanical" and repetitive work count as expressions of one's life's work too. The proverb *juto shelāi theke chanḍī pāṭh* ("everything from mending shoes to chanting the mantra of Chanḍī") begins to represent the *bāromāsyā* (twelve month cycle of stories) of a *mistrī*'s everyday life. We can see how analog habits have continued to inform the repair work of jute as well as non-jute repair communities in the surrounding neighborhoods.

Conclusion: local or nothing

It seems that body mechanics—both industrial and household *mistrī*s—exist in large numbers in the sub-urban jute locality and other sub-urban industrial and non-industrial areas of Kolkata. As indicated above, they share some kinship with DIY hobbyists engaged in weekend projects or third-party repair units in the global community. While the *kāmārshālā mistrī* is more embedded in the history of organized capitalism, the local household *mistrī* straddles the murky world of informal capitalism. The latter, especially, populate the larger cross-section of the local bazaars in India today, and without them large bodies of people living as day- and wage-laborers as well as low-income individuals and families would not be able to reuse many kinds of essential appliances, from the television set to the electric fan.

But a word of caution must follow in situating micro-repair works beyond their immediate local scope. There is no doubt that they exist because individuals turn a hobby or a knack or familial/generational knowledge into a livelihood. This is true of the industrial as well as the contract and informal mechanic today. And yet they are not the same as DIY enthusiasts we encounter in the Western context. There are structural differences between the two, as most DIY enthusiasts usually have day jobs, though a slim percentage of DIYers turn their hobbies into their actual day jobs. Secondly, they differ from the third-party repair workshops that multinational consumer companies use. Multinational companies consider the existing or future labor and service warranty on items as void if those items are repaired by the "local" *mistrī.* As we have seen especially in Shahid's case, this creates an internal hierarchy based on status of work and opportunities.

We can finally ask, do semi-formal and informal repair works create the counterworks to the capitalist myth of "seamless production?" This question takes us to the next chapter, where we will examine the repair-work of a softening machine, responsible for proper fiber treatment in global production. The importance of fiber treatment is that unbroken yarn with good tensile

strength is critical to both profits and regular wages, and yet, machines are mostly old, breaking down too often for anyone's good. We can conclude that work-functions in global production are anything but seamless without the contingency of human interactions and interventions.

Chapter 3
Inside the elephant machine: "*ṭuṭā sutā*" and the work of ethics

A machine under repair is no longer an instrument of labor, but its material. Work is no longer done with it but upon it, in order to patch up its use value.

Karl Marx, "Constant Capital and Variable Capital," *Capital I*[1]

Any patchwork would be grotesque.

Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*[2]

Introduction: *masīn ke andar se* (from inside the machine): the foundations of contingency

Though the Indian factory system could be broadly classified as Taylorist, post-Fordist, and globalized—in that order—such categories are not entirely functionalist and hierarchical.[3] They are dependent on familial and material knowledge of raw materials like jute fibers and especially, yarn processing, and their impact on semi-apprenticeships, repair-knowledge, and global work. This mixture of knowledge forms—reminiscent of *milājulā kārīgarī* or a mish-mash of work and recruitment types (permanent, temporary, shared, and contract), as discussed in Chapter 2 on the foundational logic of repair work in workshops—often makes the work of tracing the relationship between material culture and ethics a challenge.

This chapter investigates a relatively less studied practice of semi-apprenticed work, namely patchwork and "repair" work in global textile and industrial cultures. The chapter asks: what relationships are possible between semi-apprenticed work, contingency, and ethics, especially in light of repair-knowledge in contemporary capitalism? Contingency in global work simply means that even if we are prepared to call some forms of economic activity "productive work" and others as preparations for productive work, the boundaries between the two are often blurred,

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[1] Trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), 312.
[2] Trans. Catherine Porter (Harvard University Press, 1993), 6.
[3] Modern scientific management began in a foundry. It was a foundry in Bethlehem Steel, Pennsylvania which led Frederick Taylor in the 1890s to come up with the core idea of modern scientific management—motion and time economy. In the 1950 and 1960s, Indian scientific management textbooks made elaborate applications of the same techniques on the floor. One example is S. N. Kar and S. K. Lahiri, *Work-study in Jute Textiles* (Calcutta: Book Society of India, 1964). In *Mindless: Why Smarter Machines are Making Dumber Humans* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), Simon Head discusses how industrial warehousing techniques are totally dependent on motion technologies. The difference between postindustrial/global warehousing and a post-imperial jute mill is one of scale and metrics, but it is not to be dismissed easily. Digital and analog machinery require different kinds of time-keeping and bodily and material relations. Both approximate, but it can be said that digital approximates in a binary or scientifically, while analog approximates algorithmically and experientially.
For a perspective on Western technology and human interaction, see Peter J. Ling, *America and the automobile: technology, reform and social change/1893-1923* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 146.
Recognizing the contingency of the community in old as well as new forms of capitalism is necessary to understand the "patterns of change," to quote Douglas Haynes, who has persuasively written on the histories of artisanal capitalism (based on cotton textiles) and its relationship to the informal economy in Western India. See Douglas Haynes, *Small town capitalism in Western India: artisans, merchants and the making of the informal economy,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), xii. Also see Geert de Neve, *The everyday politics of labour: working lives in India's informal economy* (Delhi: Social Science Press, 2005).

which brings in the contingent as an essential element in the production of knowledge about work. This knowledge, often derived from personal, familial, community, and even ritual sources, affects everyday practices of work.[4] Further, the deepening of the notion of work in its contingency, according to "global work"[5] theorists in contemporary sociology, cannot be simply relegated to secondary forms of work.[6] In other words, work on broken machines is not unproductive, but is connected to a complex field of physical activity, knowledge-circulation, interpersonal relations, and ritual beliefs and forms necessary to put things back together for global production. Often, these kinds of work are hidden from view because they are behind or under old and junk-like machines, which have been reused and repaired over considerable periods of time.

Unaware of scientific and theoretical debates on productive and unproductive work, the affects of global work, etc., Iqbal, one of several skilled mechanics or repair workers of analog machinery in a six-mile radius in the jute industrial area of Kolkata and one of the main interlocutors in this ethnography, gives us an accurate outline of what contingency means in the jute mill context. He says in Hindi, the story of "*kyā chaltā hai, kyā nahīn, aur kyon"* (what works, what does not, and why) needs a "running commentary" (Iqbal says this in English). Iqbal is referring to the common practice of radio and television commentary of professional games, mainly cricket, a postcolonial game, hugely popular in India.[7] According to Iqbal, to make any sense of everyday repair work, it is necessary to learn the day-to-day repair narratives. These are best communicated "*masīn ke andar se,*" from inside the machine or from the field of work itself.

The ethnographic work in this chapter on junk-like machinery has two parts. The first looks at repair of a softening machine, locally called the *hāti kal* (elephant machine) because of its size, and the second looks at repair of a tiny pinion. The macro-processes of repair are often dependent on micro-repair processes. The context of both repair works is provided by something

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[4] Looking at gender and work, for example, Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum have amply demonstrated in *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009) that the difference between productive and nonproductive work is over-estimated and has been derived from valorizing the factory-system as the only means of production. They provide a counterwork in the space of domesticity where class is forged through the culture of servitude. Servitude in the modern context means the transference nonproductive work to the socially disadvantaged, but culturally managed through middle-class families. These kinds of work—traditionally known as service—are productive as they involve labor markets, commodification, and ultimately, the creation of value.

[5] See ILO papers, 1980-2010. Three categories of reports are important: country-based reports; legal reforms reports; and social responsibility reports. Besides, occasional papers discuss a wide range of issues in men's, women's, and youth's work. Also, see "World of Work Report 2013: Repairing the economic and social fabric" (Geneva: ILO, 2013).

[6] In the history of global work, a broad and loose category, contingent work can mean job sharing, a combination of productive and unproductive work, and simply, work agreed upon by any number of employment agreements—from flexible to semi-flexible and "flexiplace" work, including "home work." In discussions of work and organization, such work may be conditioned by macro-organizational factors. What this simply means is wages and benefits will be "adjusted"—a euphemism for wage theft, in most cases. See Joseph J. Hurrell Jr., Lennart Levi, Lawrence R. Murphy, and Steven L. Sauter, *Macro-Organizational Factors* in *Encyclopedia of Occupational Health and Safety*, edited by Jeanne Mager Stellman (Geneva: ILO, 2011).

[7] Iqbal used to play neighborhood cricket and still does, when he has the time, in the *chhāi gaḍā maidān* in Kamarhati. Cricket, a middle-class game imported from British India, has left a long legacy in colonial and postcolonial settings. See Ashish Nandy, *The Tao of Cricket* (New York: Viking, 1989) and Ramachandra Guha, *A Corner of a Foreign Field: The Indian History of a British Sport* (London: Picador, 2001).

called *ṭūṭā sūtā,* or broken yarn. Broken yarn is the result of an imperial and post-Independence practice—or malpractice—of selling bales containing "heart damaged" or decomposed jute in the Indian jute mills. The inside story in everyday production is "yarn breakage" in the global works, where dust, waste, and technology are recycled through repair work and junk work. Exploring the individual relations between tools, material, and subject, we see that work is dictated by personal ethics and concern for fellow workers and the community. This chapter, through an investigation of the instrument of labor in repair worksites and especially mobile repair worksites such as jute processing units, prepares us to deal with the ideology of labor itself. Commentators on jute and factory labor in India (as well as informal labor) have generally neglected this dynamic field: the relationship between contingency at work and the role of personal affects and ethics in the field of global production.[8]

The discourse of the present: "heart damage" in jute, *ṭūṭā sūtā* (broken yarn) and the tracing of ethics

The first layer of this ethnography derives from the discourse of the present. Specifically, it relates to something that is unchanging and ever present like "*sūtā tūtnā"* or "yarn breakage," jute's perennial nightmare.[9] This sets the context for the second layer: repair work on old machines, which is routine in the histories and practices of the jute mill in India. Thus, with the material evidence of yarn breakage and its effects in an actual work-site, the study is set up to examine repair work in the context of striving for an ethical life in the jute community. This is possible because the "interpretive framework," to adopt Arjun Appadurai's term for investigating larger realities through the ethnographic method,[10] is built on conversations, practices, and informal exchanges on-site. Specifically, "vernacular" or local concepts and "concept-metaphors" like "*ṭūṭā sūtā* (broken yarn)," "*tandrustī* (health)," "*chalānā* (to make something run)," "*udhār* (loan)*"* "*zindagī* (life)," and other everyday expressions contribute significantly to the perceptions of work and work-practices in the repair community of wage workers in contemporary capitalism.

The ethnography of broken yarn naturally begins with brief observations on raw jute and its processing—a vast area of inquiry involving both laymen and specialists. Experience and intuitive knowledge of raw jute have a key role to play in every step of making anything jute. But why is yarn breakage important to repair work? Is there a direct connection between the two? The immediate answer is yes. To the spinner and the weaver in a jute mill, it can have an immediate effect on work functions. But the connection can also be tentative and contingent, sharing a more complicated relationship with the community of *boḍi-mekaniks* (body mechanics) or analog repair-workers at large. In the latter context, it often creates non-hierarchical relations in otherwise Taylorist spaces characterized by the "process layout" system of works, which, in

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[8] S. G. Barker, *Report on the Scientific and Technical Development of Jute Manufacturing Industry in Bengal with An Addenda on Jute, Its Scientific Nature and Information Relevant Hitherto* (Calcutta, 1935), 42; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking working-class history* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989); and Nilanjan Das, *Of dust and distress* (Delhi: Indian Publishers' Distributors, 2004). See also Subimal Palit, "Role of Ministry of Textiles," *Jute Industry: A Historical Perspective* (Kolkata: Firma KLM, 2007)*,* 231-265 for a technological discussion of looms such as the Sulzer and Dornier looms, which are machine driven, modern looms introduced under government initiatives with a view to modernization.

[9] See H. R. Carter, *Jute and Its Manufacture* (London: Bale & Danielsson, 1918).

[10] See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) and *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (London: Verso, 2013).

this case, is also mobile. Mobility and dynamic forms of activities affect the relationship between the technical and the ethical, as we will see.

The two most cited texts on the subject of "heart damage" in jute are N. C Chaudhury's *Jute in Bengal* (1908) and R.S. Finlow's *"Heart Damage" in Baled Jute* (1918).[11] The latter discusses the over-moisturizing of jute because of climatic conditions, storage, and handling and its damaging effect on spinning. Spinning makes or breaks the yarn. Improper tensile strength will break yarn, leaving short ends, unusable for anything other than recycling and reprocessing. But short ends in spinning are the result of damaged raw fiber, improperly processed at the earlier stages. To give a sense of how important the knowledge of *kāncha pāṭ* (raw jute) in a jute mill is, one merely has to browse through Mohanlal Gangopadhyay's classic jute semi-autobiography and semi-ethnography, *asamāpta chaṭābda* (*The Unfinished Century of Jute*, 1963).[12] Gangopadhyay discusses malpractice in the jute industry, specifically related to "heart damage" of jute. Raw jute can make or break a day in a jute mill. This is the discourse of immediacy.

Iqbal, the mobile repair mechanic in a Kolkata jute mill, further explains what *ṭūṭā kalejā* or "heartbroken" (standing joke) in jute means in the larger picture of work in the jute mill and the works and worksites. Anyone with even a miniscule function in jute work is aware of the importance of two things: "*ṭūṭā sūtā*" or yarn breakage and "*tandrustī*" (health). "Heart damage" is a technical problem that has been commented on in technical and scientific manuals since the 1910s and, since the 1960s, in management textbooks. Iqbal gives a sense of the timeline,

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[11] Nibaran Chandra Chaudhury, *Jute in Bengal* (Calcutta: Newman & Co. Ltd., 1921 [originally published in 1908 as *Jute And Its Substitutes*]) and R.S. Finlow, "'Heart Damage' in Baled Jute" in *Memoirs of the Department of Agriculture in India* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1918). According to Finlow, "heart damage" occurs during baling of raw jute into *morah*, which are cut in the early processing units. This means there should be stricter quality control in purchasing processes. Jute purchasing requires knowledge of *kōshtā* (jute), which, as discussed in Chapter 1 (on vernacular *pāṭ*), the Hindu *kapālī* sect and caste of Bengal were known for before Dundee set up shop in Calcutta and dislocated the early jute weavers and workers. The *kapālīs* made three kinds of *kōshtā* weaves (*chhāla*, *chaṭ*, and *tāt*) in their rudimentary looms, which were not as sophisticated as the looms of the so-called caste weavers called *tāntī,* as H. H. Risley reports in *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal: Ethnographic Glossary, Volume 1* (Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Press, 1892). The Scottish purchasers of *kōshtā* were largely helped by the network of dealers in jute in rural and urban East Bengal. The dealer network was complex—from negotiations with the *āratdār* (stockist), *mahājan* (Indian trader of jute), *ojan sarkār* (one who weighs jute), and finally, the under-broker (possibly a Scottish person, and since the 1920s, a Marwari too. For a history of the Marwari trading community in Bengal see T. A. Timberg, *The Marwaris: From Jagat Seth to the Birlas* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1978)). With so many intermediaries and trading systems in place, it is hardly surprising that the practice of selling "heart damaged" jute to the mills would become normal malpractice.
Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ranajit Dasgupta have written on the role of *banias* in Bengal. Social and economic historians have written on the complex network of buying and selling of agricultural commodities in precolonial and preindustrial India. The networks were largely dependent on a patron-client relationship. Thus, religion, rituals, performance, and sectarian roles were critical to the success of the act of exchange of commodities. This is a whole new layer of instrumentation that I discuss in the chapter on rituals and performance. See Ranajit Dasgupta, "Factory labour in Eastern India: Sources of Supply," *Indian Economic and Social History Review,* Vol. 8, no. 3 (1976): 277-329; Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ranajit Dasgupta, "Some aspects of labour history in Bengal in the nineteenth century: two views," *Occasional papers no. 40* (Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, 1981).
The history of raw jute cultivation is perhaps more complicated than jute manufacture. A number of comprehensive texts and reports exist. See James Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Ttribes of Eastern Bengal* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1883); William Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal* (New Delhi: D.K. Publishing House, 1973 (orig. 1875-77); and Chaudhury, *Jute in Bengal*.

[12] Mohanlal Gangopadhyay, *asamāpta chaṭābda* (*The incomplete century of jute*) (Kolkata: Grantha Prakash, 1369 (1963)).

sāhab log ke samay se chal rahā hai
(this is going on from the days of the [colonial] *Sahibs*)

Obviously, Iqbal has not read Finlow's text on "heart damage" because no copy exists in translation—all technical books are in English and thus not easily accessible to semi- and non-English-literate repair and other workers, including the repair mechanic. Workshop mechanics—the more designated technical workers—have not read most of these texts either. The technical terms and their practical uses have been passed on from generation to generation, as the machines seldom change. Experts leave their traces on the next layer of "apprentice" work. But heart damage in jute is not merely a textual problem—it is a real one that affects work, processes, life, and one's ethical compass.

According to Iqbal, the individuals who should be fired for this gross negligence are the selection bosses and the batching supervisors, because they were the ones sleeping at the switches.[13] *Mistrīs* like Iqbal are all too familiar with the malpractice of passing off heart damaged jute as perfectly good. Here Iqbal, in a strange way, is echoing Mohanlal Gangopadhyay in *asmāpta chatābda* (1963). Gangopadhyay notes that in the late imperial era, heart damage in jute used to be an open secret, as was the selling of "junk" machinery.[14] In a well-known passage, Mohanlal Gangopadhyay says,

> *ār jārā jeneo jāne nā, jārā bhān kore, pāṭ shuknoi āche, tāderi upor nirbhor kore garib tānti ār garib spinārder hoptār rojgār.*
>
> (… and those [in charge] who make as if they don't know, who pretend that the jute is dry [when it is not], it is on them that the poor weavers and the poor spinners' weekly pay depends) (58).[15]

With jute already damaged, poor processing will aggravate the chances of yarn breakage or *ṭūṭā sūtā*. Under such circumstances, yarn *will* break during its spinning phase. Thus, heart damage and spinning are intertwined in the making of anything jute. If heart damaged jute enters the selection unnoticed, *ṭūṭā sūtā* (broken yarn) will come back to the carding line again, which, according to the classic textbooks of early Taylorist management, must be avoided at all costs, because this will kill profits and reduce wages.[16] Iqbal says,

> *jitnā kam sūtā lauṭ ke āye utnāhi kampani kā profit hogā aur mazdūr ko utnāhi haftā*
> (the less yarn breakage, the more profits for the company and regular weekly pay for the worker)

[13] Gangopadhyay, *asamāpta chaṭābda.*
[14] *Ibid.*
15 *Ibid.*
[16] See Carter, *Jute and Its Manufacture*. Also see Kar and Lahiri, *Work-Study in Jute and Textiles* for warning against yarn and time wastage. See Thomas Woodhouse and Peter Kilgour, *The Jute Industry: From Seed to Finished Cloth* (Library of Alexandria: 1921) for recommendations for more efficient spinning practices.

Figure 5

ṭūṭā sūtā returned to "*gardā* room" for re-carding, by author, 2011.

But if broken yarn or weak yarn somehow manages to pass through the SQC or the Statistical Quality Control mechanism, installed in each side of the factory (mill and factory side), it will inevitably be reflected in the finishing department, where bales are compressed for shipping. If the finishing bale weighs less than 400 lbs,[17] then "*gayā kām se*" (gone for good) and if it weighs more than the stipulated weight (because more yarn has been used for making a single jute bag or gunny), then "*kampani lāṭ māregā*" (the company will kick us out).

Figure 6

Akhtar in the roller section; a worker behind him testing yarn manually; "*ṭūṭā sūtā*" on the floor in fluffy balls. Photo by author, 2011.

The situation in most mills today is further complicated by the rampant use of lower-quality jute called *meshṭā*, which N. C. Chaudhury reported in his highly acclaimed *Jute in Bengal* (1908) as "inferior to jute in quality and yield" (237). But *meshṭā* currently runs most West Bengal jute mills, as the superior quality *pāṭ* or *koshṭā* (jute) or *Tossa Desi* (TD) from East Bengal stopped coming after the Partition.[18] *Meshṭā* needs more time to dry. Also, selected and batched jute of

[17] This weight varies depending on the type of order. However, the common bale weight is 400lbs. See Carter, "Jute Baling," *Jute and Its Manufacture*, 22.

[18] See Das, *Of Dust and Distress* (Delhi: Indian Publishers and Distributors, 2004); Palit, *Jute Industry*; and Gorakhnath Mishra, *Jute: udyog evam shramik* (*Jute: Entrepreneurship and Labor*) (Kankinada, West Bengal, 2010) for comprehensive accounts of jute processing from the imperial times to the present.

poor quality is not a homogeneous category and has many grades—*Tossa Desi* (TD) 1 to 8—8 being of the least fine quality. In the Kolkata jute mills, the highest grade used is about TD4.[19]

But a question still lingers in the context of yarn breakage and the overall health and happiness of the workers' lives. How does one ensure good yarn despite known and unknown irregularities? As thousands of tons of jute products are manufactured in medium to large mills, a long history of practices has evolved, often called "*dekh lenā,*" "to see to the problem," or simply, "adjustment." This is consistent with the increasing informalization of both work and the economy in the global South, which has contributed to debates on equality, wages, and quality of life and work.[20] For an agro-based commodity in everyday production in a medium-sized industry, variables such as moisture, dryness, breakage, rotting, tensility, etc. are usually factored into production. As Upadhyay, the hyper-energetic and earnest line manager at second drawing (before spinning phase), explained one day, the tensile structure of yarn depends on proper weight distribution in a roll: in this case, per pound weightage in each roll often varies as wildly as from 9 lbs to 23 lbs per roll. These numbers mean little to the outsider, but to Upadhyay, a commerce graduate with a "feel for jute," these numbers ultimately count towards the difference between a good day and a bad day in jute life.

Upadhyay further reconstructs the discourse of the *ṭūṭā sūtā* for me from the ground up with adequate illustrations. According to him, during roughly the middle stages of yarn making, a drawing machine operator knows *intuitively* if the yarn in a roll has the right tensile structure by letting his index finger gently touch the yarn as it is being spun on a roving frame (emphasis, mine). There is no way of telling during piling and carding though—and even at first drawing—how the rolled fiber will behave until actual spinning is performed on the hybrid spinning machines frames. In a technical essay written in the early days of jute, "Waste and By-Products," T. Woodhouse and P. Kilgour had a different prescription: they observed that in order to ensure short and long-fibers can attain the proper "mixture" to become proportionate to each other for that gain in strength, floor managers must engage in an

> extended scheme of carding[21]… (249)[22]

Line managers have long discouraged extended carding for losing work-time. Upadhyay says,

> *fāydā nahīn—pāṭ kā* quality *vaise hī kharāb hai*, *ṭūṭegā hī*
> (no use—jute quality is bad, it's bound to break)

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[19] See Chhabilendra Roul, *The International Jute Commodity System* (Delhi: Northern Book Center, 2009) for a detailed picture of raw jute and its contemporary grading for manufacturing purposes. White jute has 8 classes viz. W-1 to W-8 and *tossa* jute has 8 classes viz. TD-1 to TD-8 on the basis of length, strength, fineness, and luster and free from enlargements and roots. Basic variety is W-5 in case of white jute and TD-5 in case of *tossa* jute. Similarly, quality wise *meshta* has been graded in 6 classes viz. M-1 to M-6.

[20] See Kamala Sankaran, "Labour Laws in South Asia: The Need for An Inclusive Approach" (Geneva: International Institute of Labour Studies, 2007) and Uma Rani, "Impact of Changing Work Patterns on Income Inequality" (Geneva: International Institute of Labour Studies, 2008).

[21] Carding is sure way of ensuring that the fiber goes through a system of gentle combing before they are formed into a loose pile. While machines do most of the work, feeders are responsible for ensuring they do not send the "stricks" without proper batching oil in them. This simply means, one must stand in front of the carding machine, often without supervision, and continue to feed the fiber.

[22] Woodhouse and Kilgour, *Jute and Jute Spinning*, 249.

Are there other possible ways to check the quality of the yarn since this is so essential for profits and wages? Yes, Upadhyay says: "modernize"—but he adds in the same breath, it is important to be *sachhā* (honest/true). The second part of the response in this string is confusing with or without its context. He figures I am confused, so he clarifies: he believes the entire culture of jute is mired in *kīchaḍ* (dirt).[23]

Upadhyay emphasizes that in the absence of upgraded machinery and processes, on breakage, the fine yarn must be disentangled from the broken yarn. Sometimes this can become complicated too if the faces of the rollers get scraped, as they normally do. Textbooks like H. R. Carter's *Jute and its Manufacture* (1921) recommend discarding these roller faces. If the brittle yarn is spun on a defective roller, how is the outcome going to be any good? Roll weight will be seriously compromised and weaving will become impossible at the next stage. By this time, the damage will have been done, as this will mean a loss of weight per roll. When that happens, temporary, replacement, shared, and non-permanent workers, dependent on the number of "*rōlā*" (roll) production of yarn per hour, will be getting less pay.

Repair work and the striving for ethics

From the above discussion of broken yarn and its relationship with repair mechanics, it becomes clear that, among repair mechanics and workers on the floor, there is consensus that while yarn breakage is by and large linked to the quality of raw jute acquisition,[24] it can be partially improved during the processing stages. This will require several layers of patchwork—feeder, pinion-pulley-emulsion synchronicity, and proper piling—a rotational process at the end of the *hāti kal*, which needs to be then stowed away to dry. Drying also lets the emulsified and batched jute help "breathe" for the next twenty-four hours or so.[25]

Despite deteriorating conditions, this is where the *hāti kal* and its *tandrust* (healthy) pinions come in handy. If pinions do not have a scratchy surface or are not chipped, then the initial combing will occur nicely and the extra moisture in jute will get a chance to dry quickly—especially with the batching oil making each strand looser with more air to pass through. If a pinion is truly "healthy" and processing starts on such a pinion on a *hāti kal*, the *mistrī* feels good about it. If not, he feels *ethically* responsible for yarn breakage, although no one will formally complain against him. Iqbal touches his left chest with his right hand palm, looks into my eyes, and puts it succinctly,

> *ikhlāqi—sachhā dil se kām kartā hai sab*
> (ethical—everyone works with a true heart)

While mechanics can do little to prevent corruption and malpractices associated with jute purchase and overall breakdown of most machinery, Iqbal and his *shāgirds* can try and prevent malfunction of machines they must look after in the "mill side" or the processing side of raw jute. While they can do little to fix the rove spinning machines—as they are outside their

[23] This theme is narrated in novels, stories, and other creative works on jute, such as Gangopadhyay's *asamāpta chaṭābda;* Samaresh Basu's novel, *Jagaddal* in *Samaresh Bosu rachanabali* (The Collected Works of Samaresh Basu, Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2008, orig. 1966); and Gopal Prasad's poetry collection, *chaṭkalia dohe* (Jute Dohas), 1978.
[24] See Debaprasad Bandopadhyay, "*chotpat bettanto*." *Tepantar*, 2010, 29-65.
[25] Woodhouse and Kilgour, *From Seed to Finished Cloth*.

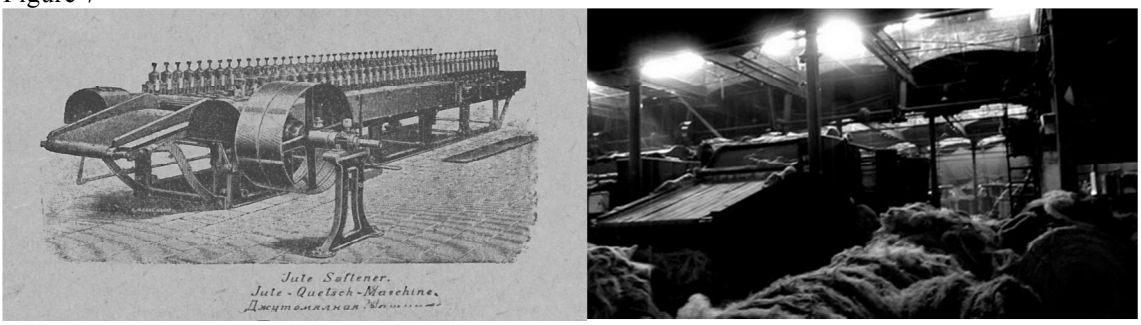
immediate repair-jurisdiction—they can make a difference to the pinions in softening and doffing machines.[26] They can make sure that the latter are working smoothly so that the first batching rolls going through emulsions are neither too moist nor too dry. As much as the next fitter or the repair worker, Iqbal and his *shāgirds* are aware who exactly will be hurt if something goes wrong in the maintenance of processing machines.

The "who" in this narrative is not an impersonal worker managing a function for an anonymous sub-sub-contractor or a line manager, but a palpable being—a friend, a member of the family, community, *pāṛā* or *mohallā*.[27] The mechanic and those working on the well-being of the machine are governed as much by the practical necessities of instrumentation as by their ethical subject of work and tools—objects that are at once impersonal and intimate, objective and subjective, inert and animate, friend and foe. This is the setting for the next section where the repair work of a machine can be better appreciated in light of the "broken yarn" question above.

Hāti kal: first look

'… in the case of a knife, would ultimately reduce it to a state in which the cutler would say of it, it is not worth a new blade'
Karl Marx, *Capital,* 312

Figure 7



Left: Illustration, jute softening machine, possibly 1900s. "In machine batching, the oil and water are applied to the fibre as the stricks pass through the rollers of the softener. The jute softener consists of 31 to 100 pairs of fluted rollers, pressed together by spiral springs. The production of such a machine is about 10 tons per 10 hours day, to which 3 percent of oil and 15 percent of water is added. The floor space required by a softener of 47 pairs is about 28 ft. by 5 ft." The description also maintains that the stricks once passed wait for 24 hours for reaching an optimum humidity and air H.R. Carter, *Jute And Its Manufacture* (London: John bale and Sons), 23, 24. This is also called "batching apparatus." See Thomas Woodhouse and Peter Kilgour, *Jute and Jute Spinning* (Manchester: Emmot and Co.), 64-67. Right: A jute softener, or *hāti kal*, today in a jute mill. Photo by author, 2011.

In the batching department, the *hāti kal*, a near-forgotten machine in the history of jute, had stopped running on a night shift. I had no clue until the next morning. When machines stop

[26] Thomas Duff papers. See Anthony Cox, *Empire, Industry, and Class: The Imperial Nexus of Jute, 1840-1940* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012) on overworking machinery parts and labor in both Dundee and Calcutta mills since the imperial times.
[27] See Raj Chandavarkar's *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance, and the State in India, 1850-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Chandavarkar thinks that the question of workers' solidarity, which has occupied the thoughts of nationalists and socialists alike, can be better explained by looking at concrete relations on the shop floor as well as in the community. This relationship is vital to Chandavarkar's project. In one sense, as a social historian, Chandavarkar comes closest to working out a case for ethics in the context of the urban poor.

working, the usual diagnostics are run on a regular basis: power switches, lever, cylinder and other moveable and non-moveable parts responsible for the running of a machine need to be checked. If the machine is still not showing any sign of life, it is necessary to remove the outer frame. In the case of the *hāti kal*, a 1.8 ton machine, the material is unusually bulky and requires a much larger area to repair even than automotive parts. It usually takes at least two if not three *mistrī* and *jugāḍ* or helpers to do the job. Detecting faults and conducting patchwork often involves multidirectional methods, because to reassemble one or two of the seventy to eighty moving parts of the *hāti kal,* made originally by Scottish or English light engineering firms specializing in batching machinery, requires a thorough knowledge of its design and its function.[28] But since no design or text-books exist anymore, except in memory and everyday practice, trial and error, and hands-on learning matter.

The repair of analog machines, which may seem undifferentiated and straightforward to the outsider, can be now traced through an ethical form. This is evident in Iqbal's interactions on the repair site, as he uses a range of verbal and nonverbal expressions, thought-work and imagination, to work on a seemingly small problem. The ethical form works through a continuous presence, attentiveness to minute processes even in tiny interstices. Yes, lapses occur: Leela Fernandes reports an incident when a weaver became angry as the *mistrī* arrived late to fix his machine.[29] Floor supervisors constantly complain how everyone will give "*phānki*" (avoid work) if they are not part of surveillance every step of the way. But the trend indicated above—a survey of about eighty jute families with a mean household income of $100 per month for a family of four to five—shows that jute work is tied to community practices where looking after each other is generally the custom, even if it requires applying different tactics, including that of "dependency" by invoking surrogate parental authority through the colonial inheritance of the *sardārī* or the European managerial or the *babu* systems.[30] None of these practices, however, turns the clock back to precapitalist days of household production, as Dipesh Chakrabarty somewhat erroneously claims in *Rethinking Working-Class History* (1989); rather, they reinforce a certain network of trust in interpersonal relations in strange, unfamiliar, and even hostile semi-industrial settings.[31] The result is that a community is made in the works and worksites and through the techniques of care and custom. Historians of women's movements have long argued how custom and care have contributed to particular histories of gender. The histories and practices of communities are similar.[32]

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[28] Batching and pressing machines were usually manufactured by Urquhart and Lindsay. See Woodhouse and Kilgour, *The Jute Industry: From Seed to Finished Cloth* (Library of Alexandria: 1921).

[29] See the brief mention of machinist and metal workers in Leela Fernandes, *Producing workers: The Politics of Gender, Class, and Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

[30] In *Rethinking Working-Class History* (1989), Chakrabarty reports the case of a woman who was given support when she landed in the coolie lines. Chattopadhyay had earlier reported in *A Socio-economic Survey* (1952) that small networks are crucial for the survival of the industrial working-classes. He explores specifically familial and inter-familial (and community links) between certain categories of skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled workers in the jute areas of Kolkata.

[31] For example, see a letter written by a mechanical weaver on 16th August, 1944. A certain Mr. A. wrote to the Weaving Master, a European (named Mr. Kidd), Kamarhatty Company Limited to hire him as a worker in the weaving department. He was willing to do anything as he was going through "hard" times. The letter, in English, may have been written by a clerk *babu,* and all the regular etiquettes were maintained.

[32] See Gangopadhyay's *asamāpta chaṭābda* (1963). Gangopadhyay traces the local histories of jute communities that have eked out a living by sharing technical and non-technical knowledge together in a *pāṛā* (Bengali: neighborhood) and *mohallā* (Hindi/Urdu: neighborhood) setting.

Pinion rhythm and the work of ethics

The instrument suffers the same fate as the man.
Karl Marx, *Capital*[33]

Judging from the previous sections, it becomes clear that interdependence of technical workers is vital to the processes of repair work in a jute mill. In this section, I narrow the view further from the *hāti kal* repair worksite as a whole to illustrate work-processes on a tiny part: the pinion. The relationship between such micro-parts and repair, and by extension, large-scale production is often governed by interpersonal interactions, which are in turn affected by a certain demand for ethics involving individuals, objects, and obscure metal parts.

On the day the *hāti kal* broke down, Iqbal came on a 6 a.m. shift. He figured this would be "ordinary routine maintenance."[34] To a newcomer this would make little sense. Historically, the expression "ordinary routine maintenance," as Samita Sen points out in *Women and Labour in Colonial India* (1999), is both everyday maintenance and a euphemism for disinterestedness in upgrading machinery. The technologists S. G. Barker and Thomas Woodhouse have made similar points in their reports and discussions.[35] Soon after Iqbal's *shāgirds* arrived on the scene, and amid the deafening noise of jute machine, a routine discussion began. One of them would have to go inside the machine. Iqbal said he would initiate the work. So he crouched and let himself in through an opening on the side. There was practically no light inside, Iqbal's *shāgird* Aftab had to hold a 60 watt bulb attached to a dangling wire. This was a minor breakdown, possibly caused by a dysfunctional *pīnā* (pinion), which could be fixed after some brushing and cutting, maybe. I wanted to check if this was indeed "ordinary routine maintenance." Iqbal said without much ado, "*ekdam* (totally)."

[33] Marx, *Capital I*, 311.
[34] See Barker, *Report,* 42; Chakrabarty, *Rethinking working-class history*; Das, *Of Dust and Distress*; and Sen, *Women and Labour in Colonial India* for interesting discussions of the meaning of ordinary routine maintenance. Also see my discussion of the phenomenon in Chapter 2.
[35] See Barker, *Report* and Thomas Woodhouse and Alexander Brand, *A Century's Progess in Jute Manufacture, 1833-1933* (Dundee: 1934).

Iqbal and his *shāgirds* doing "ordinary routine maintenance"

Figure 8

Top left: One of Iqbal's *shāgirds* inside a *hāti kal*: the cylinder rollers are visible at bottom right; top right: Iqbal inside the *hāti kal* in the batching department; bottom: Iqbal inside the large wheel-frame (his hand holding a wrench). Photos by author, 2011.

Iqbal agrees with Aftab that the *hāti kal*, which has undergone repair after repair since the 1950s, is now like an entirely new character in a *nauṭankī* (local/folk/street play). It is worth noting that to both the younger and older groups of mechanics working in post-imperial-style jute mills in a global era, the works and worksites is an extension of the local folk theater or *nauṭankī*.

Continuing the repair work on the machine, Iqbal emerges at one point from the inside of the *hāti kal*. He is holding a small bolt head, previously threaded to size on a lathe machine. That bolt head has been giving Iqbal a good deal of trouble and yet he was unable to figure out what to do with it. The hexagonal bolt head, the size of a ping pong ball, can be replaced by other regular bolt heads in the market. Numerous Indian companies make bolt heads of the same size—Lagan Engineering Works, Jutex, Shyama, and many other industrial retail suppliers in the Kolutola area of central Kolkata make them as well as distribute them. But Iqbal thinks that the metal, which seems to be Scottish steel, outperforms the cheap China variety in markets today. The fear of a Chinese takeover in industrial and consumer retail is real in the minds of Iqbal and his *shāgirds,* as cheap spares will effectively replace the *boḍi mekanik* (total body mechanic) with the *tūtā fūtā mekanik* (utility worker/fragmented and contract worker).[36] Iqbal repairing the *hāti*

[36] See Michael Buroway and Joseph Blum, et. al. eds., *Global Ethnography: Forces, Connections, and Imaginations in a Postmodern World* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2000). Nine essays in this volume explore local struggles against global forces of production. One of the local struggles is the struggle of utility work (fragmented work) that Iqbal

kal could be interpreted as being at the crossroads of an inevitable transition in global capitalism that utilizes junk, regulation, and improvisation as household tactics to get work done.[37]

So the hunt for a bolt head replacement begins in the workshop yard, which has only grown in size over the past decade or so. Hunting for a bolt head in one of the mill side junkyards is clearly a futile task, especially since there is no way of knowing if such a thing even exists anymore. The next day, Iqbal's *shāgirds* are a little unsure if a bolt head should delay work so much. Iqbal recounts how he has thought about the problem since last night. He simply does not wish to disturb the rhythm of the pinion. Proper bolt and bolt head strength is everything to a machine with a pinion rhythm and motion. Compromising the bolt's strength will mean compromising the pinions' strength in both the short as well as the long run. This will only weaken the system and soon the *hāti kal* will be consigned to the dustbins of industrial history. Hearing Iqbal speak aloud this part of his work sounded both earnest and absurd. The *hāti kal* is already a relic. How much more of a relic does it need to be?

Figure 9

One of the mill side junkyards in a jute mill; in the picture: faller bars (Lagan Engineering Works used to repair these); frames of various sizes; the heart sign means that people were hanging out in the junkyard before it was filled with more junk; the *darwān* (gatekeeper/security) is seen in the top right corner of the picture; surveillance is done 24x7 to prevent pilferage of junk from the company premises. Photo by author, 2011.

Iqbal explained that teeth and pinions are most easily stuck because of overuse. While fluted rollers made of wood have long been replaced by metallic rollers, pinions made of old steel have not been replaced in most machines yet, because old school *mistrīs* do not want cheap and alloyed steel to replace the steel from the foundries of Sheffield and nearby places in industrial England of a bygone era. A small reason for this is habit, but there are also technical reasons, and an even bigger reason is the continuum of knowledge of older pinions through generations,

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and his ilk fear the most but know will be absorbed within the same work force as the total mechanic or the "*boḍi mekanik*" by some form of reverse engineering.

[37] Relevant here are theories of improvisation in the fields of object, orientation, architecture, and capitalism at large. The theory of improvisation is attached to the theory of subjectivity as the improviser must be willing to "try out" on his or her own if things and systems fail to start or work. Equally pertinent is the notion of work-in-progress versus the notion of "finished work." See particularly Gary Peters, *The Theory of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 9-20.

perhaps. There is also a faint tracing of the Scottish romance of jute at work here. Sometimes, older technicians and managers will fondly recall when machines ran smoothly. A simple looking dirty pinion boasts many layers of signification in a jute mill.

Looking at an overused, dirty, chipped, and scraped pinion as an object of signification is not an idle technique for either the mechanic or the ethnographer. It opens up other possibilities of interpretation of metal and metallurgy, instead. For example, it is true that older steel had better gauge and more heft, which means better balance. But older steel is also more hammered as repair has been going on for more than sixty or seventy years on these pinions and machine parts. These parts and the machine are running on borrowed time, as Aftab or Rajababu, one of Iqbal's younger *shāgirds*, says in *filmī* (cinema) style:

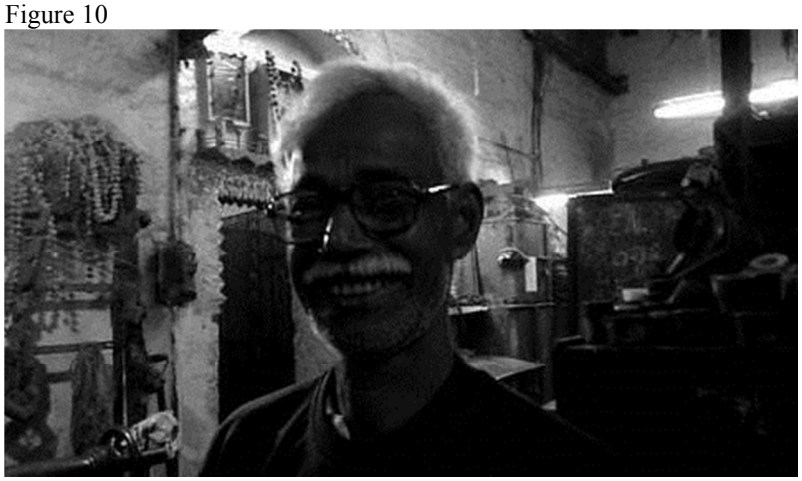
> *udhār kā zindagī* ("a life on loan")

Iqbal agrees with Aftab, but still wants to rework the bolt head for the sake of maintaining pinion rhythm as best he can. He sends Ram, the other apprentice, to the mill side Bengali master lathe operator, Manas. Lathe machines are usually run by local Bengali *mistrīs* like Manas, who have vast experience with the machine—more than thirty-six years in his case.[38] Iqbal knows that Manas-da (the "-da" ending meaning "elder brother" is a common form of respectful address in Bengali) will do a great job even without specifications on paper, because he knows each nut, bolt, and bolt head on the *hāti kal* personally. Iqbal is vocal about how only a few people can become *ustāds*. In his eyes, Manas is one, as is Tiwariji, Iqbal's guru, from whom Iqbal has learned the philosophy of "360 degrees," vital to learning the vibes of a machine.[39] Belief (based on practical evidence) and trust are essential ingredients in such forms of life. In this formulation, Iqbal is mixing many messages. The main one, however, is the long-standing practice of care of the machine, the self, and the community.

[38] In *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India: Studies in Colonial History* (Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi, 1994), Ranajit Dasgupta, the Marxist historians of jute, has reported that a majority of mill mechanics especially on the lathe were Bengalis for a variety of reasons, the main reason being a certain level of exposure to the works and worksites from an early age. Dasgupta reports in some detail about the *mistri* population in the jute areas and their community linkages. However, Dasgupta is slightly off the mark when he does not allow for non-Bengalis (mainly from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) sharing this work. This is partly because of the area he has investigated—Bauria in Howrah district—has more Bengali metal workers than other jute areas, especially in the northern districts. Besides, the demography of jute workers has changed since the so-called "sunset years" of jute in West Bengal, when the Left Front government in West Bengal had stopped providing state support to the industry because it had decided that jute was a "dying industry." Notably, the current political party in power, Trinamool Congress, in a gimmicky move, has attempted to reverse Left Front policy by furthering projects that the Left Front started in 2008, namely "Jute Parks." But till date, with the exception of scattered production and services, these parks are dysfunctional.

[39] Tiwariji, interview. March 23, 2011; 11 April, 2011.

Figure 10



Inside mill side mechanical workshop. Note the hanging pictures behind the master lathe operator. Usually, framed pictures of Ganesha and Shiva are hung on the walls for puja every day during the day shift. Visvakarma is the workshop deity, meaning all-maker. He is worshipped in the autumn.

In the meantime, I clock that Ram has been away for more than forty minutes or so. It is also time for a chai break. Before Asif, the chai boy, is summoned through a relay process—from the batching to the carding to the mill side to the outside of the mill maintenance department—Iqbal holds a large pinion in his hand and shakes it in front of us. He wishes to draw our attention amid the deafening noise of machines in the background to the fact that this too finally needs to go to the workshop to be resized. This pinion has *phensuā* or entangled jute with years of grease stuck on it, which may not be easy to clean. He suspects this might need chiseling and resizing in the end. He cannot let a defective *pīnā* stay inside the *hāti kal*; he asserts that this would cause batched jute to become entangled, which will wreak havoc on slivers of yarn in a late processing unit. Iqbal explained succinctly:

> *pinā kharāb to sab kharāb*
> (if pinion goes, everything else goes too)

Figure 11

Pinion inside a *hāti kal*; note the jute fiber mixed with grease clinging to the pinions. Photo by author, 2011.

Iqbal's *shāgird*, Aftab, jokes that Iqbal wants everything in a *hāti kal* to be resized. At this rate, Aftab continues,

> *hāti chūhā ban jāyegā!*
> (the elephant will become a mouse!)

Jokes apart, for Iqbal, a specialists' attention is still useful for some kind of vetting purposes. This pinion will go to the proper workshop located immediately outside the veteran radial borer and lathe operator Banerjee babu. Banerjee babu has experience with an original American borer, which was manufactured in 1901 in Michigan and installed in 1903 in the mill.[40] Iqbal does not know the mysteries of that machine, as he seldom has time to learn anything beyond his own work these days, but one day his goal is to master such a machine. Banerjee-da has come back after retirement, as his pension is pending from the company.[41] For Iqbal, however, this is a teachable moment.

> *sīkhne ke liye douṛ-bhāg karnā zarūri hai*[42]
> (to learn, it's necessary to run around)

Appreciation for the dynamic model of learning—*douṛ-bhāg* (running around) being its main expression—gives clues to how learning on the floor occurs. After he passes on the pinion to Ram for workshop repair, Iqbal explains how learning on the floor for apprentices or the younger mechanics is usually informal, with formal guidelines checked every now and then. The mix of formality and informality on the job makes the floor a dynamic place. He further explains that since a majority of the parts are old, spares must be "made" or "remade" in the mechanical departments themselves.[43][44] Iqbal's narrative cannot be viewed in isolation from the forging of the community, which he seems to be indicating, too, is made in the "works." In the end, it was reassuring to see that the *hāti kal* had not metamorphosed into a mouse as a result of all the cutting and rethreading in those two to three days.

A working conclusion: on work and belonging

Earlier as Iqbal's *shāgirds* were waiting for orders from him with hammers, wrenches, and other basic tools necessary to apply the torque to dislodge pinions and reassemble them, I had asked, somewhat impulsively, how problematic it was to work like this. And if this were really problematic, why did they not work in a different mechanical department? Or, why did they not return to the village? They chose to answer the last question first. They told me that they did not have land in the village, so that was a non-question. Then they told me that none of them knew how to farm or do other forms of artisanal work, as they never had land or shops in the first

[40] This radial borer was manufactured by Western Machine Tools, Michigan and is no longer to be found anywhere other than in old mills in Kolkata. The company too has long ceased to make heavy machinery.
[41] Nagarik Mancha papers, miscellaneous. Notably, pension and gratuity thefts are common ailments in the jute industry, as several recent studies sponsored by the Marxist-Leninist citizens' forum, *Nagarik Mancha* (Citizens' Forum) have indicated. Shashtipada Banerjee archives.
[42] Iqbal and his team fixing the *hāti kal* Kamarhatty Jute Mill, March, 2011.
[43] Thomas Woodhouse in *Jute and Jute Spinning* gives clear guidelines about how much cutting is permissible when the pinion needs reshaping and resizing. It seems that the authors' recommendations have long been violated, as the pinions are by no means as strong and smooth as they once were. They have reached the stage where they need to be discarded. The form of life of repair, however, demands that resizing continues.

place! They emphasized, unambiguously, that they are *urban* workers who know jute machines and are willing to put up with the difficulty of repair work in a vanishing analog environment. Fitters and mechanics in a jute mill somehow remain in a jute mill until they cannot resist the lure of contract work in the Gulf.

On the difficult subject of work and belonging, Iqbal, like the rest of his *shāgirds*, is quite clear about where he belongs: his ancestry is from Siwan in western Bihar (also the birthplace of the first President of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, and Iqbal wants his kids to know that) but he grew up near *chhāi maidān* (ash grounds/landfill) in Kamarhati—a hangout for children, teenagers, and adults alike in a jute *mohallā*. The lure of the jute *mohallā* for him is that it is a "mini Hindustan" where the community hangs out and seems to be there for each other, despite all odds. In the above ethnography, Iqbal and his *shāgirds* have shown how simple machine and repair work helps individuals and extended families of mechanics across caste and religious boundaries connect with each other. They have also shown how the striving for ethical life usually begins and ends with recognition of one's material life. Speaking of material life, Iqbal ends the *hāti kal* repair day aptly with a proverb that I have analyzed in the last chapter in more detail under the subheading "'proverbial ethics' in jute *mohallā* life":

> *man changā to kathoti mein gangā*
> (if your mind is at peace, or if your heart is pure, you'll find the Ganges in a bowl of water)[45]

All things considered, a question still lingers: are Iqbal and his *shāgirds* truly gung-ho about work in jute mills, which gives them around $3 to $4 a day? Word on the street is that Aftab/Rajababu will probably move to the Gulf for a job as a fitter in the vast construction boom[46] in the Gulf States, likely to Qatar, Dubai, or Sharjah. He has several friends who have moved on from jute life. He is fully aware of the consequences of Gulf-styled migration, especially the risks of "slave labor" in the Gulf construction boom.[47] Aftab shrugs the risks off by saying he is young and will not mind compromising a little bit of freedom for more money. But he will make the sacrifice to make a better home in the jute *mohallā*. He definitely wants to be a player in the real estate boom in the jute *mohallā* today. Aftab's ambition is not unique, but it is backed up by the notion that he will return to help his family and community live better.

[45] Bhojpuri proverb. See Chapter 5 for a detailed note on "proverbial ethics" among the upcountry mechanics and fitters. Also see, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, *Calcutta Hindusthani: A Study of a Jargon Dialect* (G.D. Thukral, 1931).
[46] The Gulf Boom is about cheap labor supply from South Asia (particularly Kerala, but other industrial metros supply cheap labor too). Gulf has not only attracted men but also younger women to work in the growing service sector. More report forthcoming. See ILO papers.
[47] Benyamin's *Goat Days* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2012) is an eye-opening fictional work on the enslavement of migrant Gulf labor.

Chapter 4
Infrastructure of the gray: *aslī/naqlī* in the *mohallā* bazaar

na karo tum aslī
aslī aur naqlī na karo
(don't do the real thing
don't do the real or the not-real)

Kabir, 15th century doha

āsol bhālo nakol bhālo
(real is good, fake is good too)

Sukumar Ray in *ābol-tābol* (gibberish, 1932)

Male: *Hamre banglā des mein har gori ke lambe bāl*
Female: *Āj to har bazār mein saiyān miltā naqlī māl*
(Male: in our Bengal country all fair maidens have long hair
Female: these days you get fake stuff in all the markets around)

Kishore Kumar and Asha Bhonsle, duet song, "*Main Bangāli chhokrā*" (I'm a Bengali lad), 1958

Keywords:

aslī: [Bhojpuri, Hindi/Urdu] adjective; real/original/authentic/good; also no. 1

naqlī: [Bhojpuri, Hindi/Urdu]; adjective; adulterated
fake/unoriginal/counterfeit/inauthentic/illicit/illegitimate/phoney; also, no. 2

aslī/naqlī (real/fake) as a vernacular lens: its practical and theoretical uses

This chapter explores the space of the "gray" in the infrastructure of the existing and emergent suburbanization in industrial and semi-industrial places of the global South, visible in jute *mohallā* or neighborhoods—the interstices of the formal and the informal, the licit and the illicit. The ambiguous character of the "gray" is captured in the vernacular expression *aslī/naqlī* ("real/fake," etc.), which is the primary lens in this essay. In everyday terms, *aslī/naqlī* is a way of "saying and seeing" a basic state of reality—real/fake, true/false, right/wrong, etc.—but it is far from a simple binary. As a form of expression, *aslī/naqlī* has been made popular by the preponderance of old and new Bombay cinema, where smuggling, gray markets, and the distribution of counterfeit items have formed and framed the subject of pulp, thrillers, sexploitation, and many other genres of films since the 1940s and popular television entertainment since the 1980s.[1] Mass media and cinema have been the source of information and entertainment feeding the working and middle-class populations and cultures since the early days of audio-visual communication in the global South, so it is not surprising that the cinematic as well as the virtual has played an important role in the construction of *aslī/naqlī*.[2] The *mohallā* or

[1] *aslī/naqlī* is a central theme in "lost identity" and doppelganger movies in mainstream Bombay cinema, such as *Ram aur Shyam* (1967), *Seeta aur Geeta* (1972), and numerous others.
[2] See Rachel Dwyer, *Bollywood's India: Hindi Cinema as a Guide to Modern India* (London: Reaktion, 2014). Also see Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Both the authors discuss the domain of the cinematic and the popular in terms of the real, tied concretely to the social. However, neither explores the critical dimensions of *aslī/naqlī* in the context of local and the translocal communities living in afast-paced market capitalism.

neighborhoods of the jute industrial belt of Kolkata, India are no exception, as video rental stores, cable and satellite television, etc. have been the major providers of news, information, and entertainment since the 1990s, when the neoliberal reforms of the market began.[3]

The ethnography on which this essay is based takes place in two jute *mohallā* nineteen miles apart from each other—Kamarhati and Naihati/Gouripur in North 24 Parganas (Districts) of West Bengal. What the two *mohallā* have in common besides the jute industry is the *mohallā* bazaar or community marketplace, which remains the hub of endless activities: small and micro-business enterprises, schools and *madrasās* (Islamic schools accredited by the education departments), everyday politics, nonprofit work, leisure activities, and more. All these energies centered on the bazaar forge a much bigger community than the jute factories or workshops could possibly engender. In developmental and urban sociological terms, this is the new sub-urbanity of the global South: the *mohallā* is comparable to other "slums" in South Asia and elsewhere, such as the *chawl* in Dharavi, Mumbai[4] and the *favela* in Rio de Janeiro.[5] The characteristic of these spaces is that governmental, developmental, and infrastructural challenges are too numerous to be easily fitted into the standard frameworks of developmental quick fixes.[6] These spaces require greater flexibility of interpretation, which is why the notion of the gray becomes important.

Notably, in South Asian discourses, *aslī/naqlī* has appeared in Lawrence Cohen's study of "queer life" and its relationship with the embroiled question of "authenticity" in India and, to some extent, in Gayatri Reddy's study of the *hijrā* (loosely, "third gender") subject in South-Central India. [7] Drawing lessons from Cohen and Reddy, I have situated the notion of *aslī/naqlī* in the context of the "conditions" of crafting the norms for a set of concrete social and ethical

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[3] See R. Banga, "Impact of Liberalisation on Wages and Employment in Indian Manufacturing Industries," Working Paper no. 153, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, New Delhi, 2005, www.icrier.org, Article viewed on http://ideas.repec.org/d/icriein.html, December 2014.

[4] Mumbai is the present-day official name of the city formally called Bombay. I use "Bombay" elsewhere in the text in reference to the cinema and textile industries, which are known by the city's old name. For works on Dharavi, Asia's largest "slum," see Kalpana Sharma, *Rediscoving Dharavi: Stories from Asia's Largest Slum* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000); J. Engquist and M. Lantz, editors, *Dharavi: Documenting Informalities* (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2009); and Arputham Jockin, Sheela Patel, and Sundar Burra. "Dharavi: A View from Below." *Good Governance (India) Magazine* 2:1 (2005).

[5] For slum dwelling; development, and its representation, see Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact* (London: Verso, 2013). Also see Sukhetu Mehta's semi-autobiographical account, *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (London: Vintage, 2005). Fictional and cinematic representations of the underworld are evident from the 1950s through the present.

[6] Arjun Appadurai, writing from the perspective of globalization in *Modernity at Large*: *Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), thinks that this particular relationship between the local (natural, undisputed) and the larger patterns have been increasingly "deterritorialized." Based on further explorations of the local, supra-local, and nonelite forms of globalization by Bhaskar Muhopadhyay in *The Rumor of Globalization: Desecrating the Global from Vernacular Margins* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), Laura Bear's study of rituals and kinship in her recent working paper on dock-workers in Kolkata called "'This Body is Our Body:' Viswakarma Puja, the Social Debts of Kinship and Theologies of Materiality in a Neo-Liberal Shipyard" in *Vital Relations: Kinship as a Critique of Modernity*, ed. Fenella Cannell and Susan McKinnon (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2013), 155-178, critiques developmental quick fixes. These academics have increasingly drawn attention to the biggest lack in Nehruvian developmental fixes: absence of community involvement resulting in an exclusive focus on the "nation."

[7] See Lawrence Cohen, "Song for Pushkin." *Daedalus* 136 (Spring 2007): 103-115. Also see Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago and Londo: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

relations. However, I push the twin terms to include a wider array of *mohallā* life that verges on the debates on development, governmentality, and ethics. The question is: how effectively can we conceptualize *aslī/naqlī* in the context of "community institutions," to borrow a term from Partha Chatterjee's explication of the concept (and structure) in *The Politics of the Governed*?[8] The term "community institutions" fits in with the ethnography of *mohallā* because the *mohallā* is perceived in terms of an institution—a flexible one—with peculiar and particular demands on its inhabitants, especially in the context of managing risks and vulnerabilities. To understand how these vulnerabilities are negotiated, therefore, I not only let people tell their own stories, I also let them suggest their own critical idioms, whenever possible.[9] This chapter highlights those critical idioms as it explores the spatio-temporal features of the *mohallā* bazaar that help members of the community to manage and negotiate their own risks and vulnerabilities. The question is, does this kind of risk management mean greater flexibility in "accommodating" the changes within global capitalism itself?

Existing studies of informality, development, and the new paradigms of the 20th and 21st centuries

Based on the paradigms of development politics in the postcolonial 20th and 21st centuries, two distinct views of governmentality have emerged in existing academic discourses.[10] The first comes from postcolonial political theorists like Partha Chatterjee and the second comes from cultural anthropologists like Arjun Appadurai. Partha Chatterjee in *The Politics of the Governed* suggests that the tensions between constitutional and electoral politics and its relationship with the "bound serialities" in heterogeneous populations in South Asia are too large to ignore.[11] In simple terms, governmentality is tied to the desire to govern as well as the desire to be governed. This desire is visible in national as well as local forms. For Chatterjee, the tensions often originate in these two indispensable categories or forms on the ground, one official and the other local or community-based. This is what he means by "community institutions," though in Chatterjee's formulation, there is no clear sense of ethnography but a porous engagement with the historical boundaries of class, caste, and religious identities in the present. The relative lack of ethnography produces serious consequences in Chatterjee's arguments for expanding the formal precincts of "civil society" into "popular" forms such as the community. I wish to point out that the community cannot be straightforwardly characterized as "popular" or "populist," as it is founded on moral and ethical codes. In any case, the lack of ethnography means we are not privy to the techniques of development, politics, and their relationship with the same community institutions, which are usually deemed to be unmanageable by the state institutions. This lack in Chatterjee takes us to other, and more tangible, sites of the local within the suburban, proposed by Arjun Appadurai in his anthropology of "deep democracy" in recent essays such as "Housing

[8] See Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).
[9] In Habermasian terms, critical idioms are admittedly necessary components in communicative reason that mark the liberal premise of a public sphere, or at the very least, public opinion and the creation of publics. Thus is subjectivity born. See Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (New York: Beacon Press, 1971).
[10] See P. Chatterjee. Also see a wide range of texts on politics and its relationship with population. See particularly Foucault's notion of biopolitics in *Security, Territory, and Population*. The relationship between politics, opinions, sovereignty, and the state has a determinable component in imagining governmentality.
[11] "Bound serialities" is a term taken from Benedict Anderson's *The Spectre of Comparisons,* referring to "the finite totals of enumerable classes of population" produced by modern governmentality (Chatterjee, *Politics,* 5).

and Hope" (2013) and *The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013)[12] Appadurai's work also stresses governmental reason, but only in the context of the "cultures of the local," which are chaotic and unmanageable by the standard components of governmental reason—electoral politics, civil society, and political will. For Appadurai, the instruments of local governmentality do not necessarily lie in the translation of political discourses but in the management of everyday risks.[13] Governmentality needs to be reinvented through the new risks, securities, and ground-level participation within informality in the "suburbanisms" of the global South, according to Appadurai.

Other views on governmentality within informality and the local come from urban theorists such as Ananya Roy in *City Requiem: Calcutta: Gender and the Politics of Poverty* (2002) and, co-authored and edited with Aihwa Ong, *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*.[14] Roy has argued that informality provides a critical epistemic shift in development/urbanism studies, but has a darker side too. Informality, or at least the "self-help" and "enablement paradigm" (especially related to women's work within informality) perspectives, does not achieve the satisfaction of needs as well as defending rights. In other words, informality in itself does not show any sign of "success" according to these criteria, when the ethnographies of the informal allow us to look into the actual conditions (and scale) of "deprivation and survival."[15] Roy emphasizes that such forms of urban existence are the fallout of the continuation of global capitalism, so the newness of informality as a concept-metaphor does not mystify Roy and her colleagues. In a similar vein, population/demographers such as Ranabir Samaddar in *The Materiality of Politics* (2007) have argued how the spaces of the legality and illegality questions in governmentality ultimately point to the gaps within the formal and statist discourses, cutting across caste, race, gender, and class lines among populations. [16] While I agree with Roy's critique of the informal and Samaddar's critique of the legality/illegalityof material politics as being ultimately "state-bound," I am not too sure about the "success" paradigms from within which they judge informality and, particularly, community respectively—statist, non-statist, or local.[17]

My premise for this discomfort is rather straightforward and comes from the same method that development theorists and anthropologists like Roy, Samaddar, Appadurai, Ong, and others have used extensively since the 1980s: ethnography of the place. In this, I am mindful of the preexistence of the community, whether migrant, migrating, or a mixture of settlers and migrants. I understand the community not in the premodern, prebourgeois sense proposed by

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[12] See Appadurai, "Housing and Hope," *Places Journal*, March 2013, accessed December 2014, https://placesjournal.org/article/housing-and-hope/ and *The Future as Cultural Fact* (London: Verso, 2013).
[13] Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact*.
[14] See Ananya Roy, *City Requiem, Calcutta: Gender and the Politics of Poverty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), and A. Roy and Aihwa Ong, *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global* (London: Blackwell, 2011).
[15] See Roy, *City Requiem* and A. Roy and Nezar AlSayyad, eds., *Urban Informality: Transnational Perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2004).
[16] Ranabir Samaddar, *The Materiality of Politics: The Technologies of Rule* (London: Anthem Press, 2007). Samaddar's idea, however, was developed in his study of transborder migration in an earlier book, *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal* (Delhi: Sage, 1999), where he says, "the questions of legality/illegality, therefore, operate in a region away from the life lived on the border" (55).
[17] See particularly Samaddar's *The Materiality of Politics*. Samaddar says, "The defence of communities in India in the arena of juridical-political rights emanates from the imperatives to defend marginality in the wake of policies ushered in by the state in a climate of globalization and economic restructuring" (163).

Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Rethinking Working-Class History,*[18] but in a participatory sense, in which the inhabitants of informal spaces manage their everyday life in the context of contested marginalities, as Nezaar AlSayyad argues in *Urban Informality*.[19] Up until this point, the weight is still on a "blurred binary." Somehow the informal must be judged against the formal in mainly social, political, or economic terms. But despite an increasing desire to control informality (through redesign, urban projects, suburban schemes, microfinances and banking, etc.), the informal seems inexhaustive and unmanageable. It is so because the informal functions on the premise of contingency and emergency, which from the *mohallā* point of view, seems to be prolonged and something to be reckoned with on a day-to-day basis. And when contingencies and emergencies occur, only the individuals inhabiting the space are helpful to each other. Municipal, non-governmental, and other supra-local agencies take time to fix things, if they do at all.

Thus, this chapter proposes to investigate the ethnographies of informality, especially working within the rites of passage of gray infrastructure, land-capital relations, and cheap commodity circulations in a *mohallā* bazaar. The chapter emphasizes the notion of rediscovering the "clumsy" and the patchwork, a carryover from earlier studies on junk and repair forms in industrial and semi-industrial capitalism. [20] Further, though the clumsy and the patchwork are like a thorn in the side of the organizational logic of state, development, and capitalism, they can be seen within the broader paradigm of "ethnography of the social" that urban theorists, development critics, cultural anthropologists, and political theorists have been alerted to recently.[21] The distinct claim I make in my work is that the ethnographic not only takes us closer to the place and all its disorienting issues, from infrastructure to land-grabbing to cheap commodity-circulation, but also to a particular time as well as passing time, capturing a fleeting glimpse of how things are done on the ground.[22] This is what makes the ethnography of a local bazaar (*mohallā* bazaar) in a global setting interesting and useful.

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[18] See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989). Also see his *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000). Chakrabarty constructs the notion of "difference" based on his reading of Marx through Heidegger. He uses the notion of difference to discuss the problematic of nonwestern societies consigned to the "waiting room of history." This condition overlooks other possibilities, histories, and the world that exist in the nonwest. The culprit, according to Chakrabarty, is historicism and the European notion of the "stagist theory of history" (9).

[19] See Partha Chatterjee, 127. Chatterjee uses many variants of the community to explore the possibilities of the community's political representation in the imagined and real framework of the nation-state.

[20] "Clumsy" not only reveals how needs are met but also provide new forms of thinking of the discourses of needs. See Roy, *City Requiem,* 2002. But Roy is also critical of the concept-metaphor of the clumsy because she thinks is creates a more lasting image of the urban poor.

[21] Ethnography of the social comes in many guises. See Michael Burawoy and Joseph Blum, et. al. eds., *Global Ethnography: Forces, Connections, and Imaginations in a Postmodern World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).

[22] See Craig Jeffrey, *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2010). Jeffrey investigates the phenomenon of timepass as a uniquely neoliberal phenomenon in India. While Jeffrey calls for phenomenological attention to "timepass," the materiality of timepass is equally essential to grasp. In the local context, the bazaar spaces provide that material space.

Informal spaces of the *mohallā* bazaar vis-à-vis private/public dyad and governmental reason

According to Chatterjee in *The Politics of the Governed*, governmental reason is not manifest in the discourses of constitutionalism or electoral politics alone. It has historically appeared in a private/public dyad of civil/political society in the context of community institutions, the latter deriving its politics from the former. [23] In the nationalist period, the former structures were evident in particularly Bengali nationalist associations as well as the petty comprador bourgeois associations and homes. In the post-Independence era, these are visible across populations that do not easily fit into the nationalist mold, but can be viewed as ethnoreligious and ethnocultural minorities in India. Ranabir Samaddar has rightly called the Chatterjee-style discourse as "thought-centric," where the discourses of change exist in the culture of print nationalisms.[24] Further, since spaces like the *mohallā* have remained more or less outside the "thought-centric" discourses, in the case of the *mohallā* bazaar, the dyad naturally does not work as effectively as it does with class, nationalist, and other overtly political institutions. This simply means that community institutions cannot be treated as purely derivative of political institutions; instead, they must realize their own epistemologies. In the case of the *mohallā,* where precarious forms of exchanges and existence are the norm, the dissolution or better still, "desecration," of the dyadic form is manifest.[25]

One known example is Dharavi, Mumbai's infamous *chawl* or "slum," which emerged in the 1880s when the depeasantized populations from other states began thronging urban spaces.[26] The legacy of that particular migration went well into the 20th century, marked by the rise and fall of Bombay textile industries. Together, they also mark the rise of self-styled management of everyday affairs that include but are not limited to self-help groups, women's groups, as well as the members of the underworld allegedly sharing the businesses in slums and "underdeveloped" urban spaces. We may remember that according to Roy and others, such forms of "enablement paradigms" have limited effect on anything short term, much less long term.[27]

Figure 12

Skyline: Kamarhati (from the southern side of the jute mill terrace); view of *mohallā* (tiled roof area on left of the picture; this part of the *mohallā* is located on the east of Mill Approach Road); a public lavatory can be seen with cow dung cakes for earthen cooking ovens; the Bada Masjid (Big Mosque) is visible at center. Photo by the author, 2011.

[23] See Partha Chatterjee, 126-7.
[24] Samaddar, *The Materiality of Politics*.
[25] See Mukhopadhyay, *Rumor of Globalization* for discussion of "desecration" of the concept of the global.
[26] See Marie-Caroline Saglio-Yatzimirsky, *Dharavi: From Mega-Slum to Urban Paradigm* (London: Routledge, 2013), for a comprehensive social anthropology of Dharavi.
[27] See Roy, *City Requiem,* 227-8.

Ethnological and survey reports of the 1950s are helpful in understanding *mohallā* housing and spatial organization. These researches have indicated the sizes of "standard" *mohallā* housing in the jute and other industrial *mohallā* areas for an average of 4-5 members of a family or non-family: rooms are not bigger than 8x8 feet, a large individual unit could be 8x8 or 8x10 feet in size; the ceiling height is usually about 10 feet with terracotta tiles for roofing; extensions and partitions are usually made with cheap materials like throw-away plywood, bamboo slats, and sometimes, a *khaṭiyā*(a reed cot) that could be pulled down to sleep on as well. Ethnological surveys also indicate that the *khaṭiyā* is a site of leisurely congregation. It is worth noting that the *khaṭiyā*used to serve as an informal court for dealing with worker's issues in the neighborhood. Anecdotes about this practice exist in the jute neighborhood of Kamarhati areas where Chatur Ali, the well-known local union worker, used to attract local workers every day. This practice was famously known as *khaṭiyā sunānī* in the *mohallā*.[28] More recent surveys, especially made by local jute historians such as Gorakhnath Mishra and others, indicate that these living and public spaces are equally marked by a micro-*āngan* or courtyard, an essential architecture separating the "outside" from the "inside" in most traditional rural and semi-rural housing in India.[29] The most important aspect of *mohallā* living is the spillage of the private into the public, often compared to guts falling out as the body is eviscerated. In the *mohallā* bazaar, the spillage is often patchworked/damage controlled/risk managed by a purdah system (separating the micro-*āngan* from the *mohallā gali* or neighborhood lanes, and the *chai-pānī* or *pān-biḍī lāḍi* or "box shop" for tea or betel and local cigarettes).[30]

Figure 13

Kamarhati skyline; fringes of the *mohallā* (tiled roof areas) Kamarhati from the southeastern side of the mill; trucks are seen parked for warehousing. Photo by the author, 2011.

[28] *khaṭiyā sunānī* or "cot hearing" is a folksy method employed by elders of a village to solve petty feuds and problems in a community. In the above instance, a local labor leader uses the folksy method to understand labor related problems.

[29] Gorakhnath Mishra, *Jute: udyog evam shramik* (*Jute: Entrepreneurship and Labor*) (Kankinada, West Bengal, 2010). Mishra is one of the important Hindi authors of jute history. His work is barely known outside of the locality of Kankinada and Naihati areas of Kolkata.

[30] See Mishra, *Jute: udyog evam shramik* and Arjan de Haan, *Unsettled Settlers: Migrant Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Calcutta* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997 for details on actual *mohallā* distribution of space. Mishra discusses the everyday effects of such spatial congestion in industrial communities.

The public gaze onto the *āngan*, usually reserved for the *zenānā*, or women's/domestic space, has been the subject of colonial and postcolonial discourses. But discussion of the separation of such kinds of space by make-shift structures—*saṛis*, *choṭ* cloths, trashed plywood, and any material that is opaque or semi-opaque—is uncommon. The purdah system, a mystique of "traditional" forms of Muslim and Hindu exclusion (two different functions) of women from the world outside, is of relatively limited interpretive use in the *mohallā* context. [31] In subalternized, sub-urban, industrialized spaces such as the *mohallā* and *mohallā* bazaar, where bodies are densely packed into "living spaces," the question that arises is: in these eviscerated realities, what does managing risk actually mean? [32]

Local and *mohallā* people squarely point to poor governmentality and the relative lack of flexible laws, while continuing to strengthen their own subjectivities, which such *aslī/naqlī* or licit/illicit realities themselves produce. The question of subjectivity gains especial importance because the popular representation of the private spilling its guts into the public points to the violations and violence attached to *mohallā* life, and yet, community members are also equally attentive to the details of conservation, recycling, remaking, and reusing materials, from the cheaply bought to the pilfered.[33] The licit/illicit therefore seems to be negotiated on an everyday basis in *mohallā* bazaar spaces. The preponderance of informal arrangements has often led scholars of development to forget that governmental reason can cause such consequences, and yet it is the same governmental reason that makes *mohallā* inhabitants depend on each other and learn to use and reuse resources in the teeth of scarcity and emergencies.

Examples of the gray and the clumsy: managing electrical risks in the *mohallā*

In the context of informality, the biggest question is the management of risks and how to narrate it without creating negative stereotypes.[34] The question of access to materials and infrastructure like power, housing, water, etc. determine immaterial statuses, such as *izzat* or respect, which are in turn connected to one's sense of belonging to the community at large. These also bring to light the actual reality of the "clumsy" or the "patchwork" of the everyday in a community setting.

The term "clumsy" is usually used negatively, as in Ananya Roy's treatment of public events as varied as the Calcutta Book Fair, urban planning, and Left Front politics in Kolkata, West Bengal, the last being Roy's focus of inquiry in *City Requiem*. Treating the "clumsy" in a negative light would indicate that there is a "neat" version of it somewhere in real or virtual space. Also pertinent, my entire field is littered with examples of broken and broken-down materials (reconstructed handlooms, machine parts, makeshift partitions, bazaar, fuel-guzzling modes of transportation, pollution, garbage, and many other unsavory realities that fit the broad category of "clumsy") that are nevertheless marked by vitality and presence. By the same token, I am unsure if politics—even West Bengal state politics, which must negotiate with everyday "chaotic" realities—can be called clumsy either. This is so because politics by its very definition

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[31] Hanna Papanek, "Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter," *Comparative Studies in Society and History 15:3 (Jun. 1973): 289-325.*

[32] In Kamarhati, the only public space for hanging out for *hawa khana* or "fresh air" is the Chhaigadi Maidan ("ash field" or landfill), listed under Kamarhati Municipality as a "small playground."

[33] Cheap, pilfered, and other materials include plastics, cardboard, tin, etc.

[34] Roy, *City Requiem.* I particularly suggest that ethnographies are not merely "spatialized" interventions as Roy, Samaddar, Appadurai, and others working with the notion of spaces and places tend to thinking; they are "spatio-temporal" interventions instead.

is always in a state of flux.[35] Politics around the informal is even more so because it is in a constant state of negotiation and active engagement with markets, state, locals, and the modes of power and gender.[36]

A good deal of emphasis is usually given in state, national, corporate, and academic reports and research to the notion of the illicit in informal spaces like the *mohallā* bazaar and so-called "slums." This section takes stock of the problem of *bijlī* or electricity, a basic commodity and service without which the infrastructure of the household, small businesses, and the *mohallā* bazaar would not be possible. This will help clarify the relationship between illicit infrastructure and the management of everyday risks, such as stealing electricity for the *mohallā* bazaar and everyday household life and business.

The bazaar is usually connected to the main thoroughfare, side-streets, and lanes and by-lanes. Electrification grids and networks are mostly complete in these "main" spaces as both the West Bengal State Electricity Board (WBSEB) and Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation (CESC) have extensive networks in the bazaar and jute areas of Kamarhati and only WBSEB in Naihati-Gouripur areas. But installing networks does not guarantee services for a majority of consumers, for whom the price of electricity has been on the list of *mahangāī* (high price) items since the 1990s (21 percent increase in tariffs on a national average), especially with more private-public partnerships weighing heavily on private contracting, outsourcing, and shareholding. The 2011 Census of India figures show that though 85 per cent and above urban households used electricity in 2010-11, the national average of transmission and distribution (T&D) loss is about 35-40 per cent.[37] Recently, Sunila Kale in *Electrifying India* (2014) has pointed out the challenges in understanding a technical issue such as electricity without its precise social and political contexts of infrastructure and development. While Kale explains the gap in electrification in modern India as the result of conflicts between the Nehruvian State and sectoral planning and market needs, her work does not investigate the micro-local spaces of neighborhoods using a variety of methods to pilfer or share electricity as examples of informal exchanges. Thus, looking at the underside of "official policy," we can say the problem of the "local" remains palpable, especially in the case of lighting up a *mohallā* bazaar, which is the hub of all activity during the day and late into the night. The next section gives us a sense of how locals manage their *bijlī majbūrī* (electrical vulnerability) through the phenomenon of "hooking," an illicit activity that is commonplace in *mohallā* life but seldom written about. It is noteworthy that a technical commodity and service like electricity often requires the technical skills of local electric *mistrīs* or electricians, who often volunteer for such precarious work for the sake of community building.

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[35] See Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed*. Also see a wide range of texts on politics and its relationship to the subject. See particularly Foucault's notion of biopolitics in *The Birth of Biopolitics* and *Security, Territory, Population*. See note on governmentality in the Introduction.

[36] Looking at gender and work, for example, Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum have amply demonstrated in *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009), the difference between productive and nonproductive work is over-narrated and has been derived from valorizing the factory-system as the only means of production. They provide a counterwork in the space of domesticity where class is forged through the culture of servitude. Servitude in the modern context means transferring nonproductive work to the socially disadvantaged but culturally managed through middle-class families. These kinds of work—traditionally known as service—are productive as they involve labor markets, commodification, and ultimately, the creation of value.

[37] Census of India, 2011.

Figure 14

"Hooking." A new apartment complex on Graham Road, Kamarhati next to a "hooking" zone; mosque in the background; sign on the terracotta tiled roof says, "*Eid Mubārak* (Happy Eid)." Photo by Snehabrata Ghoshal, 2014.

A sizeable percentage of *mohallā* households and establishments therefore manage their *bijlī majbūrī* (electrical vulnerability) by "hooking," thereby eliminating the need to buy electricity through the legitimate channels. They are unofficially known as power pilferers or *bijlī chor* and have a wide network of auction and distribution to sub-contractors in the state. It would be naïve to believe that pilferage is limited to make-shift *lāḍi* and mobile vendors only, as this is a larger network that often involves "respectable" megaplexes, public puja or festivities, and political rallies. The theft occurs on many lower, intermediary, and upper echelons—it is a proper network that requires technical knowledge of handling high tension wires as well as grids—depending on where the power is being stolen from. Common methods include an iron hook (hence the urban slang, "hooking") attached to cables to distribute power to a limited number of outlets. Other methods include using pliers to attach the end to a high tension wire and draw an extension cord to be fitted to a micro-grid that is then used to redistribute power to individual units. The task is complex enough to require dedicated electrical *mistrīs* or fitters or mechanics on board. To combat this practice, there are anti-hooking squads in both the State-owned and private-owned electric companies, but the local network is too complex, too "decentralized" to phase out selected parts without hurting legitimate buyers and consumers. Apparently, less than 40% of revenues come from consumers in these areas, according to company and state electricity board reports.[38] A recent report, however, has indicated that pilferage is down as a result of improvement in "official" distribution of power in individual units in suburban industrial *mohallā*. The problem, however, has not been "solved" and remains acute.

[38] Note how the media reports these thefts: "Local *hoodlums* put the poles on the block and the highest bidder supplies stolen power to households [and small stalls] in the area" (emphasis mine), *The Economic Times*, October 1, 2013.

Figure 15

Bazaar at the crossing of Graham Road and Craig Street lit by "hooked" electricity at night during "phase outs"—note the partial lighting; evidently, the fruit seller's *lāḍi* on the right can only be illuminated if he has a "make-shift" connection; the *lāḍi* and hole-in-the-wall stalls on the left have more "permanent" connections. Photo by Snehabrata Ghoshal, 2014.

While electrocution on a high tension wire during the act of "hooking" remains very much a possibility, a little bit of risk involving an improvised metal hook dislodged by a ridiculously simple-looking bamboo pole for the sake of having power is always worth taking. As indicated earlier, while it is true that existing power companies do not make the necessary revenue as a result of hooking—and that is the source of tension between the locals and the company inspectors from time to time—there is a system of *chanda* or subscription that benefits everyone while the informal sharing of power to light up the *mohallā* homes and businesses goes on. This is just one of many instances in which one can recognize that informality actually works within a precarious boundary of *aslī* sharing, though the act itself may be dubbed as *do nambarī* or illegal, if not "criminal," carrying heavy fines as well as a few months' sentence.[39] Hooking is not always a permanent activity either; in many cases, it may be temporary. The tiny businesses, local libraries, and other heavily frequented spaces I was using to hang out for ethnographic work would get a hook if they were unable to pay the bills for that particular month, as it cut costs down significantly. Note that a majority of these latter businesses and establishments were legitimate, with trade licenses and proper paperwork.

If hooking in the bazaar can be treated as an essentially community act (where shopkeepers and locals will protect technicians and "hooker" mechanics), the in-between spaces of a side street or by-lane is transformed into a highly complex ecosystem. This is the place of the "familiar" which, despite whirlwinds of change, is yet to become "unfamiliar." Or is it possible that despite changing habits in consumption patterns, there is a desire to conserve some "essential" space for the community morphed onto the bazaar?

Aslī/naqlī and the mohallā bazaar community: land-capital relations within the gray

To a casual observer, the grayness of the *mohallā* will never be apparent. The bazaar area seems especially open, with no hidden places for shady dealings to go on. It is, in short, the *khule ām,* "open commons." Yet there is a sense that *do nambarī,* or "no.2"—an expression connoting not

[39] Power theft in the state of Maharashtra, for example, is a non-bailable offence now. See the report in *The Economic Times,* January 6, 2005. Other states like West Bengal, Bihar, and others file FIRs (First Information Reports) against offenders at the local police station.

only "second rate," but also any kind of "shady dealings," as in fake or adulterated goods—is lurking here, from land dealings to business entrepreneurships in digital commodities.

A common refrain in the so-called "encroached" or illicit stall-spaces doing everyday business selling *pān-biḍī* or *chai-pānī* is,

> *kya badi bāt hai ki thoḍā sā jagah le liye hain dhandā pānī ke liye*?
> (What is the big deal that I have encroached a little [allegedly government] space/property/land to make a living?)

The more aggressive would say,

> *sarkār kā ukhār legā hamārā*? *Tolā dete hain na pulis ko aur gunde log ko?*
> (What will the government do? ["*ukhār*" is a common mild slang among men indicating pubic hair being pulled off] I give *tolā* (extortion money) to the police and the goons.)

This behavior may seem contradictory at first. Coming from migrant working families, everyone knows the value of "a pinpoint of land." The reference to the famous dice scene in the *Mahabharata* is known to one and all through B.R. Chopra's 1988 TV epic drama, *The Mahabharata*, aired on the national television network, Doordarshan, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the scene, Duryodhana, the Kuru prince, refuses to give Yudhisthira, the eldest of the Pandavas, even a pinpoint of the land that supposedly rightfully belongs to them without war. Those who have land in the *muluk* (country) are well aware of the scale of violence that land politics (often linked with caste and mafia politics) have unleashed on present and past generations in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal, especially in the wake of Nandigram, Singur, and other rural/agricultural or "tribal" places in West Bengal grabbed by the state and private capitalists in the last decade or so.[40] The awareness of land grabbing politics is so uppermost on the minds of the people that undergraduate students from out-of-work jute laboring families in Naihati-Gouripur routinely publish essays and articles on land politics, often citing Premchand's Hindi/Urdu narratives of land and peasant dispossession.[41] In short, land is the least negotiable entity in the genealogy of migrant politics. And yet, for a *lāḍi* vendor to say, "What is the big deal …?" is also perfectly normal under the circumstances. Why?

Municipality and company land histories are beset with manipulation of land laws through petty *dalal* (middlemen) dealing, political nexuses, and other means. The *mohallā* land, built usually on jute company property, but increasingly leased out to private buyers and owners with strong local political connections to gangs as well as influential local businessmen, has been undergoing significant changes since the 1980s. Municipality records and archives prior to the 1980s can tell us little about these changes as tabulation, accounting, and enumeration of the number of "mutations" of individual plots are not always clear. Today, the situation is marginally better with the introduction of Right to Information Act (RTI, 2005) that makes disclosure mandatory.

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[40] This goes hand in hand with control over other natural and human resources like coal, water, labor, etc. People in the *mohallā* are equally aware of the current state of land grabbing politics in West Bengal that had come down like a ton of bricks on the heads of the CPIM politicians since 2009-10. The same people are now aware of the legacy of land-grabbing caused by the current party in power, namely the Trinamool Congress Party in West Bengal.

[41] Premchand (1880-1936) was a prolific and esteemed prose writer in both Urdu and Hindi known particularly for his novels and short stories that engage with the lives of peasants and the rural poor, such as "Sadgati (Deliverance)," (made into a short TV movie by Satyajit Ray in 1981), and *Godaan* (*The Gift of a Cow*), 1936.

Debate rages about who the real beneficiaries of RTI truly are, but as a result of RTI, of the implementable schemes, Basic Services to the Urban Poor (BSUP) under Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) has been recently made available in local municipalities like the Kamarhati Municipality, for example. These reports indicate that municipalities are committed to helping the urban poor, especially those living in urban slums. But unsuprisingly, the report does not indicate the real nature of the dealings in land and other "vested" interests.

There seems to be a consensus among the *mohallā* residents that a great deal depends on local land controllers and dealers—in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, they are known as land mafia, and in West Bengal, they are known as promoters and contractors who play multifunction roles as *tolabaaz* (extortionist), developer, marketing agent, and *dalāl* of local trading houses as well as political parties. For the average *bandā* (dude), sub-urban industrial land politics is therefore not the same as caste-based land politics in the rural areas.[42] In the town, there are opportunities to "rise" as *mohallā* politics is about making new connections so that one's *dhandā*—white, black, or gray—can go on. There are several examples of individuals making it big in land dealings—one handy example is the grandson of a well-known union leader in the jute neighborhood who has quickly become a real estate magnet and a labor contractor in one of the *mohallā* areas. For those interested in *dhandā-pānī* and possessing entrepreneurial instinct, land grabbing and real estate is perhaps the quickest way to local power though it is also politically fraught with petty networks of crime, embezzlement, and some mafia activity.[43] Typically, a few square feet of empty municipal or company land grabbing is usually done by invoking *mohallā* politics of land use and associated rights to use (in contrast to land ownership) for mainly personal or *dhandā* (business) use. In this scenario, the questions of rights, use, community, and consumption do not cancel each other out—instead, they reinforce each other.

To a limited extent, this is the kind of informality that development and urban theorists and economic anthropologists, and others like Arjun Appadurai, Ananya Roy, Ranabir Samaddar, Janet Roitman, and others have been attempting to theorize since the 1990s. It will be useful to see how much of those insights are applicable on the ground, especially when we examine the problem of infrastructure and the circulation of commodities in the *khule ām* or, in this case, the open local bazaar.

Circulation of commodities in the *mohallā* bazaar

I have already established that the *mohallā* bazaar is a tightly-knit space of *dhandā-pānī* (business-livelihood). Local, supra-local, and trans-global producers and companies send in their marketing agents to "penetrate" the *mohallā* bazaar. They are usually engaged in aggressive

[42] Municipality land records indicate unitary coverage of company land; but there is no indication of dealings after the 1960s and 1970s; a majority of the new developments since the 1990s has occurred through local mutations in which the local councilor or MLA or *bidhayakji* has had a share of the deal. Municipal land prices are ridiculously low—open bazaar prices are astronomical—and people will pay to grab a piece of land to build a tenement and turn it into a micro-local business. For most people paying rent is easier and less of a liability; though everyone is looking for an opportunity to make a *pucca* or concrete house with a flat *chhat* or terrace made of cement and not *tali* or earthen tiles, tin, or asbestos, or worse, plastic or plywood as patchwork.

[43] Land grabbing has generally contributed to a local mafia, which has semi-formal links with the state and non-state actors. For a general understanding of the networked realities of land grabbing, see Stefano Liberti, *Land Grabbing: Journeys in the New Colonialism* (London and New York: Verso, 2014).

marketing practices through the print, television, and mobile media. Commodities such as tobacco products, spices, pharmaceuticals, and mobile phones as well as *janswartha parisevā* or public welfare services, cable television networks, credit financing, gold loan services, and numerous other micro-credit services operate on the success of "penetration" of the *mohallā* bazaar. Multinational companies use various methods—from installing fridges in *chai-pānī* stalls to making new DTP signboards on stall fronts, thereby demanding new infrastructure to be accommodated in makeshift spaces constructed by reused and impermanent building materials. Further, electricity, security (you need to lock down your stall especially at night to prevent pilferage of a fridge or other fancy items), and other costs need to be factored in the running of a makeshift stall. In addition, one may have to pay a little more *tolā* (extortion fee) as more gadgets mean more credit worthiness and more business.

Every micro-entrepreneur in the *mohallā* bazaar is acutely aware of how multinational consumer goods (FMCG) and (non-FMCG) products, financial services, etc. are trying to gain access to their stalls in the *ali-gali* (lanes and bylanes) of the *mohallā* bazaar. Others who are able to penetrate this space with varying degrees of success are social entrepreneurs as well as government workers like census workers, public health workers, hyper-local media reporters, and local law enforcement officials.[44] However, even then, access and penetration are not as deep as one may think from the outside or by counting the number of DTP signs. This is mainly because of the relative difficulty of physical access to *mohallā* space compared to, say, the Bengali *pāṛā* space that is a stone's throw away from Graham Road and Mill Approach Road (see map). But depending on the locality, commodities may flow more in the *mohallā* bazaar compared to the Bengali *pāṛā* bazaar because of the increased circulation of capital in the *mohallā* as a result of credit-financing and microfinancing in the localities. This evidently creates a lop-sided bazaar community, in which the *bhadralok* or 'respectable' middle class people must depend on the *mohallā* bazaar for accessing a greater variety of commodities, *aslī* or *naqlī*. I suggest that the commodity-form connects the working-class and the *bhadralok,* although in a way that does little to demystify the *mohallā* bazaar.

[44] Hyper-local media reporters abound in the *mohallā* bazaar areas; the aim of local television companies is to cover as much local news as possible.

Figure 16

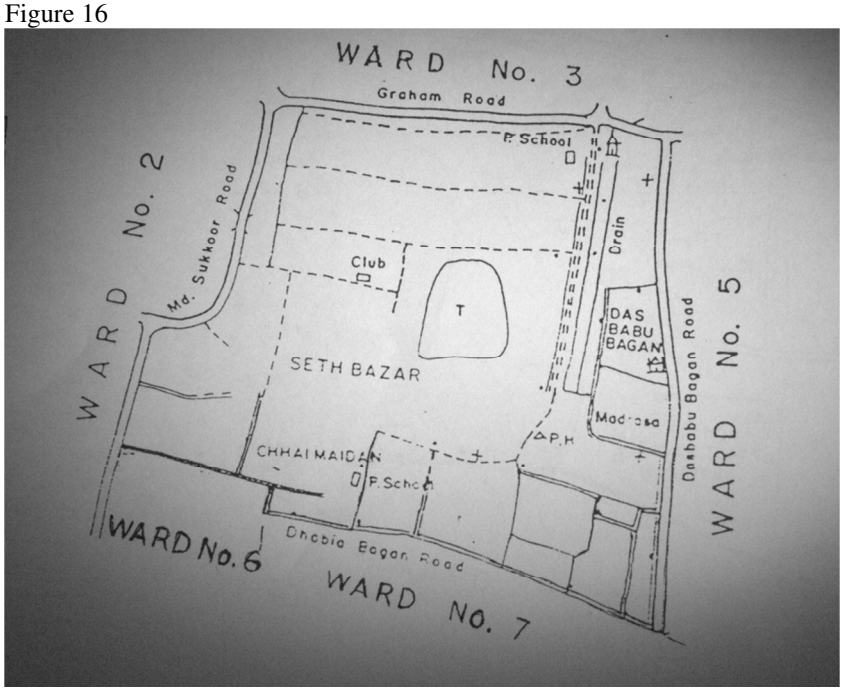

Photo of a hand-sketched map (not drawn to scale) of main ethnographic site in Kamarhati, showing wards 2, 3, and 5. Designated *mohallā* bazaar is around Graham Road, but the bazaar spills onto Craig Street between wards 2 and 3, the entire stretch of Graham Road, Md. Sukkoor (Shakoor) Road, Dhobia Bagan Road, and Dashubabu Bagan Road. Source: Kamarhati Municipality files, accessed 2011.

Bazaar, commodity-form, and the new 'hormone'

Shifting the ethnography about nineteen miles north to the Naihati area of West Bengal, we can investigate the *mohallā* bazaar in its changing form, which is connected through supra-local means to other spaces such as the Kamarhati jute *mohallā* and other urban bazaars. Most importantly, these spaces are marked by changing practices within global manufacturing and marketing. In this context, the old *mohallā* accommodates the new commodities and forms without recourse to hybridity.[45] The moments of change also produce fleeting ideological tensions between individuals and the community, where people feel that something is transgressed as the bazaar changes around them at break-neck speed. The flooding of the commodity markets, for example, seems to have drawn out the "*yuvak-yuvatiyān*" or the new and younger generation out of the *mohallā* woodworks, to quote a local chronicler, linguist, activist, and academic, Gorakhnath Mishra, of jute life. This simply means there is a divide between the "*upyogitāvādī*" (utility ideology) and the "*upbhogtāvādī*" (consumerist ideology) worldviews of the market. This divide can be better understood by giving the younger "others" a chance to discuss their views of the moral compass, which appears to be less and less important to them as "computer education," social media, and mobile phones take over their lives.

[45] A wide range of theorists and commentators including Ray in *Cultures of Servitude* and Bear in '"This Body is Our Body"' have suggested that any change on the ground does not necessarily point to hybridity. Instead, recent commentators are interested in tracing the discrete elements such as caste, class, gender, infrastuctures, and emotional histories of change, adaptation, and urban forms of renewal. There is a different ethical demand on the work of the critical today.

Bikram Shaw, a doctoral student in Hindi with high school and college-level teaching credentials and the son of a jute worker in Gouripur near Naihati in North 24-Parganas, sums up this situation well. Bikram, who has grown up in the area and considers himself part of both the working-class and an academic and cultural community, says that although the bazaar is old, there are streaks of the new. Someone has injected it with a new "hormone," a metaphor for the new digital commodity, mostly fake and cheap.

On reflection, the hormonal analogy is apt. The knowledge of hormones comes from its wide application in animal products since the late 1960s. In the *mohallā* bazaar, it comes in the form of the "boiler chicken" (actually "broiler chicken," hormonally treated chicken from private-owned and state-owned poultry farms intended for mass consumption), which has found a wide and dependable distribution mechanism in the bazaars all over West Bengal and India. Similarly, fisheries, hothouses, and other "artificial" (read hormonal) agro-animal products have increasingly found their way into urban and sub-urban bazaars and consequently, people's diets. It is not clear if hormonally treated produce and food products can be easily delineated from the *deshī* or "local" (loosely, *aslī*) produce anymore—the *deshī* produce in a bazaar is limited to the marginal *chāshī* (farmer) and *sāk māshī* (greens auntie), who claim to have procured these from non-fertilizer and non-hormonal farms. Most food and consumables in bazaars in West Bengal come from the *ārat* or storage that has "cold storage" facilities. It is part of the state directive in West Bengal to ensure that food items are properly stored before they get to the consumer. It is also necessary that every *āratdār* get a fair share of storage. This is official policy, but state-owned storage facilities are often beset with difficulties ranging from power outages (affecting cold storing) to improper handling and *phore* (middleman) control over storage space, aggravated by a complex bureaucracy.[46]

Studies and reports originating in the Animal Resources Development, Food and Supplies, and Food Processing Industries and Horticulture departments in West Bengal indicate how these new developments must be seen in light of the 21st century. That is, not in light of Nehruvian ideals of "self-reliance" techniques (producer-patriot and consumer-patriot[47]), but in terms of "parks" where work is called play. Hence, Food Parks or Jute Parks, etc. are the true face of "Banglar mukh" ("the face of Bengal," a play on a famous line by an equally famous modernist Bengali poet) that the current party in power, Trinamool Congress Parliamentary Party (TMC), advertises both in print, electronic, and the internet media.[48] It is in this light that we need to investigate the phenomenon of the new hormonal rush, as Bikram succinctly puts it. How do we treat the new in a practice that accommodates *aslī/naqlī*, licit/illicit, cold storage/*deshi*, *khānti/milāwatī* or pure/mixed, etc.? More importantly, what does this new hormonal rush look like and how shall we explain it discursively?

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[46] On food storage, local bazaar, and the public distribution woes in West Bengal—see vernacular media publications like *Anandabazaar Patrika* reporting on the problem for several decades. For example, "*bikol ac, pochā khābār, rājnīti-te duhsswapno-jātrā"*("Broken AC, rotten food, nightmarish journey in politics," staff report on food politics in West Bengal, *Anandabazar Patrika,* 14th July, 2014.

[47] See Satish Deshpande, "Imagined Economies: Styles of Nation-Building in Twentieth Century India." *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, Special Issue on Careers of Modernity, 25-26 (1993): 5-35.

[48] See the West Bengal government website, http://westbengal.gov.in/, for more on the official policy of "*Banglar mukh*," or "The Face of Bengal." This is a fragment of a line from a famous poem written by Bengal's popular modernist poet, Jibanananda Das (1899-1954). The line goes: "*Bānglār mukh āmi dekhiyāchi,*" meaning "I have seen Bengal's face."

BlackCherry and Calvin Kleen: examples of new "hormone?"

The hormonal analogy above gives us the opportunity to examine if the two jute neighborhood sites—Kamarhati and Naihati/Gouripur—could be connected through the circulation of cheap and fake commodities, which could be understood through the metaphor of the 'new hormone.'

Earlier in Chapter 3 ("Inside the Elephant Machine") in the factory at Kamarhati, we had seen how a worker like Iqbal hesitates to work with cheap China steel bolt remakes of pinions to load into an unwieldy analog machine, because he perceives such actions as the path to a slippery slope. Iqbal works with and on "dumb" machines, but he plays with "smart" machines like a cell phone (though cell phones in urban slang could be further divided into dumb and smart—*bhānrua*, "pimp" or here, "unrespectable," meaning QWERTY keypad phones and *smartua,* "smart," meaning touchpad and double subscriber identity module (SIM) equipped phones). But Iqbal cannot afford an *aslī* brand and so he is happy to buy a *naqlī* branded phone.

Figure 17

"Calvin Kleen" (*Naqlī* Calvin Klein) belt made of jute. Photo by Jackson Whittington, 2014.

The point is that Iqbal does not seem to mind buying a cheap remake of the global Canadian brand, Blackberry rebranded as "BlackCherry" for himself or his family members. Like Iqbal, many others buy remakes of global brands, such as "Noquia" dual SIM smartphones instead of the Finnish cell phone giant's signature product, Nokia. The list could go on, including Calvin Klein counterfeited as Calvin Kleen (as in the belt made of jute pictured above), Gucci as Guchi, and other global brands as well as hundreds of local items flooding the bazaar for consumption. Others are keen to buy similar phony phones or accessories for their teenage sons and/or daughters because remakes are cheaper for real, even though the material might be fake or the product a remake of the "original" brand. Are we to conclude that a mechanic like Iqbal is displaying paradoxical behavior by conserving his analog machinery while at the same time giving in to the pleasures of consumption of ubiquitous items such as a cellphone in the form of a counterfeit "global" brand? Is this just "shallow"/"low class" behavior of a *mazdūr* or is this a sign of something else altogether?

We can look at this paradox in two ways. First, like Satish Deshpande and others, we can imagine that the modernist and modernizing symmetries, triggered in part by the post-Independence Nehruvian ideals of an "imagined economy" based on the ideas of traditional capitalism, where commodities come from designated places of production aimed primarily at self-sufficiency and nation-building, have been "ruptured." (This is Appadurai's long-term view

of globalization as well, as I have discussed earlier.) The GSMA association is explicit about the question of authenticity and safety, pretending to live in a Nehruvian state of regulation. According to a report by Mobile Manufacturers Forum, governments are warned about consumers buying "counterfeit" and "substandard" mobile phones as this "infringes the trademark or design of an original and authentic product."[49] They also warn consumers of higher concentration of lead and other toxic substances in substandard phones. But if the price is right, will levels of toxicity in a mobile phone really matter? We need to judge this question in light of exposure to large particulate matter (LPM) and toxic substances in the factories where workers like Iqbal earn their living.[50]

But a BlackCherry is undesirable from the point of view of a "planned" economy, as it infringes and transgresses "official" or "State" policy. This transgression can be understood in terms of current theories of globalization, particularly the notion of transnationality, in which the commodity-form shapes one's beliefs about citizenship and subjectivity. Pertinent here is Aihwa Ong's logic of the "flexible" and new modes of commodification in "transnational" capitalism, in which such transgressions occur well "within" the rules of the familiar. While Ong is interested in the question of citizenship in the context of "transnationality" practices—and I agree with her logic—my interest lies mainly in "translocality" practices that govern the manufacture and circulation of commodities in local bazaar life and communities. Translocality may be understood as an evolving local that is willing to accommodate commodities from non-local sources without necessarily sacrificing the more familiar and the known practices of the local. One could say that the BlackCherry or the Noquia circulates as a counterfeit within a market where *milāwatī* or mixture is the norm.

The second perspective is this: the "rupture" or more likely, a new form of "accommodation" is most visible in the form of the "rumors of globalization,"[51] made even more visible through the surfeit of the counterfeit in a physical bazaar space that is governed both by the territorial and by the virtual imagination. In local terms, some of the *agal-bagal* (fringes/side areas) of the bazaar are changing in this precise sense. This includes building materials, styles of signboard printing, and much more.[52] It is debatable whether we can associate these changes with the global/virtual bazaar in the precise sense of "global flows" or something similar. Global theorists like Appadurai, on the one hand, would like to see this space in terms of the more communicable "abstract" lines of exchange, inviting us to embrace the interconnected nature of the flow, economic and cultural. Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay would like to suggest the global is nonexistent in these situations, as the "original" does not matter, only the counterfeit does. Mukhopadhyay makes this clear in the context of buying and selling in the market. His critique is directed mainly at Appadurai, for whom with buying and selling comes a place for the creation of value, though he limits the creation of value in the local to its own cosmology—a "fragile performance." Mukhopadhyay, criticizing Appadurai for failing to recognize that this cosmology of the local—

[49] See "Counterfeit/Substandard Mobile Phones: A Resource Guide for Governments," *Mobile Manufacturers Forum* http://spotafakephone.com/docs/eng/MMF_CounterfeitPhones_EN.pdf , viewed on 9 and 10 July, 2014.
[50] Several studies have concluded the levels of toxicity in a jute mill. See for example, Nilanjan Das, *Of Dust and Distress* (Delhi: Indian Publishers and Distributors, 2004). Das has conducted a systematic survey of the levels of toxicity in two jute mills in Kolkata.
[51] To borrow Mukhopadhyay's phrase.
[52] For the changes in the use of printing and telecommunication technologies, especially commercial and other printing and telecommunication methods, see D K Ghosh, *The Great Digital Transformation: A Saga of Sustainable Development* (New Delhi: Sunrise Publications, 2004).

to many it is cosmolocal or even cosmopolitical[53]—is actually neither to be counted for its notion of "difference" from the "global" nor should it be understood as an *effect* of the global or globalization, but is *globalization* itself. He cites a simple case that resonates with my example of cheap and fake phones above: the preponderance of Chinese-make items in the global market is not an example of Chinese globalization or Sinification. Southern globalization is not derived from the Northern beyond its most "basic" operational forms; so, everything else in the South is an original in itself. That is, we can neither compare their empirical differences nor parade their particular forms of identity and difference based on a trumped-up particular-universal dichoṭomy. In simple terms, these globalizations do not "flow" entirely from Wall street-type or Shanghai-styled globalization, nor are they purely indigenous, at least technically speaking as technology from the processing of tobacco in Raja chap *khaini* to local packaging has some "foreign" components in them and have been manufactured in an automated manufacturing facility in India or outside India. Based on this information, globalization is trans-state, where the circulation of commodities has increasingly taken numberless forms. The commodities, in most cases, are consumed by the non-elite in places like the *mohallā* bazaar, where no one stresses about the "origins," nor worries about provincializing Euro-American experiences in the postcolony. As I see it, ethnographically, there are still loose ends that Mukhopadhyay's argument does not cover. For example, how much can we know of the translocal (or in Mukhopadhyay's express terminology, the "vernacular") through a heavily tilted theoretical framework when the problem of the aforementioned vernacular is embedded in its own ethnographic practice? To me, it appears therefore that neither Appadurai nor Mukhopadhyay have paid sufficient attention to the everyday processes of the ethnographic field of the *mohallā* bazaar spaces, where everything from infrastructure to commodity-forms and exchanges occur through known limits and boundaries. One could argue that these local practices strengthen the premises of the translocal in distinct ways as the chapter has, hopefully, demonstrated.

Figure 18

Bazaar entrance, Graham Road, Kamarhati; *lāḍi* structures are visible; new "megaplexes" like Sony Plaza is visible on the right; note the two lit-bulbs below a "power transmitter"—these can be used for hooking too. Photo by Snehabrata Ghoshal. 2014.

[53] See Mukhopadhyay. Also see Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, eds. *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

Conclusion

By using the idea of *aslī/naqlī* to explain the make-up of the bazaar spaces, I hope I have been able to show how the bazaar as an *aslī* community space has always been flooded with *naqlī* things; old-fashioned *milāwatī* and *bhejāl* (adulteration) precede or go hand in hand with the counterfeit, fake, remade or remixed in the era of globalization. This simply means that *aslī/naqlī* has been a constant presence in the *mohallā* bazaar context at all times. Thus, it has acquired the power to shape a belief-system and sense of *izzat,* or respect, which allows one to belong to the community. As we have seen in our mini-tour of the *mohallā* spaces, *izzat* is maintained by keeping things together in make-shift ways. The paradoxical situation is, however, that *izzat* is also constantly threatened by the illicit, clandestine, counterfeit, and violent forms of local and supra-local life which are beyond the means of managing risks this chapter has explored.

The question remains: how do nondescript, make-shift, and hole-in-the-wall stalls in the streets and community spaces of the *mohallā* bazaar shape the everyday politics of the community? Or is this a tall claim after all, since local politics or governmentality resides in the hands of the supra-local municipal bodies that regulate local life through licensing, tenders, schemes, and "cultural" events based on the "secular" calendar?[54] Postcolonial histories have tended to suggest that the uprooted semi-rural migrant community in industrial spaces is less adept at modern social and political exchanges, preferring to practice rituals, religious, and localized exchanges. From an ethnographic perspective, I find it hard to believe that a migrant worker (past or present) will not notice the surfeit of things and commodities in the familiar "open" spaces of the local bazaar, which is often run by members of his or her own community. Modern exchanges and consumption are a constant source of anxiety in the bazaar as a result of low wages, inflation, and *mehengai* (high prices). If so, how is the *mohallā* bazaar not a part of *aslī* politics? In fact, most of the local politics—even unionized politics—takes place in the *chai-pānī* shops and other informal spaces of the bazaar. I explore the vital space of the *chai-pānī* and its relationship with specific politics like jute politics in the last chapter.

[54] There are three types of calendars for observing Indian holidays—municipal, religious, and secular.

Chapter 5
chai-pānī and *mohallā* politics

chai-pānī: introduction

The closing chapter investigates a well-rehearsed topic in South Asian labor, especially following the emergence of Subaltern Studies Collective (SSC): the role played by politics in the life of a postcolonial and developing nation like India, or any other nation in the global South.[1] Gender/feminist critics have been affected by Subaltern Studies to quite an extent, though their critiques of SSC are substantial, arising out of their need to rewrite histories of labor and work from the perspective of gender, a vast area of neglect in Subaltern and postcolonial studies. [2]

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[1] See Dipesh Chakrabarty, "A Small History of *Subaltern Studies*," *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 3-19. See also Chakrabarty's "Two Histories of Capital" and "Translating Life-Worlds" in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). For Chakrabarty, the importance of the fallout of the rational history of the Enlightenment in the making of the colonized world and politics cannot be properly assessed without understanding "difference." Chakrabarty's purported critique of Enlightenment based on "difference" has drawn extensive criticism, especially from gender and feminist scholars, who have accused Chakrabaty of missing the gender angle of work altogether. See Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009). See also "Introduction" for my critique of Chakrabarty's analysis of labor in the jute mills.

[2] Sumit Sarkar's critique of the later subaltern projects as postmodernist and culturalist in *Writing Social History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998) and "Postmodernism and the Writing of History," in *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), 154-194 has had a notable impact on scholars such as Himani Banerjee in "Projects of Hegemony: Towards a Critique of Subaltern Studies' 'Resolution of the Women's Question,'" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 35, No. 11 (2000): 902-920 and Prathama Banerjee in "The Subaltern-effect: Negation to Deconstruction Hybridity?", Review of *Subaltern Studies X*, Gautam Bhadra et al ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), *Biblio* (1999): 17-18 <http://www.lib.virginia.edu/area-studies/SouthAsia/SAserials/Biblio/bss10.html>. Recently, feminist scholars like Ray and Qayum have pushed the boundaries of the productive-unproductive fetish of labor by engaging invisible forms of work like domestic labor in colonial and postcolonial households which have contributed to the making of class, especially the middle class, in modern India. They are especially keen to represent the hitherto unstudied gestures within households involving master and servant (master sitting down and servant standing up or expressions of feeling for servants as kin). Incidentally, the latter has a transcendent quality—to understand how transcendent this "culture" of servitude is, see response on the notion of "respect" by a team of researchers on informatics attempting to solve the problem of "mobile communications" between employers (households in residential Mumbai complexes) and domestic workers in "Novel Information System Addresses Unemployment in India's Informal Sector," http://www.ischool.berkeley.edu/newsandevents/news/20140509sahay, accessed October 2014 and May 2015. One of the researchers suggests that "Domestic help have traditionally been treated as part of the family … so the job has a lot of respect." Clearly, the bias towards technological fix blinds researchers to understanding the historical roots of the sociology of inequality and misrecognition (in Michel Pecheaux's sense of ideological misrecognition) in the form of imagined respect. The bias is mainly entrenched in the realization that middle class families have a hard time finding domestic workers as one researcher acknowledges. This is evident in their research findings: one shopkeeper in Mumbai has received 1500 requests from middle class families for household help. In contrast, the researchers could find one instance where the household worker has complained about not finding enough work. The researchers conclude that an entire community is not being served because there is no organized matchmaking between informal workers and households. My critique of this project is based on the simplicity of the relationship it projects: matchmaking (presumably done by a mobile phone "app" or application) precludes the existence of an equal relationship (employer-employee). In reality, there are two communities with two different historical contexts and sociological need—the residential complex inhabitants of Mumbai and the army of domestic workers who live in "slums." The two communities are not equal, despite the rising enrollments of

Drawing on the works of feminist scholars, I suggest that there is another, even more neglected perspective: that of communities' perception of politics. Partha Chatterjee has attempted to correct the SSC problem of lack of engagement with the community by reflecting on the community itself through a purportedly new form of institutionalization, or more appropriately, "community institutions."[3] Cultural anthropologists, development theorists, and interdisciplinary scholars including Arjun Appadurai, Ananya Roy, and Ranabir Samaddar, see these institutions as vital to understanding the demands of non-electoral, non-representational, civic and self-help bodies.[4] In the present chapter, I suggest that *chai-pānī* or tea shops need to be viewed as a way of sensing the pulse of the community, the place where subalternization and such kinds of politics are shaped. Ethnography of *chai-pānī* in Kolkata gives us the opportunity to study the concept and practice of "community institutions" like the *mohallā* (neighborhood or community). This is specifically evident in the common spaces of *chai-pānī* shops, which resound with labor, union, and non-union chatter, along with the telling of proverbs, jokes, and slang, giving important clues to the complex ethical life of the *mohallā*. Further, these everyday expressions and interactions articulate implicit and explicit critiques of the "political class" in the globalizing South. Further, *chai-pānī* is now globalized and made media-worthy thanks to the new Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, who in "*chai pe charchā: namo ke sāth* (Discussions over *chai* with "Namo"—an acronym for Narendra Modi which echoes a common Sanskrit invocation) wishes to "connect" with a billion plus Indian population as well as high profile politicians like the U.S. President Barack Obama or the German Chancellor Angela Merkel over a simple *chai.*[5] This gimmick delivers a complex message, hinging on the trope of the powerful in touch with the everyday. My discussants over *chai*, however, belong to a smaller and perhaps a less gimmicky world—the *mohallā* or community in semi-industrialized and globalizing suburbs of Kolkata—and express deeper anxieties over the everyday.

It is interesting to note that ethnographers of jute neighborhoods and/or development, such as Arjan de Haan and Leela Fernandes, have not truly explored micro-local spaces like *chai-pānī* shops in their studies of the community of the working and non-working poor.[6] De Haan suggests that informal shops like these have been around since the early days of migrant labor in Kolkata, but he does not study the nature of the chatter that goes on in these spaces or associate them with *mohallā* ethics and politics. [7] Fernandes recognizes these spaces as active, but characterizes them as exclusively masculine. She locates them schematically outside the mill

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domestic workers and households on the "matchmaking" websites. Hence the epiphenomenon of respect is quite simply, biased and fictional.

[3] See Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[4] See Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (London: Verso, 2013); Ananya Roy, *City Requiem, Calcutta: Gender and the Politics of Poverty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); and Ranabir Samaddar, *The Materiality of Politics: The Technologies of Rule, Vol. I* (London: Anthem Press, 2007).

[5] Opposition parties including the Congress Party have deemed Modi's *chai pe charcha* a gimmick—a commonplace in Indian politics. See, "Narendra Modi was canteen contractor, never a 'chaiwala': Congress," *The Economic Times*, Feb 15, 2014.

[6] See Arjan de Haan, *Unsettled Settlers: Migrant Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Calcutta* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990) and Leela Fernandes, "Shop-floor politics and Labor Market" in *Producing Workers: The Politics of Gender, Class, and Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 58-88.

[7] See de Haan, 78.

gates, which limits the scope of *chai-pānī* significantly.[8] Further, she suggests that women have been traditionally dissociated from tea (and *chullu,* country liquor or moonshine) shops, ignoring the fact that *chai-pānī* is connected to women's work in a critical way: often, women run the shops or are directly involved in supplying ingredients from the home, like tea leaves, cooking coal, pilfered LPG (liquefied petroleum gas) cylinders, and locally made cookies, snacks, and sweets. *Chai-pānī* springs up in every nook and cranny of a *mohallā* bazaar, so access is almost universal. Though visibly dominated by masculine presence, *chai-pānī* is nonetheless equally marked by the presence of women, teenagers, and others working informally behind the scenes, often as "self-employed" or "own account" workers (i.e., working alone) or as "unpaid family workers."[9]

Also pertinent, in the field of development studies, Ananya Roy has produced a marginal narrative of "sickly sweet" tea drinking mainly in the context of the industrial and nonindustrial poor. She opens her book *City Requiem* (2003) by associating *chai* with neglect, as she narrates the story of a (lower middle class) fireman drinking tea instead of putting out the fire at the makeshift 1997 Calcutta Book Fair, which brought together the postcolonial *bhadralok* and the poststructuralist French intellectuals as represented by Jacques Derrida.[10] In each of these narratives of *chai*, the materiality of *chai-pānī* is largely missing. As this chapter shows, *chai-pānī* promises more than a cup of sickly-sweet *chai*—it involves a truly ground level narrative of ethics and politics of the so-called commons called the *mohallā*.

chai-pānī: relevance and research questions

As anyone with the slightest familiarity with South Asian customs would know, *chai-pānī* is the most basic form of sociability that individuals, families, and groups maintain, a social benchmark for everyday interaction. No conversation is complete without *chai-pānī,* whether at home or in the bazaar. Thus, by looking at *chai-pānī*, we are engaging the community at large. Further, this custom provides essential clues to understanding the aspirations and ethical lives of communities, for example, the new meaning of *māng*, or "desire (with a deep sense of want),"

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[8] Fernandes, 61. Discussing gendering of factory space, Fernandes observes, "[Women] are never seen in the tea shops or sitting in groups in the factory environs." I am not sure if gendering in the *mohallā* or in *mohallā*-style interactions within formal and semi-formal environments can be understood in such a clear-cut fashion. The *mohallā* is often said to resemble an "eviscerated" reality; the distinctions between male and female space are often maintained through make-shift materials in a fragmentary fashion. However, Fernandes is correct to note the difference between working women's space and that of non-working managerial wives.

[9] See "Women in Labour Markets: Measuring Progress and Identifying Challenges" (Geneva: ILO, 2010), 4-5 and 30-43 for a discussion of where and how women in "low-income" countries like India work as "own-account." Though the findings in the ILO paper do not include statistics from India, the trend among women from the developing countries is to move away from the traditional "agricultural" sector because of increasing urbanization and the opening up of "service industries." However, data is abysmally low for women who do not belong to the formal economy. See Amitabh Kundu, "Trends and Patterns of Female Employment in India: A Case of Organised Informalisation," *Indian Journal of Labour Economics* 40:3 (1997). Also see Kanchana N. Ruwanpura, "Quality of Women's Employment: A Focus on the South," Geneva: ILO Discussion Papers (Decent Work Research Programme) (2004) 6, for a discussion of women's employment in the *bīdī* (Indian cigarette) and other emergent non-agricultural sectors. *Chai-pānī* is yet to be accounted for in these studies. Both *bīdī*-making and *chai-pānī* are household sectors; however, Ruwanpura specifies that increasing "globalization" has resulted in sub-sub-contracting employment patterns among women in India, Sri Lanka, and other countries. However, she also mentions that employment statistics among women need to be treated with more care as we will not know about living, work, and other conditions from statistics alone. We need qualitative analysis of the data for that purpose.

[10] See Roy, *City Requiem*.

which contrasts with the traditional (read "political") meaning of *māng,* or "demand," the staple of union politics. The difference between the two meanings is increasingly important, because in informal economies (or globalizing economies with ancillary work of numerous kinds)[11] the majority of ancillary workers, domestic workers, young adults, and many others from the neighborhood inhabit non-unionized political spaces increasingly distant from the formal work habits of industrial capitalism; they are just part of a *mohallā* with ethnolinguistic, ethnocommunal, and ethnopolitical crossovers of class (and labor), community, and gender.[12] The *chai-pānī* shops demand attention as they are among those public spaces where people "hang out" and access the local network of information, which is dynamic and based on needs as well as a deep desire to connect with the new commodities in the markets. [13] Throughout the chapter, I use the expression "*mohallā* politics" to indicate the oscillation between desire, demand, and ethical life among emergent "publics" within such communities.

The question is: how are ethics and politics forged in the *mohallā chai-pānī* spaces on a day-to-day basis? Or inversely, how does *chai-pānī* affect *mohallā* politics, if at all?

The answer is partially suggested by ethnography in *chai-pānī* shops in *mohallā* bazaar and residential spaces in Kamarhati and Naihati-Gouripur in West Bengal. Three interrelated aspects that emerge clearly from the ethnography are a) "proverbial ethics," or the utterance of ethical speech-forms, forging the missing links between community and politics; b) jokes, slang, and skits as everyday performance of politics; and c) the shaping of particular kinds of politics, particularly "pension politics" of and for retired and laid-off industrial workers in demographically and ethno-linguistically diverse neighborhoods.

chai-pānī and chatter in a *mohallā* bazaar

Two spots feature prominently in the following ethnography: the *chai-pānī* stall at the cross-roads of Graham Road and Craig Street in Kamarhati and Yadav *chāchā* (uncle)'s stall in Gorifa in Naihati. The first is frequented by mechanics from the nearby jute mill, like Iqbal and his friends, and the second by older and newer jute pension activists, like Gaya *chāchā* and Rama Shankar Paswan.

The table below gives a snapshot of the number of "informal" *chai-pānī* establishments as well as *pān-bīdi* shops (selling betel and tobacco products and miscellaneous items), *mithāi-dukān* (sweet shops) and mobile phone shops in Kamarhati, Naihati, and Gouripur/Hajinagar in North 24 Parganas. These enumerations are far from complete—new "pop-up" *lādis* (stalls) cannot be

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[11] See Ruwanpura for a discussion of kinds of employment in the informal sector in India and elsewhere; see Uma Rani, "Impact of Changing Work: Patterns of Income Inequality," Geneva: ILO Discussion paper, 2008. According to Rani, In India, for a discussion of how data on informal employment has been on the rise in India and other Asian countries with the exception of Thailand and Philippnies. Rani suggests that the increase in informal employment in India is largely due to the downsizing of the public and private sectors as a result of "labour market reforms," which in turn can be attributed to the new economic reforms since the 1990s. Both the authors indicate that the political economic trends and analyses of informalization of the economy in the global South, however, depend on scant data.

[12] For a discussion of the crossing boundaries in labor and gender, gender and migration, and "re-drawing" the "boundaries of work" in the case of China, see, Barbara Entwisle and Gail E. Henderson, eds. *Re-drawing Bourndaries: Work, Households, and Gender in China* (Berkeley and LA: UC Press, 2000).

[13] These hangouts are not usually overtly political, but may be treated in a limited sense as teeming with "actants," to use Bruno Latour's and Michel Callon's idea of "mediation" in actor-network theory. See Michel Callon, *The Law of the Markets* (London: Blackwell, 1998).

easily counted as they are "hidden" in the *alli-galli* (lanes) connecting feeder roads to the inner spaces of the *mohallā* bazaar and other cramped areas. Like other informal businesses, these shops use "hooked" electricity, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Table 1

Kamarhati Wards 1-7 (total Wards 35)
Naihati Wards 2-5 (total Wards 28)

A typical *alli-galli mohallā* area (roughly half a square kilometer area) has the following number of stalls:

	Kamarhati	Naihati	Gouripur/Hajinagar
Chai-pānī	**24**	**26**	**19**
Pān-bīdī	**16**	**23**	**15**
Mobile (incl. music)	**9**	**12**	**6**
Mithāi-dukān	**8**	**14**	**9**
Miscellaneous	**60**	**56**	**23**
Total	**117**	**133**	**72**

Source: Field-research, 2011, 2013; Kamarhati and Naihati Municipality Records, JNNURM project reports

Figure 19

chai-pānī in Kamarhati: Left: a *chai-pānī* stall; the time is late afternoon; activity is brisk; a *pān-bīdī* shop is visible next to the *chai-pānī*; Coca-Cola sponsored fridge behind Haji *chaivālā* (with dark glasses); the *hāndi* (pot) behind Haji has milk simmering in it; Right: a woman supplying milk (aluminum can) in a *chai-pānī* in Kamarhati; Bottom: a woman running a *chai-pānī* stall. The table fan in the picture used to fan the earthen oven, run on "hooked" electricity as evident in the electrical wire running straight up from the fan coil towards the ceiling instead of towards an electrical wall socket. Photos by Snehabrata Ghoshal, 2014.

For the purpose of immersing myself in *chai-pānī* chatter, I would usually meet Iqbal, a mechanic in a nearby jute mill in Kamarhati, once every Monday in Haji *chaiwālā'*s *chai-pānī* shop, as Monday was Iqbal's day off from maintenance and "fitter" work. Haji's shop is one of

the twenty-four visible shops in a less than one square kilometer area. Haji's is next to a *pān-bīdī* stall and the kebab shop and restaurant that cater to the *mohallā* around the Graham Road and Craig Street crossing. The interdependence of *chai-pānī*, *pān-bīdī*, and eatery establishments is typical in *mohallā* bazaar areas.

Two things must be noted about this shop: there is barely any room to stand in large groups, and yet, at any given time, there would be at least eight to ten people in front of the shop. There is a slice of space inside the shop where three to four people can sit on a wooden bench. Those spots are reserved for the true regulars, including Iqbal and his *shāgirds*. I had the privilege of both standing outside and sitting inside the shop while I talked with passers-by and regulars over a period of about four months in 2011.

The *chai* itself is an attraction; *chai* and *chai-pānī* shops gain their reputation based on the thickness of the *malāi* (cream) on top. But morning *chai-pānī* is a less creamy affair, as the milk has not been simmering all day. The good thing about the *mohallā* bazaar is that there is usually a *khaṭāl* (cow/buffalo shed) nearby, so the milk is *aslī/khānṭi* or pure. While Bengali *pārā* (neighborhood) *chai* depends on "toned" or reconstituted, packaged milk, a majority of *mohallā chai* stalls buy milk form the local milkman. Without the *bhaisā* (buffalo) milk, the *chai* will not be as creamy. But recently, the local municipality, under the directive of the West Bengal State government, has launched a drive against the *khaṭāl* as it creates a health nuisance according to the West Bengal Public Health experts.[14] These *khaṭāls*, about 2000 unlicensed and 200 licensed in the jute and other sub-urban areas, are mosquito infested and generate methane, a greenhouse gas. A report in 2003 indicates that since India is a signatory in the Kyoto Protocol (1998), it can get loans for clean technology for disposing of *khaṭāl* waste.[15] Since the Trinamool Congress Party (TMC) came to power in mid-2011, the *khaṭāl* controversy has kicked up a storm in a teacup. While neighborhood *khaṭāls* are illegal, they are indispensable to the Marwari and "Hindustani" or North Indian populations, who like their *chai* creamier than the typical Bengali *chā* (tea). The pleasures of *chai-pānī* cannot be easily compromised. I hope this further explains why *chai-pānī* is important for accessing the grapevine. It is, in fact, more important than the *chullu-gānjā thek,* or moonshine-and-marijuana spot, which caters to a more selective, mostly masculine clientele, and certainly exists on the "disreputable" margins of the slum[16] or colony, requiring a different kind of ethnography, not attempted here.

Proverbial ethics in *chai-pānī*

As several scholars of the Bhojpuri language, dialect, and work have commented, among Bihari and eastern U.P. people, "proverbial ethics" carries communicative power. "Proverbial ethics" may include the larger repertoire of the traditions of *boli* ("speech," also "proverb"), *loriki* (everyday referencing of the folk ballad *Lorik*), *nauṭankī* (folk theater performance with links to myths and ethnic identities), etc. Adorned with the simplicity of the "folk" and enshrined in imperial and postimperial associations and publications, these have been crystallized as the

[14] See West Bengal Cattle Licensing Act, 1959.
[15] "Private role in khatal waste disposal seen," *Times of India,* Feb 1, 2003.
[16] Kamarhati Municipality reports that in 59 "slums" 49,541 people live. See http://www.Kamarhatimunicipality.org/cms.php?page=NDQ=

essential forms of Bhojpuri, Maithili, and other linguistic and cultural identities in the region.[17] The use of proverbs is common among the rural "folk" as well as the transplanted "folk" in sub-urban industrial places, i.e. migrant labor from Bihar and eastern and southern Uttar Pradesh (U.P.). These traditions exist in metaphysical, spiritual, ritual, communitarian, and secular forms, and thus may be accessed through a wide variety of performances in everyday life and work.[18] Iqbal, the fitter, amply demonstrates this as he borrows a riddle-like proverb from the *gawālā* (cowherd)-caste, media-savvy, and scam-ridden ex-Chief Minister of Bihar, Laloo Prasad Yadav.

Sipping *chai* at Haji's one Monday afternoon, in the middle of a conversation about how working life and politics sometimes do not meet due to a lack of personal ethics, Iqbal utters a quintessentially Bhojpuri proverb. He had used the same proverb in passing in a previous conversation as he was doing repair work on a large clunker. He says,

> *jaise Lalooji bolte hain nā, man changā to kasoti* [sic] *mein gangā*[19]
> (as Lalooji says, you know, if your mind is at peace/if your heart is pure, you'll find the Ganges in a bowl of water)

Such an utterance is an example of proverbial ethics—a form of exchange indicating the illocutionary force of a traditional proverb striving for the ethical life. The relationship between *changā* (fit/pure) and *man* (pronounced as "munn" meaning soul/mind) has a metaphysical component that is linked to everyday politics through the act of utterance. It is interesting that Iqbal, an individual from the Muslim community (I have little information about his piety), has no issues quoting this proverb, which gets its strength from the ritual richness of the Puranic Ganga, a Hindu construct, most likely because allegiances to language and community often supersede ethnoreligious considerations. This is not an argument for the discourse of "unity in diversity"— a staple of the post-Independence Nehruvian politics in India as well as global politics—but recognition of the relationship between language, work, and community. Further, the proverb is refracted through contemporary party-politics, simply because Iqbal has taken care to report Laloo Yadav as its source.

The Laloo connection does more than provide a disclaimer; it is an indication of a sense of Bihari self and identity, common to transplanted working populations. Iqbal, echoing Laloo Yadav, is expressing the belief that the small and the provincial (gossip, jokes, chatter, and the folk or folksy[20]) expand the the material politics of jute and its related community.[21] This many-faceted belonging may well include *mohallā* politics, which often sees itself as going beyond the realm of working-class politics and the conundrum of employment and recruitment as such.

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[17] Bengal-Bihar associations in the late 19th century were keen to document the "folk"—this left indelible impact on authors such as Bhikhari Thakur; see Sanjeev, *Sutradhar* (New Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan, 2006).
[18] These forms include *nautanki* and *hijra rozi-roti* (daily bread of the third gender population) performances.
[19] The word is usually *kathoti*—Iqbal uses "s" instead of "th," possibly a slippage or as an equivalent Bihari dialect usage.
[20] I use "folk" and "folksy" somewhat loosely to include expressions of community belonging within or outside the flawed categories of the "authentic" and "traditional."
[21] The traditions of *sant*s (ascetic) Kabir and Redas/Ravidas are alive in Bhojpuri and Hindi poetry, including *chaṭkalia*. In *chaṭkalia dohe* (1978), leftist poet Gopal Prasad finds no contradiction between the use of Kabir's *dohā* (couplet) form and the discourse of equality in wages and employment in the jute economy.

While I cannot confirm that Iqbal is aware of the irony of this particular situation, my guess is he must be. Laloo is known as one of the main architects of criminalizing politics, scams, and other illicit activities that has put Bihar in a negative light in the national media since the 1990s. At the same time, Laloo has continued to project the image of the media-savvy wisecrack who is (both in Hindi and English news media) "in touch" with his caste (the *gawālā* or milkman caste) and his people through *boli*-style utterance of proverbs for ethical conduct. What is important in Iqbal's reiteration of Laloo's speech is the communicative power of proverbial ethics, which Iqbal suggests is essential to ethical conduct in work and *mohallā* life. For Iqbal, politics associated with wages, rights, recruitment, and employment need to be mediated by something as seemingly transparent and authentic as a proverb. But the irony is that to express this idea cogently, Iqbal has to use Laloo's gimmicky comment on the television media. I am not suggesting that Iqbal lives in a make-believe ethical world. For a daily wage worker, the everyday is like "household war," in the words of the wife of a wage worker in a poem by Gopal Prasad, a local poet writing in the *dohā* tradition three or four decades ago.[22] Rather, Iqbal's comment indicates that the proverbial form is necessary to cope with the everyday, for it informs, entertains, and is often embedded in both imagined and real forms of representation. It is not easy to determine whether these forms gain political ground, but they do help us gain a perspective on everyday *mohallā* life.

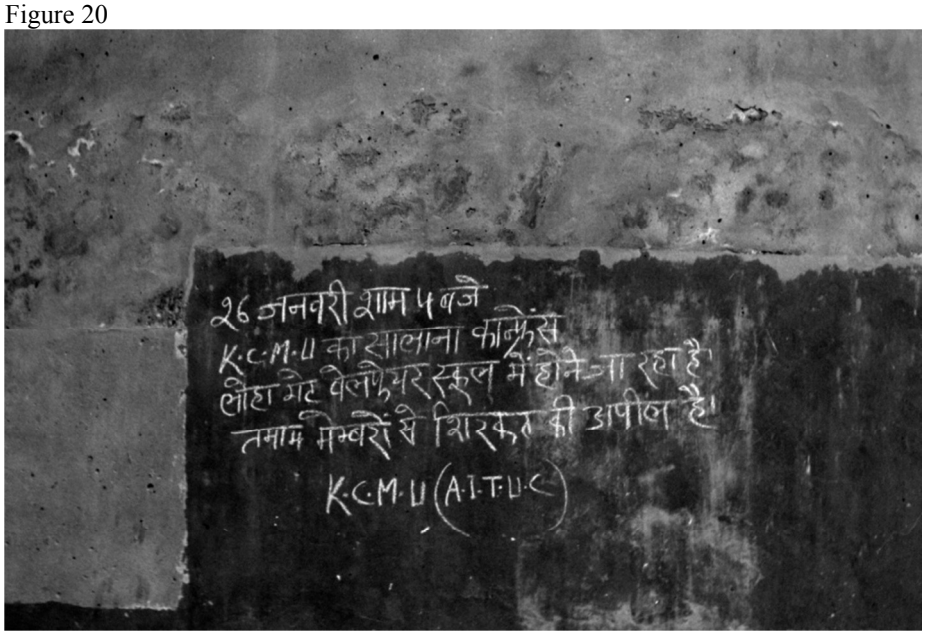
The other side of proverbial ethics: urban slang

Also heard in the *chai-pānī* stalls and *mohallā* bazaar is a relatively cynical version of proverbial ethics: urban slang. As explained briefly above, proverbial ethics is a loose personal belief and metaphysical system. As discussed below, other tangible forms of politics come from the representation of a similar ethics that labor unions try to reinforce through active participation, requiring a public display of signage, speech-forms, and a general appreciation of politics. Urban slang, which brings into sharp relief the heartfelt politics in *mohallā* life, is often a combination of personal feelings about politics and the realpolitik of meetings and unions in *mohallā* spaces.

Not to belabor this point too much, if we look at the notice in the photograph below, taken during the early stages of this ethnography—mid-January of 2011, to be precise—it will become clear how Iqbal's street-wise ethical speech-form contrasts with the semi-formal language use of an established political party, Kamarhati Chatkal Mazdūr Union (K.C.M.U.), a local chapter of the leftist trade union, All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), which called a meeting in front of the Loha Gate on 26th January, 2011.

[22] Gopal Prasad, "*patni* (Wife)" in *phūlon mein dupahriyā ho gayā hūn* (*among flowers I have become a noon-flower*), 1977.

Figure 20



Notice in Hindi/Urdu on the wall in a jute mill in Kolkata by a leftist trade union. Photo by author, 2011.

The notice on the wall in Hindi/Urdu (it is written in Hindi script, but contains several Urdu words) says,

> *26 januari shām 4 baje K.C.M.U. kā sālānā kāngres lohā gate belfair skūl me hone jā rahā hai. Tamām memberon ko shirkat ki apīl hai* (*K.C.M.U.) A.I.T.U.C.*
> ("On 26th January, 4 p.m., K.C.M.U. annual meeting is to be held inside Loha Gate Belfair School. We hereby *appeal* all members to attend." (K.C.M.U.) A.I.T.U.C. (emphasis, mine)

While the message is informal in appearance, the language is unmistakably semi-formal and sounds close to legalese—especially the English word "appeal," transcribed into Hindi. Considering that the sign is written in Hindi script and addresses a sizeable Hindi/Urdu speaking population, one of the Urdu words for "appeal," *darkhāst* or, more informally, *guzārish*, might seem appropriate. Though there is a sense in which the notice displays a *bazārī tarīkā* (market style) by simply using a handwritten chalk scrawl on a wall, the message indicates serious business. What business would this meeting perform on the 26th of January, India's Republic Day, and how does it possibly affect the everyday opinions of politics in the *mohallā*?

The Belfair, a primary school started by the Dundee mill owner Jardine Henderson and now run by the current owner of the mill, Sushant Agarwal, is an example of a tradition in educational and social responsibility, now dubbed "corporate responsibility," according to middle and senior management of the mills.[23] Notably, this latest dubbing connects the industry and economy to a larger pattern in global business and emergent styles of corporate governance. The school is about fifteen to twenty yards away from the Loha Gate and lies a stone's throw away from the crossroads of Graham Road, Craig Street, and Mill Approach Road—the center of this part of the ethnography in Kamarhati.

[23] Interview, Labor Officer, Kamarhatty Jute Mill, 31 March 2011.

As the mills in the Kamarhati area were closed on Republic Day, there was no fieldwork inside the mill for me to do. So I arrived a little before 4pm and hung out at a *chai-pānī* shop to watch the meeting from the outside. The school, it turns out, is now regularly used for *bhāshan bāzi* (loosely "throwing speeches around"), especially since the strip of land in front of the Loha Gate has been negotiated by the Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation (CESC) to build a power transformer to regulate power theft more assiduously; other real estate encroachments are visible on the strip.

On this day, the number of attendees at the meeting did not cross 350 to 360, a meager turnout considering that more than 9,000 people work in the three jute mills in the area (Kamarhati, Agarpara, and Prabartak jute mill area near Nowadapara), which together span one and a half square kilometers.[24] About eight to nine local union leaders, including the "guest speaker," a higher up in the Party, spoke at this meeting. Only two spoke in Hindi/Urdu, while the rest spoke in Bangla—this is a trend that I would notice later at the "pension politics" and other formal and informal meetings in jute neighborhoods like Naihati-Gouripur. This is noticeable because the majority of workers in the *mohallā* and surrounding areas are *abāngālī* or "non-Bengali" Hindi-Urdu and Bhojpuri speakers. In many cases, the speakers are Bengalis from the "political class," representing labor and the working-class.

I had hoped to catch up with a couple of Bengali union organizers at K. C. M. U. to discuss the state of union work in the area. As it turned out, I did not need the Bengali union organizer to fill me in on the state of leftist and labor politics in West Bengal, which was losing ground as a result of policy failures and, most importantly, the hot potato of the Singur-Nandigram fiasco[25]—the direct result of the new politics of land grabbing and promoting, and the consolidation of a new class based on the industrialist-contractor-politician-*netā* (leader)-police nexuses. The rising Trinamool Congress Party (TMC) had made a big dent in the leftist (read CPIM) strongholds by 2011 by opposing the leftists for their active role in fostering land-grabbing and real estate politics. The TMC were able to achieve their goals by making full use of media-"intellectual"-"public" power.[26] In 2014-15, media reports abound of the Trinamool Congress playing the same ominous game of land grabbing and displacing the rural and urban poor as the CPIM did for thirty four years or so. In the second part of this chapter, we will find out how within a few months, citizen activists from jute areas in Naihati-Gouripur have become disillusioned with the TMC too. But I am getting ahead of my story.

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[24] Labor Office data, Kamarhatty Jute Mill, 2010, Agarpara Jute Mill, 2009, Prabartak Jute Mill, 2009.

[25] Singur-Nandigram in a nutrshell: local men and women farmers and ordinary villagers rise against land-grabbing of the industrial state of West Bengal in 2009.
See Amit Bhattacharya, "Singur to Lalgarh via Nandigram Rising Flames of People's Anger against Displacement, Destitution and State Terror," published by K. N. Pandit on behalf of Visthapan Virodhi Jan Vikas Andolan, 2009. The article covers the trend of displacement as a result of land grabbing from peasants and farmers in the countryside of Bengal. Land grabbing is more than a recipe for violence and displacement of rights; it is unsustainable, ecologically devastating, and purely corporatist with no respect for the local and the "tribal" (6).

[26] See Nivedita Menon, "Theses on Feurbach, Woddy Allen and Nandigram," *Kafila* (Nov. 25, 2007) http://kafila.org/2007/11/25/theses-on-feuerbach-woody-allen-and-nandigram/ (accessed in December 2014). Menon's critique of the self-destructive style of industrialization in Nandigram in the context of the "21st century Stalinist saga" unfolding in West Bengal is not particularly original. See Premen Addy and Ibne Azad, "Politics and Society in Bengal" in *Explosion in a sub-continent: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Ceylon,* ed. Robin Blackburn, 1974 for a similar critique. However, it is the typical response of "left" intellectuals, positioned on the center or slightly left or right of center of the argument on industrialization in West Bengal. Print and electronic media in West Bengal in the 2000s has been awash with such vocalizations.

On the day of the K.C.M.U. meeting above, the man who runs the general store next to the mobile and *chai-pānī* shop—Munnabhai, also an acquaintance and friend since the 1990s—pointed out that

> *sab chhuttī manā rahe hain—āj chhuttī hai nā. jyādā tar chhuttī ke din meeting hone se dhandā thodā sā badhtā hai. Par yeh lāl party kā jyādā chal nahin rahā hai āj kal. Garib logon kā chūs rahā hai Bangāl sarkār—Bihār jaisā ho gayā hai. Is liye ādmi kam dikh rahā hai; phir bhi woh log jaisā dukān kholke baithe hain hum bhi*
> (Everyone is celebrating a day off; today is a holiday [Republic Day], no? Usually if there's a meeting on a holiday, business picks up a bit. But this red [leftist] party is not doing so well these days. The Bengal government is exploiting the poor—it's become like Bihar. That's why you are seeing fewer people. But still, like them, I'm sitting here with an open shop.

It is worth noting that "*dukān,*" meaning shop, is also a slang word in sub-urban industrial neighborhoods for *gānd* or arse; the expression is meant to indicate that one has been sitting on one's arse, which the system lifts from time to time for *gānd mārnā* or "buggery" purposes. If Lawrence Cohen's reading in "Holi in Benares: The Mahaland of Modernity" (1995) may be recalled, here, the public is possibly imagined as Shikhandin, the gender-bending warrior in the Hindu epic, *Mahabharata*, with his behind up for grabs. (Like most Bihari Muslims in the area, Munnabhai is well aware of the Mahabharata through B. R. Chopra's TV version.) As Cohen has shown, such forms can be traced through the circulation of *hijra* and/or *laundā* jokes as obscene cartoons during the permissive festival of Holi (which refers itself to the sexual play of Krishna, Radha, and the *gopis* or milkmaids). The message is that the "*gāndu netā*" (politician-bugger) and "*jhandu pulis*" (useless policeman) take the *Shikhandin jantā* (the Shikhandin-like public) every day by the arse. While this indicates a negative view of homosexuality, it also reveals the presence of a hyper-masculine bazaar public and culture. The discomfort expressed in Munnabhai's comment is that the public is routinely buggered by corrupt politicians, union workers, and police. In addition, "do not forget," Munnabhai adds, the

> *thekedār—harāmi thekedār—union boliye yā promoting boliye—sab mein hai*
> (The contractor—the bastard contractor—is in everything, from promoting to unions.)

On top of all this, there is the *thekedār* or contractor—designated by Munnabhai as *harāmi,* an expression roughly equivalent to "bastard" but here also indicative of the contractor's illicit dealings—he milks politicians and the public through real estate promoting or labor contracting using these nexuses. Sometimes, the public is also referred to as *chutiyā jaisā,* meaning roughly "as if just born," or naïve. So while, in Cohen's study, obscenities are circulated in the "libertine" festival of Holi in Benares, in the *mohallā* bazaar, displeasure with the buggery of the public is expressed on an everyday basis, especially in *chai-pānī* chatter during political and union-*bāzi* meetings.

Chai-pānī, pension fraud, and dealing with ghosts in Naihati-Gouripur

Figure 21

"*shapath Naihati*" ("Oath Naihati") sign on rickshaw; approaching Gouripur *choumāthā* (crossing) on a rickshaw from Naihati station towards Gouripur on congested R. B. C. Road (named for Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the "father" of the Bengali novel, who was born near Naihati). Photo by author, 2011.

While the Kamarhati *mohallā chai pani* helps us examine the everyday life and politics of union work, the ethnographic trip to Naihati-Gouripur in mid-2011 takes us into the terrain of "pension politics" (as a result of "pension fraud" in jute mills). I met with older and newer political workers and activists in *chai-pani* shops as well as the *nāgarik manch* or citizens' forum.[27] The *nāgarik manch* has considerable consequences for the future of *choṭnīti* or jute politics in the *mohallā*, especially in light of citizenship. Both here and in *chai-pani*, one's personal knowledge, feelings, and sense of belonging matter a great deal in the perception and shaping of politics on the ground. Together, they affect the critiques of the "political class" in the changing interactive landscape of the *mohallā* in the neoliberal context. In this ethnography, I pay particular attention to the shifting modes of politics, especially in relation to unions, parties, activism, and envisioning futures in the disorienting and sometimes bewildering realities of jute and related informality. It is worth noting that it is sometimes hard to tell whether the old world has truly disappeared or has simply been consolidated in a gimmicky form in the 21st century, reminiscent of the trend in jute ethnics or jute eating practices, for example (see Chapter 1). This is

[27] This is not the same as the non-profit Nagarik Mancha (Citizens' Forum), run by a group of Bengali middle-class *bhadralok*.

particularly evident in the new meaning of the word *māng* (desire with a deep sense of want), adding a new layer to the older meaning, "demand," born of political parties in nationalist and postnationalist India. But to understand this complexity, it is necessary to recognize the material spaces of informal exchanges and everyday opinions around jute and *mohallā* life, namely the makeshift *chai-pānī* stalls and other tiny spaces.

Shifting the ethnography of local and *mohallā* politics to Naihati-Gouripur, nineteen miles from Kamarhati area, the first thing that strikes the observer is the presence of the *bhutuṛe* or ghostly, or more precisely, ghost ownership and ghost workers in a ghost town. It will be interesting to see how a concrete space such as the *chai-pānī* shop mediates something as spectral as jute politics with the present. The Naihati-Gouripur area has a more run-down appearance than Kamarhati because one of the main sources of industrial recruitment and employment, Gouripur Jute Mill, has been locked out since 1997-1998. The Gouripur mill area is significantly quieter today than it was in the late 1990s—locals and media reports call it a "ghost town," as out-of-work Bihari and eastern U.P. workers have either left the place or become engaged in other kinds of work. As one of the older Bengali union workers explained, many have left Gouripur, and many older workers may have died hoping that their pension funds would materialize sooner than later. Jute politics, something that belongs to a by-gone era, seems to have little impact on the lives of the people here. But as we shall see below, in the Naihati-Gouripur context, the spectral presence of jute has come alive through the politics of pension fraud. As the *dalit*[28] Marxist-Leninist, non-profit collaborator and "pension activist" Rama Shankar Paswan, says,

> *Ham sab abhī bhī juṛe hue hain is bhūt pret nagarī se—aur abhī kā hāl behāl hai*
> (We are still attached to this ghost town—and the present condition is out of bounds.)

As we shall see below, this comment is potent in more ways than one. Along with the closure of a major mill in the area, the question of pension fraud crops up almost automatically.[29] This is the ghost that haunts the present. But it also links the politics of the place to a larger reality of global politics, as Paswan insisted several times during my four month ethnography in the area. Pension activism is an informed but informal way of looking at *mohallā* politics. This new and emergent politics cannot be gauged properly without spending time in informal *chai-pānī* and other *mohallā* spaces.

The example of Naihati-Gouripur is telling in terms of pension politics, because practically no worker has received his (or her—Naihati Gouripur had a few women workers too) meager pensions, though the mill closed in 1997-1998. Unsurprisingly, in Naihati-Gouripur, *chai-pāni* chatter involving pension fraud and its fallout in *mohallā* life prompted a group of Hindi/Bhojpuri-speaking workers and local leftist and non-leftist Bengali activists to meet with me on several occasions. Each session was productive in its own way, but one of the most interesting meetings occurred in a local library in Gouripur near Gouripur *pānī ṭankī* (Gouripur Water Tank—symbol of a dynamic past), still a significant landmark in Gouripur even after the Gouripur Jute Mill was closed. At least three unions with pan-Indian operations were represented at this meeting—Rashtriya Chatkal Mazdūr Union (RCMU or National Jute Mill Workers'

[28] *Dalit,* meaning "oppressed," is a term for communities excluded from and oppressed by the caste system, formerly referred to as "untouchable" or, in patronizing Gandhian language, "Harijan (Children of God)."
[29] My own father was a victim of pension fraud at a mill that his extended family had founded! See Debaparasad Bandopadhyay, *choṭ-pāṭ bettānto* (A tale of raw and woven jute)." *Tepantar* (2010).

Union), Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), and Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU, a Leftist organization with pan-Indian operations). As Partha Chatterjee argues in *The Politics of the Governed* (2004), post-Independence politics and ideology cannot be ignored while trying to understand the local bodies that must adhere to the large political frame.

Gaya *chāchā*, the main interlocutor of one of the dominant trade unions—RCMU—in the locked-out Gouripur *chaṭkal* area, "opened" the discussion by detailing the nature of the fraud that ghost company ownership—a phenomenon that has plagued the jute industry since the 1970s and 1980s in particular—has perpetrated in recent decades. In a meeting that lasted over one hour, I suddenly realized I was only hearing narratives in Bengali and not in Bhojpuri or Hindi, commonly spoken languages in the *mohallā*. In fact, at one point, Gaya *chāchā* actually said that the Bengali *babu* had all the "facts" of the case. The "fact-based" Bengali narratives sounded overtly "political," with a great emphasis on the legal mess and staggering details of tripartite negotiations (mill management, government, unions) regarding pension and gratuity amounts, figures, and accounts. My point is not that the facts of the story are less important than the "human" story of pension fraud victimization, or that the Bhojpuri/Hindi narrative alters the facts to fit the theory of worker victimization, etc. but that the purportedly "political" stories of missing accounts needed a proper context: the Bhojpuri/Hindi-speaking worker's life itself. Having conducted interviews in Kamarhati (while obsessing about the "*khaṭiyā sunāni*" or "cot hearing" politics of Chatur Ali[30]), I was well aware of the limitations of tripartite negotiations—their main limitations being myopic policies and/or lack of implementation on the ground. These have cumulatively resulted in workers' indifference to organized politics for decades, if not for nearly a century, of labor and union politics. For example, during a late-night street interview in April 2011, Khalil, Ali's disciple and friend, made it amply clear that with the proliferation of unions, everyone gives *chandā* ("subscription" or dues) but no one follows the logic of "mainstream" politics anymore, because it stands at a distance from *mohallā* politics. Khalil says rhetorically,

> *chandā de dete hain; par kaun koī kyā samjhe?*
> (Everyone gives subscription, but who understand what?)

To get a clearer sense of *mohallā* realpolitik and its representation in a deindustrialized setting, I continued meeting with the Hindi/Bhojpuri contingency in Gouripur several times over a period of four months since that first meeting in early August of 2011.

Figure 22

Gouripur mill area near the *pānī ṭankī*; overgrown vegetation, untended since 1997-98; a "box shop" is visible. Photo by author, 2011

[30] *Khātiya sunani* or "cot hearing:" a method of community problem-solving. See chapter 4.

PF Enrollment or Partial Dues Enrollment (PDE): gimmick or real deal?

When I was conducting ethnography in Naihati-Gouripur, one particular event related to Pension Fund (PF) distribution, titled "Partial Dues Enrollment" (PDE), began taking shape. This gave me a chance to test some of my assumptions about rumors, circulation, the spatio-temporal space of the *chai-pānī* and its critical place in mediating the field of pension politics. Further, it gave me the opportunity to figure out if this was just gimmicky local politics (under the diktat of central working committees) or if there was something truly meaningful in it. PDE in Gouripur was marked by a "roll-call" register set up by "ethical" and duty-bound union workers from the *mohallā*, a clerk, and old local workers who still believe that they will get PF money one day. The "roll call" was to be administered only on Sundays from late August-early September through December in 2011. The local organizers needed a list of workers. Gouripur had a roll call of more than 20,000 workers when it closed in 1997-1998, according to mill reports as well as citizens' reports, but less than 10 or 12 percent of its working population can still be found residing in the area, according to municipal censuses as well as one union record. But if PDE were to be conducted successfully, the path to pensions for families would be better facilitated.

In the month of August, after more than a decade of legal battle, many workers were finally promised their partial dues. But before a mountain of paperwork could be processed, every worker was asked to "claim" his dues. Where and how were all these workers to be found, especially those who had left a decade ago or more? While Bengali union workers are prompt with names in their union register or *chandā khātā* (subscription register),[31] no one is expected to know what precise part of the *muluk* (country) a worker may be from originally. If the union workers had the human resources, they would probably go to the post-office to find out from old registers the names of those who would regularly send money through postal money orders. But many workers have left the *mohallā* over a decade ago and moved elsewhere for a variety of work—some relocating in other jute mills, many starting *dhandā* or informal local businesses in nearby or faraway areas—and the task of tracing individuals in a state without definite ID mechanisms can be a daunting.[32] So, old timers like Gaya *chāchā* and upcoming pension politics leaders like Rama Shankar Paswan were now left with the task of spreading news of PDE. Despite a welter of knowledge about individuals, workers, and families residing in Naihati-Gouripur as well as neighboring areas, tracking everyone was a real challenge. Still, within a week or so, they were able to come up with a few hundred names by putting the word out at *chai-pānī*.

The task of collecting information was best accomplished sitting on a *lāḍi* sipping *chai* or just hanging out near the Gouripur *mohallā* bazaar. To test this information-gathering method, I asked a rickshawallah named Suraj Shaw in Naihati station, nearly a mile south of Gouripur *mohallā*, if he had heard about the upcoming PDE in the Gouripur Jute Mill front office. Suraj had earlier confided in me that his father, now dead, had lost his pension, forcing him to make a living as a rickshawallah. Sure enough, Suraj had learned about the PDE in the *chai-pānī* shop opposite the station on the heavily congested R. B. C. Road, although he did not believe that the money would actually be disbursed.

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[31] *Chanda* or subscription becomes useful here for record-keeping purposes.

[32] UIDAI project is about providing ID to 1.3 billion Indians—a logistically challenging task; not all inhabitants in the area have ID—in fact, few do. Many do not have a ration card—it is essential to have some form of documentation to prove citizenship and domicile status in India.

One Sunday afternoon in his Gouripur *mohallā chai-pānī* hangout, Gaya *chāchā* explained:

> *jab koī kisīko jāntā hai tab uske bāre mein jānnā āsān hai—moṭāmuṭi jitnā jan kā ho sake khabar karte rahe hain—chai-pānī dukān mein khabar raṭ gayī to chintā nahin—sab ko mālum ho jāegā*
> (when you know someone, it's easier to find out about him—we inform about as many people as possible—once word gets around in the *chai-pānī* shop, no worries—everyone will know.)

But is this system failsafe? In this day and age of cheap mobile phones, wouldn't it be easier to just call someone and update them about the current situation? Gaya *chāchā* agrees that it will be better to do it that way, because there is always room for "human error" if one has to inform each worker individually and in person, but asserts that *khabar* (news) travels through trains and humans as well as wires and wireless networks. The *mohallā* usually gets news first through the *chai-pānī* and the bazaar. In the *muluk* (country), news travels through the community and villages. The effects of "rumors" and human networking produced fairly good results in the following weeks and months. The following table indicates the number of attendees at "roll call" for pension claims from the following areas on one day:

Table 2

Gouripur-Naihati-Kankinada	**Barrackpur-Titagarh-Kamarhati**	**Village and *taluka***
68	17	7

Total: 92

Source: PDE, Gouripur Jute Mill, August 2011 notes; also Gouripur mill "roll call" register, 2011

The figures above are quite impressive; and it is worth noting that the PDE trend between August and November 2011 was mainly upward, with a slight fall in figures in December (probably because men and families regularly leave Kolkata for their *muluk* in the winter). Considering the "ghostly" nature of the pension crowd in Gouripur today, PDE seems to have given a significant boost to jute politics in the present. However, the younger Rama Shankar Paswan believes that pension activists should be more proactive in building stronger networks through the local young people using mobile communication systems. The difference between Gaya *chāchā* and Paswan over the "mode" of communication of a political message often stands out in the discourses of *mohallā* politics. But whatever their differences, contradictions, and deviations from the mode of jute politics, it is hard to ignore a sense of purpose and togetherness. The intensity of local engagements makes it hard to judge whether the PDE was just show or if it was at least a short-term solution towards rethinking the modes of future politics. Partially in keeping with Bourdieu's idea of "field," PDE "reproduced" and even "recreated" its own field, governed by *chai-pānī* chatter, effectively contributing to enrichment of the discourses of *mohallā* politics around jute. The question that remains open in the *mohallā* is: are events like the PDE capable of advancing *nayī rājnīti* or "new politics," a slightly bigger forum of citizens' politics?

While old timers like Gaya *chāchā* have mixed feelings and views about the new politics of pension activism, they are even less sure about citizens' politics. But Paswan, an ex-mechanic in Gouripur Jute Mill and currently a mason with a deep interest in *mohallā* politics, has different

ideas about the future. It is fitting that this chapter and the dissertation end with Paswan's acute observations on *mohallā* politics in the 21st century. Paswan straddles the informal spaces of the *chai-pānī* and the *manch* (forum, or a makeshift pedestal from which to address an audience).

Between *chai-pānī* and the *manch*: Paswan's four minutes of fame

The political class in West Bengal politics often complains that Hindi/Bhojpuri workers seldom assume leadership roles. This has produced hermetically sealed boundaries between class, community, and politics which seriously affect the question of representation. Discourses of representation are visible in a wide array of work on jute and labor politics, from Marxist and postcolonial critics to the social psychology of the organizers themselves. The fact remains that, usually, ground level workers like Paswan are given "token time" to make themselves heard in events that are meant to be addressed to the "working-class." This is evident in the narrative below as well as in the several meetings I had with Hindi/Bhojpuri workers and their *mohallā* representatives and the union organizers. The problem of representation usually originates in language and communication, translating into limited opportunities to speak in critical events such as the public meeting held by the non-profit called the Nagarik Manch (Citizen's Forum) and Gouripur pension activists in late July, 2011 in Gorifa, West Bengal.

I had first met Paswan in late July of 2011 at a Nagarik Mancha meeting, where he was one of the "local" speakers representing the *mazdūr varga* (laborers' or working class) in Gouripur. Nagarik Mancha had staged a few meetings in an "open" space in front of a local club in the midst of a *mohallā* bazaar area to make the "leftover" mill population aware of company and pension fraud, locally known as PF *chori* (theft). While citizen's politics claims "transparency," or circulation of information through a desire to communicate rather than to obfuscate and wheel and deal with management and bureaucrats, what seemed common to all jute neighborhoods was the question of "representation." As in union politics and interactions between union workers and ground level workers (as in the Gaya *chāchā* meeting described above), representation in this meeting was predominantly male, and six out of seven speakers were Bengalis speaking erudite Bengali sprinkled with Sanskritized expressions. (Remember the speakers in Belfair School, Kamarhati.) The only Bhojpuri/Hindi speaker, Paswan, spoke for just about four minutes in a meeting that lasted from around 4 pm till past 7 pm that day. What is striking is that no one in the entire organizing forum thought that anything was out of the ordinary. The organizers of the citizens' forum seemed to be continuing the trend of organized politics of unions and other organizations, where the ground was held by the middle- and upper echelons of the political class. However, Paswan, aware of the problem of language and communication in the domain of interaction between *mohallā* and political-class politics, could not pass up the opportunity to make himself heard.

Figure 23

Left: Garifa, Gouripur, locals waiting for an anti-pension fraud (PF *chori*) meeting, along with protests against TMC's Jangalmahal military operation; organized by Nagarik Mancha, 30 July, 2011; Center: Rama Shankar Paswan addressing locals about pension fraud in bazaar space in Garifa, Gouripur; soon after this meeting, an announcement was made that the workers would be given partial payment of their own provident fund; Right: Attendees in Gorifa when Paswan was speaking in late July; women wearing their *pallu* (sari end) over their heads can be generally identified as Hindustani; less than half of the number of attendees in this picture are Hindustani women

On the *manch,* Paswan, who was discussing minimum wage issues in West Bengal in the context of the Gouripur lock-out and pension fraud that had victimized more than twenty thousand workers and their families, welcomed luminaries of *mazdūr* politics from Kolkata, the urban hub of the political class. Paswan extended his thanks to the luminaries

> *sab mazdūr varg ke taraf se*
> (on behalf of all working class people).

Why is Paswan grateful? He says to the luminaries,

> *mazdūr varg kā ānkh jo bandh thā woh āp khol diye aur hamārā mārg darshan karāye*
> (you opened the closed eyes of the working class and showed us the "*mārg*"[33] [the way])

Paswan's short speech is packed with layers of meaning. Paswan, a *dalit*, is using a metaphysical and philosophical concept derived from the high Brahmanism of Manu: *mārg* means "path" or "way," both literally and figuratively, as well as a "school" of philosophy.[34] He also makes sure his audience and friends from the political class know that he is fully knowledgeable about consciousness that would facilitate access to the *mārg* by following it with another philosophical word, *darshan*, which in Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengali, and other languages means "showing (oneself, as a deity)/beholding (a deity or other desirable presence)" as well as, more powerfully, "philosophy" itself. Paswan is mixing messages—his way is Gandhian, but his consciousness is Hegelian-Marxist, if not Leninist, and the style of his invocation of blindness and insight ("*ānkh khōl diye,*" "opened our eyes") is possibly reminiscent of the literal affects of the *nauṭankī* of Bhikhari Thakur.[35]

[33] Paswan's speech seems to have become inflected as he formally ends his speech. Throughout his speech, he spoke colloquially, conscious that half the attendees were "Hindusthani" people who spoke *boli* (dialect) and would not be able to follow "high" language or *shuddh* ("pure") Hindi, which Paswan is capable of speaking.
[34] Since the post-Independence era, the word has been used for major roads, the most common being the Gandhi Marg.
[35] A Bhojpuri ballad writer and *nautanki* author known for his Shakespearean intrigue, according to the Buddhist-Marxist critic Rahul Sankrityayan.

It is in this charged space that Paswan's observations on politics—or as I suggest, his politics of observation—need to be understood. For example, he makes no mistake in assessing the current state of politics:

> *chounttis barsh bāmfrānṭ kā sarkār ke bād ham parivartan kā nāre par jo sarkār badle hain to sarkār phir aisa hī kare to fāydā kyā huā?*
> *(*After thirty-four years of the Left Front government, if we've changed the government in the name of "*parivartan*" ["change"], what good is it if the [new] government does the same things?)

Paswan's comment on "*parivartan*" refers to the change I mentioned earlier in the government of the state of West Bengal. The timing is significant. The new government had just come to power in late May of 2011. Paswan is already expressing his discontent in late July in 2011. Paswan's discontent comes from the government forcing workers to accept a less than Rs. 140-168/day ($3-4/day) in Zone A (Kolkata and the surrounding districts), utterly ignoring the rate of inflation in the state (a little above 9% in 2011). In the *mohallā* bazaar, inflation, known as *mehengāī* (high prices) affects everything from basic utilities to consumables of "essential" and "non-essential items," the latter especially a contested terrain in ethnological studies from the 1950s onwards.[36] Paswan articulates that minimum wage is no match for *mehengāī*, and that there is also iniquity in disbursement of wages in the semi-informal and informal markets. In his brief speech, Paswan manages to pack a lot of information that his listeners (local Hindi/Bhojpuri women and men) would readily identify with and understand. He says it is unfortunate that jute workers in a manufacturing area live such miserable lives even though India's trading practices are on par with global trends—*bāhar jaisā* ("like outside," or "like in foreign countries"). He says with great aplomb that it defies imagination that pension fraud exists so openly in this day and age of governmental reason. In this context, Paswan's prognosis is startling. He does not expect the government or the powers that be to solve pension fraud overnight: first, he wishes them to listen. This leads him to utter the most commonly heard word in working-class politics: *māng* or "demand." Instead of using known slogans like "*hamārī māng pūrī karo*" (fulfill our demands) he says: *yeh hī hamārī māng hai* (this is all we want/desire). Since he does not know if the government will fulfill this desire, he makes it a point that he can only leave the conversation open. This open-ended conversation seems to point to other possibilities of politics on the ground in a neoliberal context.

Addressing the new politics of *māng* in *chai-pānī*

While *māng* used to expressly denote "demand" through unions and other overtly "political" channels, its current usage is closer to "desire" and adds a deep sense of want. It is noteworthy that despite their differences on the question of citizen's politics, both Gaya *chāchā* and Paswan, pension activists in Naihati-Gouripur, are quick to point out how the discourses of modern politics—democracy, rights, justice, and equality—in India, in an age of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) or recruitment spots for informal labor, cannot be understood without considering the *mohallā kī māng,* the *mohallā*'s desire. Desire cannot be viewed other than in terms of *ājkal,* or the present, Gaya *chāchā* insists in conversation over endless *chai*. I am excited to learn more about what desire means in the neoliberal present. Gaya *chāchā* is not too familiar with the

[36] See Kshiti Prasad Chattopadhyay, *A Socio-Economic Survey of Jute Labour* (Calcutta: Department of Social Work, Calcutta University, 1952) on working-class "consumption."

expression "neoliberal" but he knows "Manmohanomics"—media slang for neoliberalization in India, coined in response to the federal/central annual budget presented by the then finance Minister, Manmohan Singh (later the 14th Prime Minister of India, 2004-2014) in the late 1990s. Recounting how "Manmohanomics" has truly affected *mohallā,* local, and regional politics, both Gaya *chāchā* and Paswan agree that the new face of "Bangāl" (Bengal) politics is characterized by land grabbing in rural, urban, and semi-urban spaces for the creation of Special Economic Zones—a double-edged sword in which

> *sarkār sachmuch punjivād aur bazari ban gayā hai*
> (Government truly has become the capitalist and the market.)[37]

In Gaya *chāchā's* view, the bazaar has since become *khule ām*, wide open*,* meaning every kind of exchange is possible—ending decades of regulation by the government. These discourses on *mohallā* politics, I suggest, show greater urgency than union struggles for fair share and wages.

Working conclusion: the future of new politics

The crucial interaction within microlocal spaces such as *chai-pānī* is entirely contingent upon relations and interactions in moments of ordinary exchanges; things are made more ordinary by the ubiquitous presence of beaming hyper-local media. The exchanges are as intriguing as the contexts. As suggested earlier, the Kamarhati and Naihati *mohallās* have arguably brought forth new styles of politics. Fast-changing commodity-markets and labor-contracting modes have played important roles in these new formations. Iqbal, Gaya *chāchā* and Paswan are effectively addressing an emergent debate on the question of the limits of representation. For Iqbal, it is all about proverbial ethics and the self. For Gaya *chāchā*, pension politics requires a solid human network. For Paswan, getting people together—*ekatthā karnā*—is the true challenge. These are the grounds of the new politics of the *mohallā*.

As we have seen, *chai-pānī* stalls serve as places of chatter that create a space for many forms of political expression, from ethical and performative speech-forms to overt political activism—and, of course, just plain chatter too. I want to end this chapter and dissertation by suggesting that when Paswan winds down his "*dharnā*" or "sit-in"—a common tactic used by strikers in union politics for more than a century—by treating friends to *chai* at Yadav *chāchā*'s shop as they plan their next move, there is scope here for political action; and when they watch the repeat news on 24x7 TV in the evening, they will gather material for new chatter that will radiate out of Yadav *chāchā's chai* stall over the next few days.

[37] Notably, as indicated earlier, Gaya *chāchā* belongs to RCMU, a breakaway from the centrist INTUC—so, in theory, h*e* should have had little difficulty in accommodating "capital and market intensive" drives by the government. On the contrary, Paswan, a Marxist-Leninist, is the one who should have had issues with such developments, as the ultra-Leftist slogan usually associates national governments with being "stooges" of "American imperialism" and the free market in the 20th and 21st centuries. It turns out that, on the ground, both are cynical of contemporary forms of politics or more precisely, *choṭnīti* (jute policy/politics) in the state of West Bengal from their differing perspectives of the neoliberal.

Conclusion: "Community" and its "institutions" through performance

Looking closely at the entanglement of the vernacular and local forms of repair work/technologies, ethics, and politics in the jute sphere in Kolkata, this dissertation has kept a close eye on the notion of "community" and the so-called "community institutions" like the *mohallā* and the *mohallā* bazar. The dissertation has particularly insisted on the distance between the community and existing theories of postcolonial theories of "prebourgeois" non-secular habits of the community as fundamentally incompatible with modernity and globalization.[1] The dissertation has argued that the community has "accommodated" both capital and globalization through particular processes without necessarily losing its own identity and character, although tension between the two persists. The dissertation has established that this is most visible when we look at the material cultures in the vernacular forms. These are visible in medieval to modern forms, the latter brought about by changing technologies although the traditional techniques and practices have persisted, continuing to shape ethical and governmental relations between work, family, and the community.

To this end, the chapters in the first section ("Works") have discussed the material cultures of recorded and revived vernacular material and craft-forms in jute life and forms. In Chapter 1, this approach has taken us closer to textual and oral traditions of *pāṭ* craft and craft revival and related politics, which cannot be overlooked as period-pieces but form the crux of nationalist and neoliberal tendencies of fetishizing the "authentic" in different forms. Focusing on material practices of vernacular *pāṭ* craft and its revivalist politics, Chapter 2 has taken us to the heart of repair and reuse of analog machines in jute mill workshops where memory, craft, and everyday interactions produce entanglements in industrial settings, thereby creating new opportunities to explore themes of "improvisation" and creativity. Chapter 3 examines the hands-on relationship between micro-repair sites and ethics through ethnographic encounters of repair workers on a particular machine (*hāti-kal*) and machine-part (pinion). These chapters have collectively shown how analog technologies have continued to shape everyday repair-practices in jute factories. Through this, they tell us how cheap settler and "unsettled" labor circulation in the context of "nonelite" globalizations is not simply a cut-and-dried affair involving skills and motion management, empirical deductions, or ideological reconstructions (of labor and capitalism), but involves close reading of the relationship between the home, work, and community spaces. The research confirms K. P. Chattopadhyay's ethnological observation in the early 1950s that in jute labor, the "home" belongs in the "factory" area. Chattopadhyay's leap in connecting the home and the factory in spatial (and ethnographically for the present purpose, in spatio-temporal) terms can only have meaning in an active relationship between individuals, work, and family that the dissertation, hopefully, has been able to explore.

The two chapters in the second section ("Publics/Politics") discussed community life in the jute *mohallā*, which usually lies at a stone's throw from the mills themselves. This section explored everyday interactions in rapidly changing microlocal spaces of the *mohallā* teeming with possibilities of present and future politics. Chapter 4 employs spatial, infrastructural, and interactive modes in ethnographic research to assess the nature of relations arising out of exchanges and practices of globalization and the *mohallā* bazaar. In Chapter 5, these spaces are explored to rethink ground level politics from within *chai-pānī*, a micro-local space in the

[1] See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History* (1989), etc.

mohallā, as well as "pension politics," which are enacted in the *manch* (forum) instead of in unionized spaces today.

In this open-ended conclusion, I want to revisit the notion of the community and so-called community institutions like the *mohallā* through an overview of a less studied terrain: performance. I suggest that performance in *mohallā* contexts—*nauṭankī* (musical theater performed on a three-sided open stage) and its sub-genre *biraha* or *birha*[2] or "separation" or mourning—from the 19th century to the present supplements our understanding of the community and community institutions significantly.[3] Further, these, like the *mangal kāvyas* of Bengal and their loosely folk/oral legacies in the 19th and 20th centuries, are known for representing the "voices" of the household and the mundane rituals of familial, community, and everyday life, such as worshipping deities, fasting and feasting, constructing and reconstructing nostalgia.

My interest in these rituals lies in the exploration of the local and the proximal in performance and its reception in community or community institutions from colonial to a globalized context. The latter is an especially a contested terrain considering the dominance of Bollywood or contemporary Bombay cinema as the universal mode of entertainment in India. Bollywood has created a binary where the regional or *anchalik* makes "everything else" fit in—"low class" activities, caste politics, community interests, rituals, vernacular, and other everyday affairs of migrant and unsettled communities in the *mohallā*. This tendency, I suggest, is reminiscent of the tensions between majoritarian and minoritarian politics or everyday politics and electoral politics, etc. affecting community and community institutions greatly. I conclude by suggesting that if we abandon the binary of the universal and the regional, microlocal performances such as the *nauṭankī* and *biraha*, appear every bit as interested in the modern, technological, and the global. Particularly, their relationship with *nokariyā* or employment or modern work and technology stands out in this context. This particular relationship has affected traditional genres and meaning of the "folk" from the 19th century onwards as sociologists, Subaltern historians, and media critics have noted. To understand these performances, it is necessary to familiarize oneself with the domestic, household, and the familial in the context of migrant communities who share both rural and urban characteristics, or as early Indian sociologists called them, "rururban."

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[2] As a musical genre, *birha* or *biraha* belongs to the Ahir caste. Its modern and contemporary forms are various. For example, in a "modern" rendition of the birha tradition, called "Jaunpur kand" (Jaunpur episode) on 17 January, 1986 in Bihar's neighboring state, Uttar Pradesh (Varanasi region). Jaunpur, locally known as "*machhali saharya*" or "fish town" embodies local as well as erudite cultural traditions. The "*tarz*" or "index" or prologue begins with the observation, "*laṛkiyān jab se saikel chalāne lagi, tab se āge kā ḍanḍā khatam ho gayā*" (since when girls started to ride bikes, the rod in the front ended). This is a comment on the design of the bike, where the front rod had to be lowered to accommodate women's dress (sari or shalwar kameez, or skirts). In this *biraha* song, mixed with *tamāshā*, the double entendre is too obvious to miss.

[3] See "*Nautanki,*" in Indian *Theatre: Traditions of Performance*, Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann, and Phillip B. Zarrilli, eds. (Manoa: University of Hawaii, 1990), 249-274. Also see, Suresh Awasthhi, "*Nautanki*—An Operatic Theatre," *Quarterly Journal of the National Centre for the Performing Arts* 6, 4:23-36.

Nauṭankī and biraha: "folk" forms and microlocal spaces of the *mohallā* through the "rururban"

Nauṭankī or loosely, "folk songs [and performances]" from the Bihar (and Bhojpuri region in Western and roughly Southwestern Bihar), according to Dhirendra Prakash Saxena in *Rururban Migration in India* (1977), recorded the "plight" of migrant labor and unsettled families since the 19th century. Performance in the *mohallā* is more than about representing this plight; it engenders particular ethical forms that require attention to open-ended speech and structures, such as the proverb and *loṛikī,* explored briefly in Chapters 4 and 5. These further our understanding of the processes of shared values and tensions arising out of the complex relationship between household, domesticity, and modern notions of work or repair-work in the so-called "nonelite" globalizations such as Kolkata jute mill areas.

Saxena has given a detailed account of these musical representations of the "ruruban" migration of working populations especially from Bihar. "Rururban" owes its definition and uses to G. S. Ghurye in *Anatomy of A Rururban Community* (1963), where Ghurye, to paraphrase S. Pillai in *Indian Sociology through Ghurye* (1997), discusses the fault lines of the rural and the urban connected by caste and ritual worship of localized deities in small *tālukas* in Western India, namely Haveli in Maharashtra.[4] Investigating an essentially rural community often with links to the urban through work and migration, Ghurye was interested in ascertaining "continuities and avoid compartmentalized labels like 'rural,' 'urban' to the extent possible."[5] Ghurye emphasized the role of performance of rural and folk stage art like the *tamasha* (loosely satire with *nauṭankī*-styled links) in the context of the community's identity in a shared context of both rural and urban forms and experiences.[6] Drawing on this category of shared structures (and tensions) between the rural and the urban, Saxena's detailed account of what he calls "folk songs" and "folk literature" in a Bhojpuri (North and/or East India) "rururban" context indicates how, since the 19th century, those folk forms have played on the shared values of the household and tensions between the household or domesticity, on the one hand and the notion of *nokariyā* or employment and the "economic," a predominantly modern and urban phenomenon, on the other. In choosing from a wide range of musical sub-genres of the folk, Saxena focuses on desire, sex, household, and, of course, nostalgia for the absent male from the family. Saxena suggests that "foreign words" like "fashion" and "driver" and many other non-rural expressions have begun to appear in an essentially "dialect" based genre of Bhojpuri performance. These are the products of "urbanization," Saxena maintains. Further, in his examples, women's and wives' perspectives gain in importance because the folk centers on the household and the economy of the household more than anything else.

Based on my study of "nonelite" globalizations in jute mill areas, it seems that contemporary Hindi/Bhojpuri musical genres are dependent on the original, "serious" *nauṭankī* and its dominant sub-genre, *biraha* and *bidesiya*, forms, explored by authors such as Bhikhari Thakur and his jute mill protégé, Narayan Dubey.[7] In cultural discourses, the distinction between "high" and "low" is usually the defining feature of performance and aesthetics; these also mark the

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[4] See G. S. Ghurye, *Anatomy of a Ruruban Community* (1963).
[5] S. Devadas Pillai, *Indian Sociology through Ghurye, a Dictionary* (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1997), 6-7.
[6]See G. S. Ghurye, *Anatomy of a Ruruban Community*; *also see,* D. P. Saxena, *Rururban Migration in India: Causes and Consequences* (New Delhi: Popular Prakashan, 1977) 175-8.
[7] See Sanjiv, *Sutradhar* (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2010).

distinctions between the written and the oral respectively. In *nauṭankī* and *biraha*, these lines are blurred because community performances are shared through mythical, ritual, and social commonalities rather than the hierarchies of print cultures of authorship and readership. Further, *nauṭankī* and *biraha* cannot be judged with reference to stage plays because there is no inside and the outside in *nauṭankī*; it is performed usually with three-sided openness and therefore calls for open-ended theories of live performance instead of the more controlled environment of the proscenium stage. In a sense, *nauṭankī* and *biraha* provide us with greater flexibility of form and interpretation of *mohallā* realities. It is also pertinent that in Bollywood cinema, *nauṭankī*, Bihar's biggest export outside the Bhojpuri region from the 1950s and 1960s, remains mostly as an "item" instead of being the central narrative of Bollywood. But since *nauṭankī* is tied to the excess of emotions, regional *nauṭankī* authors like Narayan Dubey often rhetorically say that the entire Bollywood or the Bombay film industry is one big whole *nauṭankī*.[8]

Biraha, nokariyā and Subaltern histories: a missed connection?

From the point of view of the social sciences, this dissertation traces in the vicissitudes of *nokariyā* or employment in a factory and/or non-factory setting with regimes of work derived from the organization of space-time in capitalism and more contemporary forms of globalization. In *Rethinking Working-Class History* (1989), postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty posits the *nokariyā* conundrum in the specific context of working-class consciousness in colonial times, but misses the opportunity to recognize its expression within a vital subculture of nostalgia engendered especially by "vocalization" of the female voice in *biraha* or mourning.[9] Discussing how economic migrants from Bihar, entering a jute mill, had to choose between wage slavery and freedom, Chakrabarty cites a Bhojpuri proverb and a song in translation.[10] The song says,

> *poorab ke deshwa mein kailee nokariya te kare*
> *sonwan ke rojigar jania ho*
> (One who gets a job in the east can fill his house with gold)[11]

The stubborn refusal to entertain *nokariyā* as anything meaningful in domestic life can be further seen in the wife's railing against the fetish of money and markets, embodied by the "*poorab*" or the "east":

> *Aagi lage rupia bazar pare paisa se*
> *poorab ke nao mati liha ho balamua*

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[8] Interview, November 2011, Kankinara.

[9] See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 187.

[10] Chakrabarty does not cite the original Bhojpuri. The originals given below are cited in D. P. Saxena's "Rural Migration and Cultural Change" in *Rururban Migration,* 178. Dhiraj Kumar Nite's *Work and culture in the mines: Jharia coalfields 1890s-1970*; Ph.D. Dissertation, 2014, JNU, India, 272.

[11] I give the originals based on Saxena's work above that reveals an exchange, which gives away the implied gender of the speaker, which here is male and the alternate speaker in the next example below, female. The idea is that because women allegedly crave gold (though in this case it is imitation gold), an oblique reference to the "*Marich*" episode in the *Ramayana*, the oldest Hindu epic, the man often says work in the east in the mills brings gold. Also see Bhikhari Thakur, *bidesiya* for a *biraha* performance of the tension between household and work in the industrial "east."

(Let fire take the rupee, let thunderbolt smite the paise,
my dear, forget the name of the east [of going to the east])[12]

This is further supplemented by,

Railiya na bairi, jahajiya na bairi, naukariya/[*nokariyā*] *bairi ho.*[13]
(The railways are not our enemy, nor are the steamships
Our real enemy is employment)

The above is a woman's lamentation because *nokariyā* is taking "our" *maraduā* or men folk away. Chakrabarty however erroneously assumes these as men's voices in factory localities in Kolkata when, in fact, male *nauṭankī* performers are vocalizing women's pain of separation from their *maraduā* or menfolk through a real or imagined exchange in a *biraha* moment or enactment. Specifically, *biraha* highlights how *nokariyā* exists in a hyper-masculinized space where the feminine, the sexual, and the familial—but not necessarily the filial—are routinely ignored. As Dhiraj Nite comments in his work on migrant labor in South Bihar, miners, loaders, fitters, *mistrīs,* and loosely held "family-gangs" of the *mazdūr* (labor or working) population appear in everyday performance of *nauṭankī* and *tamāshā* on the theme of *bidesiyā* (foreignness),[14] which also accommodates *biraha* (the pangs of separation) and other sentiments.[15] The female in *biraha* could be a *sundari* (beautiful woman), *ranḍī* (whore), or just an ordinary married or unmarried woman, all missing their men in the home and community. Also, there are *chhaṭ* (worship of the sun god Surya and the Vedic goddess Usha or dawn) and *beha* (wedding) traditions in which women compose and sing their own songs about the work of women and their place in the community, regardless of the men's status in the family as absentee husband, working husband, house-husband, or *devar* (brother-in-law). Men's presence is desirable in these *parab* or festivals.

To conclude, traditionally, *nauṭankī* and *biraha*, though mostly written and performed by men (as male and female persona), rail against the fetish of money, commodity, and modern work from the point of view of women, imploring their husbands to recognize sex, family, and other pleasures as more desirable things. Today, traditional, techno-folk, and remixed versions of Thakur's *Bidesiyā,*[16] sometimes in the form of "total" Bollywood performance or "item number," point to a similar relationship between home, love, work, and sex in neoliberal contexts of

[12] See Saxena, *Rururban Migration.*
[13] Another version of this folk song says, "Railiya Na Bari se jaha jawa Na bhairi se paisawa Na Mor saiyan ke bilmane se paisa baira Na (it is neither rain nor ship that is our enemy but rather money that compels our husbands to migrate to other lands)." This seems like a mistranscription of the song, leading to a mistranslation. It possibly should be "railiya na bairi se jahajawa na bairi se" (same meaning as the version in Saxena). See Madhumita Majumdar, "The 'Bidesiya' in the Works of Bhikari Thakur," http://www.museindia.com/focuscontent.asp?issid=46&id=3725# Majumdar explores the "bidesiya" tradition, which as I have indicated above, upholds the *biraha* tradition, common to migrants since the 1840s.
[14] See Nite, *Work and Culture in the Mines: Jharia Coalfields 1890s-1970*; Ph.D. Dissertation, 2014, JNU, India, 272.
[15] Bhikhari Thakur, *Bidesiya*, 6. As already mentioned earlier, the proverb and song cited above belong to *bidesiya* and are akin to Bhikhari Thakur's plays and other folk songs on this theme, which lend voice to the women of migrant families, left behind in rural and semi-urban or "rururban" households.
[16] Bhikhari Thakur (1887-1971).

migration.[17] *Biraha* and *nauṭankī*, interchangeable as they are, posit complex challenges of recounting sentimental histories of work, family, and community.

Leave your *nokariyā* at the jute mill

Discontent with *nokariyā* in the *biraha* tradition persists in contemporary forms, most notably in sound-works (a concoction of computerized genres, remixes, and remakes of 'originals' or *aslī nauṭankī* of Bhikhari Thakur as well as his jute mill protégé, Narayan Dubey). Early Indian techno-folk performance in the 1990s which attempted to remix classics like Bhikhari Thakur's *bidesiyā* and *biraha* with the impracticality of *nokariyā* tells us:

Woman*: Chhoḍ de chaṭkal kī nokariyā sunāye sajnā*
Ghaṛhi karake tuwāri sunāye sajanā
Man: *Humke chaṭkal kī nokariyā jī choḍawā Dhanyā*
Kuchdin manwā ke apne manwā rāniyā
(Woman: Leave your work/job at the jute mill
Come back home, my love.
Man: You want me to leave my job at the jute mill, my Dhanya[18]
Keep your heart in reins, my queen.)

In this modern Bhojpuri ballad, the woman is urging her husband to leave her job at the jute mill. The reason she offers him is that she misses him and so his toil at the jute mill is making no sense to her (anymore). So she thinks that he should give up his job at the jute mill and come back home to work on the agricultural plot of land. The distance between her and her husband is unbearable. The husband sings back saying that giving up a job at the mill is silly. He reasons that to do farming today, one needs money. And so he sees no reason to give up his jute mill work because that is their source of income. If that income dries up, they will have no money for food and even water. As a compromise he promises to take her (presumably to Kolkata) in the month of *sāwan* (monsoon season). There is no dearth of Bhojpuri popular performance around the themes of *sāwan* when *biraha* (separation/sorrow) is most acute because *sāwan*, the monsoon month and season, means sowing the fields as well as going to Deoghar to bathe in the holy water of the Ganges and worship Lord Shiva, the Puranic deity. In short, familial and ritual worship means nothing without the entire family being present on the occasion.

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[17] Recently, I spoke with one of the most popular singers of Bhikhari Thakur's ballads, Kalpana Patowary. Patowary is from the northeastern state of Assam, but is one of the most popular Bhojpuri singers on the television and regional Bhojpuri cinema circuit both inside and outside Bihar, especially in Bollywood. I particularly asked about the legacy of Bhikhari Thakur and its relations with toil, to which Patowary rhetorically replied,

> Thakur's songs and music bring closer to heart the hardship of the individual in search of work, home, and family. That home and family is always Bhojpuri.

Kalpana Patowary, Interview, June 10, 2012. Also see, Sanjiv's *Sūtradhar* (New Delhi: Radhakrishna Paperbacks, 2004), a novel based on the life of Bhikhari Thakur.

[18] (common Bhojpuri name, meaning great or the blessed, also commonly pronounced as *dhaniyā,* coincidentally meaning coriander)

Nauṭankī and *biraha*: regional or global?

In conclusion, *nauṭankī*—old and new—is a proper object for further understanding *mohallā* because the *mohallā*, like the *nauṭankī* and *biraha* performances too has no inside and outside as I have argued in the second section of the dissertation. The power of sounds, images, bodily movements, and the chatter of domestic and community lives are too proximal to be contained by the formality of the literary form. And yet, most criticism of *nauṭankī* has come from the cultural discourses based on the binaries of regionalism or *ānchalikatā* and universalism or the national Hindi popular in media and performance. A typical example of this binary in performance and media studies would be Rachel Dwyer's *Bollywood's India* (2013). Dwyer seems to ignore the form, function, and structure of *nauṭankī* in Bollywood altogether, focusing on the generalized account of Bhojpuri as a "low-class" and "emerging" cinema and performance of the region. This has effectively created fallacious myths of the regional or *ānchalik* as different from the universal mode of Bollywood entertainment in India. Recently, Abhijit Ghosh in *Cinema Bhojpuri* (2010) through film journalism has attempted to create a different outlook for Bhojpuri cinema (and performance), but his work is of a documentary nature, which basically does not show interest in subverting the myths of regionalism in media in contemporary India. The problem with the binary of regionalism and universalism is that the former tends to create its own hermetically sealed boundaries and hierarchies of dependence on the center (ideological construct), thereby running counter to the tendencies of globalization (networking). Further, media and performance theories like the ones cited above are very much reminiscent of majoritarian and minoritarian politics in contemporary Indian democratic contexts. The latter, as I have briefly glossed in my discussion of *mohallā* bazar and politics in both Chapters 4 and 5, have deeply affected the politics of community institutions, as is especially the case with Partha Chatterjee's discussion of "community institutions" in *The Politics of the Governed* (2004). If we abandon the majoritarian/minoritarian binary in appreciating both community institutions such as the *mohallā* and performance such as the *nauṭankī* and its sub-genre, *biraha*, we can see that Bhojpuri performance is every bit a candidate for globalization through the vernacular, as is the universal medium of entertainment called Bollywood in India.

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National Jute Board http://www.jute.com:8080/web/njb/home/

Jute Corporation of India http://www.jci.gov.in:8080/jci/

Indian Jute Mills Association http://www.ijma.org/

National Jute Manufacturers Corporation http://njmc.gov.in/

Board of Industrial and Financial Reconstruction http://bifr.nic.in/

The Bengal Chamber of Commerce and Industry http://bengalchamber.com/

Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry www.ficci.com

Indian Jute Blog http://indianjute.blogspot.in/

Census of India http://censusindia.gov.in/

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Interviews and informal meetings (selected) in workshops, local libraries, *chai-pānī*, *mohallā*, and *mohallā* bazar, 2011 (unless otherwise mentioned)

Kamarhati

1. Munnabhai *chai-pānī*, 1/26, 4/28, 8/3
2. KCMU Meeting, 1/26
3. Islamia Library, 2/1-7
4. Informal women workers, pen factory, 4/3
5. Informal men and women workers on *sūtā kāṭnā* (cutting yarn), 4/4
6. *Sūtā-sāṛi* spinning, 3/29, 4/9
7. SPAN crowd, 3/20
8. Kamarhati women workers in *mohallā,* 4/1, 2, 4, 25
9. Kamarhati EOU workers, 2/16
10. Kamarhati Jute Mill, Selection, 1/27
11. Kamarhati Jute Mill, Batching, 3/2
12. Kamarhati Jute Mill Labor Office 3/1, 2, 3
13. Kamarhati Jute Mill, Workshop, 2/10, 2/13, 2/14, 2/23, 3/10, 3/11, 3/31, 4/1
14. Iqbal, fitter and mechanic, Kamarhati, 1/30, 2/1, 2/4, 3/1, 3/3, 3/4, 3/5, 3/25, 3/27
15. Aftab Rajababu, fitter mechanic, 1/30, 2/1, 2/4, 3/5, 325, 3/27
16. Nemai Das,union worker, 2/13
17. Khalil, worker, 8/28
18. Rahamatullah, union worker, 2/7
19. Upadhyay, supervisor, 1/30, 4/28
20. Pandey, supervisor, 1/29, 1/30
21. Singhji, selection-in-charge, 1/29, 1/30, 2/2
22. Zakir Hussain, labor contractor, 3/1, 3/2, /3
23. Kamarhati CITU Office members 3/4
24. Tiwariji, engineer, 3/23, 4/11
25. Bipin Dubey, Anglo-India Jute Milljute staff, 11/13
26. Shahid, 3/31, 4/1, 4/3, 4/6

Gouripur

1. Jagaddal workers, 8/28
2. Indu Singh, librarian and activist, Maitreya Granthagar, 8/15
3. Rama Shankar Paswan, pension activist, 7/30, 8/19, 9/29, 10/31, 11/30

4. Jiten Chatterjee, CITU member and leader, 8/20, 9/27
5. Gaya *chāchā*, RCMU member, 8/20, 10/31
6. Maitreya Granthagar, local library engaged in girls' education, 8/28
7. Bikram Shaw, Graduate Student and School Teacher, 8/28, 9/29
8. Rajshri, Tumpa, Manju, 8/28, 9/20, 11/30
9. Gour Goswami, formerly CPI union activist, 8/31, 9/2, 9/4, 9/8, 10/8 11/22
10. Gorakhnath Mishra, author, professor, activist (RCMU), 8/6, 11/2
11. Narayan Dubey, *nauṭankī* author, 11/3, 1/1/12
12. Yadav *chāchā*'s tea stall, 7/30, 8/19, 8/20, 9/29, 10/31, 11/30

Titagarh, Barrackpore, Barasat, and Kolkata

1. Indrajit Singh, former member, Communist Party of India and later member, Hind Mazdur Sabha, *kachhā* (uncemented tenement) line 9/10, 9/30,
2. Shyamal Bose, member, Communist Party of India, 3/4
3. Gour Goswami, former member and activist, Communist Party of India, 9/14, 10/23, 11/1

Acts and Annexures

1. "Jute Ecolabel: Annexures to Life Cycle Assessment Study" Pricewaterhouse Coopers (Kolkata), March 2006 www.jute.com/ecolabel
2. "Jute Ecolabel: Benchmarking Against Competing Product," Pricewaterhouse Coopers (Kolkata), May 2006 www.jute.com/ecolabel
3. Ministry of Textiles Notification, 24th December 2002
4. The Jute Manufacturing Development Council Act, 1983, No. 27 of 1983
5. Jute Technology Mission (JTM) files
6. "Questionnaire on Stakeholder Consultation on Indian Jute Ecolabel," Pricewaterhouse Coopers (Kolkata) www.jute.com/ecolabel (undated)
7. "Stakeholder Consultation for Evaluation of Ecolabel Criteria for Jute Products," Pricewaterhouse Coopers (Kolkata), December 2005 www.jute.com/ecolabel

Little Magazines (selected)

1. *Anik*
2. *Padārpan*
3. *Samakāl kathā*
4. *Bhāshālipi*

Appendices

Appendix I: Jute at a glance

West Bengal is the leading manufacturer of jute textiles. As of 2009-10 the state is the largest in India in terms of production. 64 among 83 composite existing jute mills in India are located in West Bengal – mostly on the banks of river Hooghly near Kolkata. Export of jute products during 2009-10 was 110.5 thousand metric tonnes, valued at Rs. 844.70 crore. The state jute industry provides direct employment to 0.26 million workers and supports the livelihood of around 4 million farm families.

Source: FICCI, "Suggestions for West Bengal Textile Policy," 2022

Definition of Slum

"Slums have come to form an integral part of the phenomenon of urbanization in India. Comprehensive information on the slums is essential for formulation of effective and coordinated policy for their improvement. Formation and identification of slum enumeration blocks prior to the conduct of 2001 Census has made it possible to compile and prepare special tables for slums. It is for the first time in the history of census in the country that the slum demography is being presented on the basis of the actual count. The systematic delineation of slums for collection of primary data on their population characteristics during population enumeration itself may perhaps be the first of its type in the world.

For the purpose of Census of India, 2001, the slum areas broadly constitute of:

(i) All specified areas in a town or city notified as "Slum" by State/Local Government and Union Territory (UT) Administration under any Act including a "Slum Act."

(ii) All areas recognized as "Slum" by State/Local Government and UT Administration, Housing and Slum Boards, which may have not been formally notified as slum under any act;

(iii) A compact area of at least 300 population or about 60-70 households of poorly built congested tenements, in unhygienic environment usually with inadequate infrastructure and lacking in proper sanitary and drinking water facilities."

Source: Census of India, 2011

Appendix II

Vernacular and community practices in jute life

a) Gappo

The word, "*gappo*" has the connotation of *āḍḍā*, an informal and impromptu interaction, a favorite leisure activity among Bengalis and others interacting with Bengalis. One of the most iconic representations of *gappo* has been made by Ritwik Kumar Ghatak in his last film, *jukti takko ār gappo* (Reason, argument, and a story, 1974). In the film, Ritwik narrates the tale of Nilkantha Bagchi, an alcoholic and disillusioned Marxist intellectual wandering on foot from Calcutta, the metropole, to Purulia, a tribal-agrarian area in the western part of West Bengal, in search of his son, Satya, and his estranged wife, Durga. Along the way, he passes through the countryside and the tribal areas of West Bengal, documenting, like an anthropologist, every little detail of artifacts, people, and events; in the end, Nilkantha dies of a gunshot wound aimed at the Naxalites in the forest he has wandered into. His wife refuses to let him stay because of his alcoholism and misdirected intellectualism, which, she reckons, would have a bad influence on their son. The story ends with Nilkantha's dying words to his wife: "*Mānik Bābur oi Madan tāntir kathā mone āche tomār? … tānt, tānt, …tānt nā chāliye gāye bāt dhore geche… Kichu ekṭā korte hobe to!*"(Do you remember that story by Manik Babu? … loom, loom… he got rheumatic arthritis from not running the loom …we have to do something, you know!).

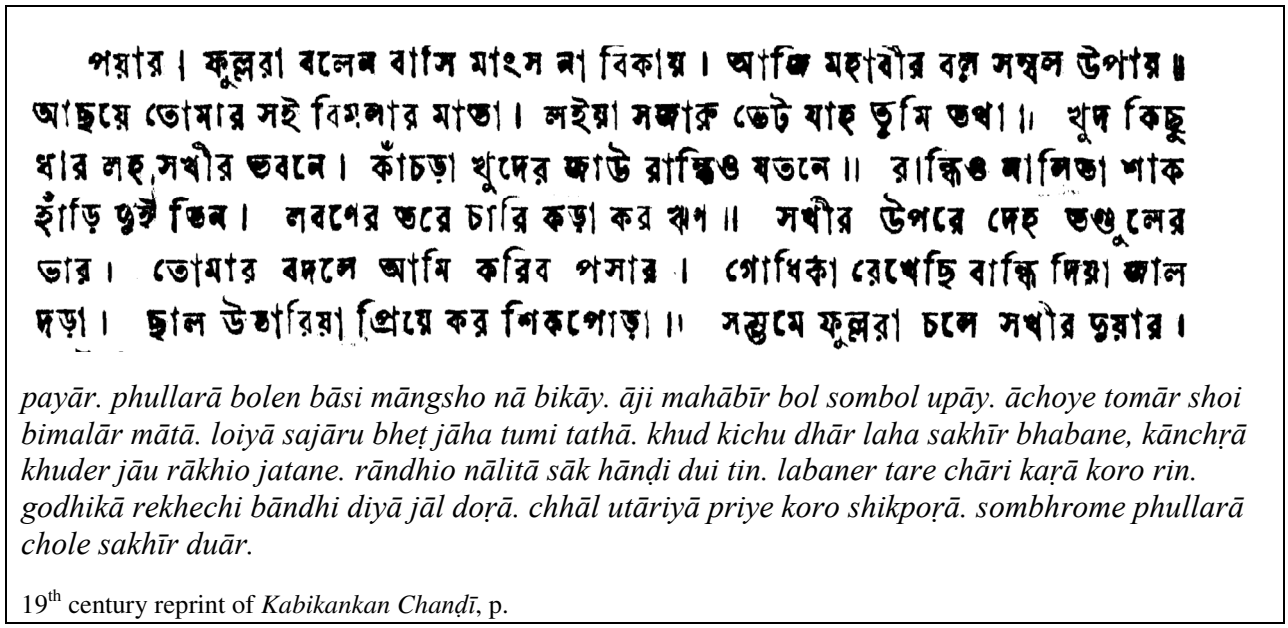
The reference is to Madan the weaver in Manik Bandopadhyay's short story, "Shilpī" in Paristhiti ("The Craftsman," in *Situations*, 1946), written and/or set during the Tebhaga movement in 1946-7 in Bengal, sponsored mainly by the Leftist movement. Madan the weaver is one of the best known symbols of undying resistance in modern Bengali avant garde prose and culture. Tebhaga means sharing by Thirds; the agitation was directed against the landlords, who were asked to give up one third of the yield of crops to the share-croppers (tenant farmers). In Manik's story, Madan has refused to buy yarn to make cheap cloth and sell his labor to the textile proto-capitalists, intermediaries (*dalāl*) and money-lenders (*mahājan*) like Bhuban Ghoshal. But as a weaver and craftsman, Madan must weave, even on an empty loom. Madan resists capitalism's driving logic of abstract labor and its means to enslave weavers by cutting off the supply of yarn for artisan textiles and forcing them to weave cheap cloths. Ghatak, like Manik, is exploring the work of the community, though both are using the platform of modern culture, samskriti, or creativity—cinema and short story.

b) Leaf-eating and premodern Bengali poetry

As briefly mentioned in the "Introduction," the edible uses of the leaf have been well-represented in the medieval poetic traditions. *Pāṭ* appears as a wild and a backyard plant, an everyday *sāk*, and a part of domesticity, especially when represented in ritual texts and songs like the "medieval" *mangalkāvya* (poetry of well-being) of Bengal (15^{th}-17^{th} centuries).[1] Below is an example of eating *pāṭ sāk,* here called *nalitā* (Sanskrit for *pāṭ*) in *Kabikankan Chaṇḍī*, Mukundaram Chakrabarti's version of the *Chaṇḍīmangal* (narrative poem about the goddess *Chaṇḍī*, probably 16^{th} century, first printed in 1868 in Calcutta).

[1] See Mukundaram Chakrabarti, *Kabikankan Chaṇḍī* (Calcutta:1275 Bangabda (1868)).

In the episode "*godhikā*[2] *saha kālketur āgamane phullarār khed*" (Phullarā's regret as Kālketu arrives with an iguana), Phullarā, the wife of the low-caste hunter Kālketu, is advised by her *"sakhī*" (female friend) and neighbor to cook *nalitā* or *pāṭ sāk*. What makes an everyday cooking item like leafy greens interesting is the context of the binds of kitchen, everyday ritual, and domestic love in a resource-scarce household. Kālketu and Phullarā in the episode "*Akhet*" (non-agrarian) are shown as a couple who "eke out a living" hunting animals for animal products.[3] To give a sense of how both the *payār*, a narrative form in old Bengali with rhyming couplets (meant to be sung in ritual worship by housewives with fasting), and the *pāṭ* cooking reference in the text are rooted in domesticity, it will be useful to point out the everyday narrative contexts of the *mangalkābya*. For example, a bit later in the same *payār*, Phullarā and her friend are shown sharing sisterhood as they comb and pick lice from each other's hair, thereby giving the singer, audience, and reader a deep sense of the everyday "time pass" of the housewives of hunters and pastoralists (38). In the following snippet from the *payār*, Phullarā's conversation with her female friend, a "*sakhi*" gives a sense of the domestic context, in which we need to examine the *pāṭ* leaf scene.



পয়ার। ফুল্লরা বলেন বাসি মাংস না বিকায়। আজি মহাবীর বল সম্বল উপায়॥
আছয়ে তোমার সই বিমলার মাতা। লইয়া সজারু ভেট যাহ তুমি তথা॥ খুদ কিছু
ধার লহ সখীর ভবনে। কাঁচড়া খুদের জাউ রান্ধিও যতনে॥ রান্ধিও নালিতা শাক
হাঁড়ি তুই তিন। লবণের তরে চারি কড়া কর ঋণ॥ সখীর উপরে দেহ তণ্ডুলের
ভার। তোমার বদলে আমি করিব পসার। গোধিকা রেখেছি বান্ধি দিয়া জাল
দড়া। ছাল উতারিয়া প্রিয়ে কর শিকপোড়া॥ সম্ভ্রমে ফুল্লরা চলে সখীর দুয়ার।

payār. phullarā bolen bāsi māngsho nā bikāy. āji mahābīr bol sombol upāy. āchoye tomār shoi bimalār mātā. loiyā sajāru bheṭ jāha tumi tathā. khud kichu dhār laha sakhīr bhabane, kānchṛā khuder jāu rākhio jatane. rāndhio nālitā sāk hāṇḍi dui tin. labaner tare chāri kaṛā koro rin. godhikā rekhechi bāndhi diyā jāl doṛā. chhāl utāriyā priye koro shikpoṛā. sombhrome phullarā chole sakhīr duār.

19th century reprint of *Kabikankan Chaṇḍī*, p.

> "Phullarā says, stale meat does not sell. Today, we depend on the strength of the brave. Your friend, Bimalā's mother, is with you. Go make a gift of a porcupine. Borrow some broken rice from the friend. Save the boiled rice gruel with care. Cook two or three pots of jute greens. For salt, borrow four *kaṛā* measure [by palms]. Give your friend responsibility for the rice. I will spread my wares instead of you. I have roped in a female reptile. Skin it and make a kebab. Respectfully, Phullarā goes to her friend" (*Chaṇḍī*, 38)

Phullarā has to make do with limited kitchen resources, which often mean borrowing salt and rice for making *jāu*, a porridge eaten by pastorals, peasants, and poor people, and cooking meat

[2] (The reptile in the episode *Chaṇḍī*'s *vāhana* or carrier in the Upapurana is a crocodile, hence the reference works both literally as well as ritually/symbolically.)

[3] Saumitra Chakravarty, "The *Chandi mangal kavya* of Mukundaram Chakraborty," *Le Simplegadi,* 2009, Vol. 7, 7: 43

like field rats, *geckos*, and other reptilian creatures as well as pheasants, pigeons, and other birds. What stands out in this scene is that Phullarā does not have to borrow *nālita* or *pāṭ* as it grows in the wild and is readily available for cooking. As indicated earlier, Phullarā's domestic rituals are rooted in the forest and pastoral contexts that go to establish not only the premodern and precapitalist but the pre-agrarian roots of *pāṭ* in its availability and edible uses. The *pāṭ* leaf that will be cooked is not a small amount either—it is three to four *hāṇḍis*, or capacious pots used to cook rice.

The Phullarā episode above points to a moment in the text that Abhayā apparently would rectify—i.e., Phullarā-Kālketu would leave their hunter-gatherer and pastoral life (arguably tinted with the mythic alluding to the *Purānas* (genre of old Hindu texts) as well as selective memorializing of the master-epics, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*) to found the state of Gujarat and spread the good word of the deity Chaṇḍī. By the 18th and 19th centuries, medieval forest-dwelling themes in narrative poetry were less and less featured centrally as the rural and the urban began to be connected through commerce and culture. While there is little room to discuss the critical changes in Bengal's forest and pastoral landscape here, we must remember that another retelling of the myth, Chandravati's *Ramayana* from Mymensingha in East Bengal (now Bangladesh), similarly alludes to a wide array of *pāṭ* in an equally borderline context of the pastoral and the agrarian.

c) Leaf-eating in modern and neoliberal forms: reconstructing the gimmick of the authentic

The gap in the histories of edible *pāṭ* from the medieval to the modern and contemporary is fairly wide. While the 19th century is mainly focused on the commercial representations of the bast fiber, little is known of its edible uses around the time. Edibility of *pāṭ* partially resurfaced in the post-Partition era in West Bengal as the large-scale cultivation of *pāṭ* in West Bengal (albeit for commercial uses) gave people living in the East Bengali refugee colonies in Kolkata and its adjacent areas the opportunity to buy *pāṭ sāk*, seasonally sold in the local bazaars by local farmers, or as mentioned earlier, *sāk* aunties (*sāk māshī*). I must note that post-Partition cultivation of jute for commercial uses had created a niche market for the leaf again. Little is known about *sāk māshīs* selling *pāṭ sāk* in local cultures except in scattered ways, but with the advent of ethnic food since the 1990s, "authentic" Bengali eating establishments in Kolkata (as well as internet cooking guides) have started offering *pāṭ pātā bhājā* (fried *pāṭ* leaf in rice batter), evidently an East Bengali delicacy, among other local and ethnic dishes.[4] As Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay has argued repeatedly in *The rumor of globalization* (2012), these new authenticities are part of the mystiques of nostalgia and identity politics in new urbanisms in neoliberal contexts.

For example, recently, *pāṭ pātā bhājā* in its pan-Indian avatar, "jute *pakoṛā*," has gained attention in the Indian and internet media. Its popularity can be partially gauged by an incident involving Brian Cox, the Dundonian[5] actor in Hollywood and the narrator in a BBC documentary called *Brian Cox's jute journey* (2009), who made a nostalgic trip to the jute mills

[4] See Sunita Narain and Vibha Varshney, *First Food:A Taste of India's Biodiversity* (New Delhi: Center for Science and Environment, 2013) for a review of local biodiversity and ethnic food related to leaves and greens like *pāṭ*.
[5] Dundonian is the adjectival form of Dundee, the jute capitals of Europe from the early 19th to the early 20th centuries.

in Kolkata to trace the Dundee-Calcutta jute connection. During his trip, in a government-owned jute stocking house in southern Bengal, the Jute Corporation of India staff offered him a jute *pakoṛā*. Cox's *pakoṛā* was not cooked entirely in keeping with the traditional East Bengali recipe of using rice batter, from where the tradition of fried *pāṭ* leaf originates in eastern India. Instead, Cox's savory item was cooked in *besan* (Bengal gram flour batter) in keeping with the West Bengali tradition of *telebhājā* (deep-fried savories) as well as the North Indian tradition of deep-fried foods. (Also, the tradition of eating fried food for everyday snack is not too common in the East Bengali gastronomic tradition. Fried foods are eaten during meals.) These niggling details are perhaps too inconsequential and unworthy of mention in general, but community eating practices across the Bengal regions are often quite particular and come up in everyday conversations as is true of any other community practice. But historically, since the early 20th century, the Bengal regions have been subject to ethnoreligious and ethnocommunal violence, remembered culinary pasts appear in sharp relief more often than not in other "cultural" forms. These kinds of differences in food memories, for example, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has written in *Habitations of Modernity* (2002), became more noticeable during and after the Partition refugees began arriving from East Bengal (now Bangladesh), straining every possible resource and relation with their neighboring West Bengalis in post-Independence India. Cox, however, seemed to fully enjoy his afternoon snack, oblivious to the minor difference in detail of cooking, eating, and identity politics and practices. The situation is quite ironic as Cox was himself on a nostalgia trip in Kolkata![6]

Harnessing the nostalgia of "ethnic" foods in an era of neoliberal desire—a deep pocket involving the middle-class, non-resident Indians (NRIs) as well as consumers from the lower strata of the Bengali and other populations in Kolkata—many food establishments have begun to cater to foods like *pāṭ pātā bhājā*. While the new urban phenomenon of "multi-cuisines" brings Chinese, Thai, Italian, American, etc. adapted to Indian tastes, niche cuisines specialize in sub-regional cuisines, especially from the colonial times in various places in Bengal. Thus, Dhaka, Pabna, Bardhaman, Barishal, Murshidabad, and other regions and towns in Bangladesh and West Bengal have come to be associated with ethnic cuisines.[7] The implosion in cuisines in a place like Kolkata bringing multi-cuisines as well as microlocal gastronomic tastes to the urban consumer needs to be seen in light of the combination of the premodern forms with neoliberal tastes.

Reviving edible *pāṭ* is therefore increasingly a part of specialized ethnic food culture. Unlike multi-cuisines, specialized ethnic food providers are more "interested" in educating the client of the traditions they would participate in as they taste the "lost" culinary glory of Bengal. In return, they also want the client to share her experience of remembered pasts related to any item on or off the menu. Such approaches are advertised as part of "cultural" experiences. "Eco-friendly," "community-based," and "fully modernized" facilities blended with "authentic" gastronomic sensations are the main attractions. These eateries, increasingly found both in the city limits as

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[6] *Brian Cox's jute journey*. BBC, 58:59 mins, color, 2009. Weblink: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bu7Vh9i1wgI

[7] Suchandra Ghatak and Somrita Bhattacharya, "*peṭ-pūjor āntarjātik upochār niye tairi sahar* "(City prepared to worship the belly with international cuisine), *Anandabazar pāṭrika,* 16 October, 2014 http://www.anandabazar.com/calcutta/different-dishes-ready-to-blast-in-festive-time-1.72034 There is a pun on the word *pūjo*, which stands for the Durga puja festival (Durga is another form of Chaṇḍī in Kolkata, and worshipping the *peṭ* or belly. Bengalis adsvertise themselves as *khādya-rasik* or foodie.

well as a little far from the city of Kolkata (about 25-30 miles maximum—usually a couple of hours drive; but traffic is usually very slow, hence 1-2 hours for the above distance), also give an authentic setting for such gastronomic experiences. For example, in Arshinagar, near Budge Budge (a jute mill area) in South 24-Parganas, about 15 miles or less from the metropolis of South Kolkata, a non-profit runs a restaurant called "Pancho Byanjon" (meaning five cooked foods, a euphemism for a large variety of steamed, fried, and cooked Bengali vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes). As the restaurant advertises its philosophy and activities, the emphasis on culture is uppermost. Though in this case the *pāṭ* leaf delicacy is not listed in the pitch itself (it is on the menu)[8], the use of words like "authentic," the revival of the colonial spelling of Bengali as "Bengalee," and the invitation to experience the "Babu" life of Thakurbari (the Tagore family residence of the 19th and early 20th centuries in Kolkata) sum up the perspective of the "food archive" the non-profit intends to highlight and practice:

> This is our restaurant but you can call it our "food archive" because here we have collected the most *authentic* menus of *Bengalee* cuisine. Our collection extends from the *common Pally Bangla* [rural Bengal] menu to the kitchen of Rabindranath Tagore, Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose and the likes. We have meticulously collected these menus and trained our cooks to serve them. At Pancho Byanjan, we can serve you the legendary Barishaler *Bhapa Ilish* [Barishal's steamed hilsa], *Pabnar Tel Koi* [Pabna's raw oil Koi fish], *Bardhamaner Posto Bora* [Bardhaman's poppy-seed fried dumpling] and some nearly extinct menus like *Chingri Maach diye Kochur Loti* [Taro-type stalk with prawn], *Lotey Maacher Jhuri* [Lotey fish squiggly crisps] or Dumurer Dalna [Fig curry].
>
> We regularly invite interested personalities to our kitchen, who train our cooks in a particular dish which they have innovated or maybe have learnt from her earlier generations. We have archived menus of many households from various parts of Bengal and our cooks can transform them at your wish. So, if you wish to design your menu exactly the way the *Babus* of Thakurbari used to do, then give us a call (italics mine).

The careful construction of the idea of the "authentic" is situated in both the common experience of eating cuisines from rural Bengal (Pally Bangla) and the kitchens of cultural luminaries like the Tagores and the Boses.[9] These are heightened by the etiquettes of new urbanity that pay particular attention to cooking and serving techniques, utensils (made of brass and copper in keeping with tradition as well as local customs), presentation, and "satisfaction" surveys—online or in "guestbook" entries. It particularly encourages non-resident Indians (especially from the USA) to tell their stories of learned or remembered recipes to help the cooking staff learn and grow—to help "them" (meaning local cooks) to "grow" their "imagination." Further, these efforts are tied to the idea of conservation that the guest can "tell them" about in more detail so that they can take care of the environment better.

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[8] Pancho Byanjon, a restaurant specializing in serving ethnic Bengali food http://arshinagar.org/poncho-byanjon/

[9] See Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, "Between elite hysteria and Subaltern carnivalesque: the politics of street-food in the city of Calcutta," *South Asia Research* (Sage Publishers), Vol. 24, No.1, p-37-50, May 2004. Mukhopadhyay discusses the trend in yet another kind of food—street food and the condition of new subaltern possibility. Mukhopadhyay's essay on the interaction between the elite and the nonelite is crucial to understanding neoliberal desires in contemporary global South.

Equally relevant, the said "personalities" who are invited to advise the resident cooks are identified as female. The assumption is that as women (and housewives), they may have learned older recipes from their mothers or mother-in-laws. Also implied in this assumption is the fact that many women may be professionals but as women, they must know already how to cook. Besides engendering the stereotype of the woman as naturally privileged to know food recipes, the pitch represents the pathetic state of the Bengali males in neoliberal times who, like earlier times, are alien to cooking. And yet, traditional cooks (known as "Thakur") in the Hindu tradition are males—the common saying in Bengali goes that for men, cooking is a profession (productive labor), but for women, it is *svabhāb* (sva=own; *bhāb*=state; nature, non-productive labor).[10]

Reviving edible *pāṭ*, though apparently gimmicky in the new urban context, needs to be seen in the light of the new etiquette and evolving forms of the "authentic," which is not a simple act of replicating the past but involves reticulated paths and reconstructions in neoliberal capitalism. In the case of Pancho Byanjon, both common Pally Bangla (rural Bengal) and cuisines from the luminaries' kitchens need careful reconstructions of forms, memories, and material. Reconstructions of edible forms as well as in the woven forms are common occurrences as we shall see while discussing woven *pāṭ*. Arguably, in the case of ethnic food reconstructions, the ethical problems of differing urban forms of micro-local food movements that are variants of the global trends in "organic," "open," and anti-Frankenfoods politics can be recalled.

However, in the case of ethnic enclaves such as Pancho Byanjon, the appeal goes beyond the activist rhetoric of the local, fair trade, and the organic as prevalent in the West. Instead, Pancho Byanjon promises and delivers a distinctly "cultural" experience, though it is not clear if it delivers a "community" experience in the sense of continuity and deeper relationship with the local, except for a shared experience of reconstructing ethnic food enclaves. As we have briefly seen in the works of the early agriculturalists like N. C. Chaudhuri (Jute in Bengal), the practice of eating pāṭ leaf was traditionally rooted in wild, small, and seasonal cultivation of pāṭ in its predominantly local and community growing practices (including use and reuse of water in small tracts for retting and other purposes instead of the large-scale irrigation methods adopted during its industrial use), it will be quite difficult to replicate its ethical forms of backyard cultivation and relatively small landholdings today.[11] And yet, despite these limitations, the revival of pāṭ as an edible form provides new insight into the creation of global ethnics and particular forms of neoliberal desires.

[10] Feminist scholars have long debated the difference between productive and non-productive labor and work. See Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude* (2009).
[11] See Dvijadas Datta, *pāṭ bā nālitā*, 1911.