

Tug-of-Ear:
The Play of Dialect in Modern Bengali and Tamil Literature

By

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Abstract

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The dissertation foregrounds Bengali and Tamil ideas of nonstandard language that complicate dominant discourses of literary language and its political contexts, including modernism, nationalism, and contemporary movements. The first half of the dissertation explores dialect, place, and literary form in Bengali through the idea of “*dēśer kathā*” (“dialect,” from *dēś* “homeland” and *kathā* “word-form”). I begin with how *kathā* (oral and dialectal forms) disrupts the dominant paradigms of *sādhu* (“pure”) and *calit* (“current”) Bengali in the modernist novel, through readings of three classic works by Manik Bandyopadhyay, Advaita Mallabarman, and Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay. Then I examine how the discourses of indigeneity (*ādibāsī*) and refugee experience (*udbāstu*) in Bengali *āñcalik* (regional) and Dalit poetry, short fiction, and *kabigān* (poet’s songs) complicate conceptions of *dēś* (homeland) and *jāti* (birth community). The second half of the dissertation carries these questions into contemporary Tamil literature through the idea of *vaṭṭāra valakku* (“dialect,” from *vaṭṭāram* “region” and *valakku* “practice”). Here too, regional language problematizes the dominant “spoken/written” (*pēccu/eluttu*) binary by stressing place and practice. I trace these threads in the work of contemporary Tamil authors, highlighting dialect as a mode of attention in the work of Kanmani Gunasekaran, regional author and lexicographer based in Virudhachalam, Tamil Nadu, and dialect as play in the work of Tamilselvi, feminist author from Tiruvarur district now based in Virudhachalam. These ideas, I argue, offer innumerable places from which it may be possible to challenge hegemonic concepts of the nation and the global as well as complicate or reimagine past and present regional discourses. Thus, dialect offers a space to grapple with the problems of representation of and by marginalized communities, minorities, Dalits, and women.

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Note on transliteration

For standard Bangla and Tamil words, I have generally followed the transliteration scheme used in the Samsad Bangla-English Dictionary and the University of Madras Tamil Lexicon, respectively (both available through the University of Chicago's Digital Dictionaries of South Asia). However, in the case of Bangla, I have deviated substantially from the Samsad scheme with respect to some sounds, as it does not give the reader an accurate sense of even standard Bangla pronunciation, much less dialect. Specifically, the vowel অ, usually represented with *a*, is sometimes pronounced like the *o* in *pot* and sometimes like the *o* in *stone*; I have generally used *a* in the former cases and *o* in the latter; I have represented the conjunct ঙ্গ phonetically as *kkha* instead of *kṅa*; I have used *j* for both জ and ঞ; the Samsad scheme does not differentiate between ঙ and ঞ, so I have used *r* and *ḍ* for these letters and used *ri* instead of Samsad's *r* for the vowel ঞ; and I have retained the transliteration *s*, *ś*, and *ṣ* for the letters স, শ, and ষ, which are differentiated in orthography but not in pronunciation, so please note that all three are pronounced with the sound *sh*. Please also note that the letter ছ, usually represented as *cha*, is regularly pronounced with the sound *s* (as in English "sun") in East Bengali dialect.

Dialect words in both languages present a difficulty, as there is no standardized system of representing dialectal pronunciation in the texts I examine. I have attempted to give the closest possible representation of the word as it appears in the text by following a modified, flexible version of the above transliteration schemes.

For both languages, I have followed accepted spellings for proper names except when quoting from original-language texts.

Introduction

The title of this dissertation, “Tug-of-ear,” comes from an untranslatable play on words in a line from a novel by Bengali modernist writer Jibanananda Das. The protagonist imagines himself bound by a *kān-ṭān*, “tug on the ear,” or *prāṇ-ṭān*, literally “drawing of breath” or “tugging on life” (suggesting ‘*prāṇ niyē ṭānāṭāni*, endangering one’s life’)” in a condition of estrangement from his own language, family, city, and society. A poem by the same author remembers a man who has died, it seems, of dialectics dragging him by the ears in opposite directions. What does this have to do with dialect? Colloquially, a person’s accent is called *kathār ṭān*, the “pull” of their home place on their words. The use of dialect, or non-standard socioregional language varieties, in a literary text is subject to the play of many “centripetal and centrifugal” forces,¹ of many forms of intimacy and estrangement, translation and untranslatability—a ceaseless “tug-of-ear.”

Socioregional dialects in South Asia as elsewhere have strong associations with work, being characterized predominantly as the languages of the working-class, those who work in the fields, the factories, their own homes and the homes of the better-off, those with limited access to education and social mobility. However, what emerges from the texts I explore has as much to do with play as with work, from the forms of play that sustain working people and communities to the irrepressible play of sounds and associations that is fundamental to literature in its oral and written dimensions. Play, understood colloquially as *khelā* in Bangla and *veḷayāṭṭu* in Tamil, has tremendous potential as a way of navigating the cross-currents of language in and between South Asian modern literatures.

I argue that dialect plays an irreducible and irreplaceable role in literature as it evokes neglected bodies of knowledge, practices of knowing, and deep reserves of affect, particularly the affects of intimacy and loss. Bakhtin’s pathbreaking work established the intrinsic heteroglossia and polyphony of the novel form yet focused on the “expressive possibilities” of speech styles rather than linguistically marked dialect; when dialects enter the literary text, Bakhtin argues, they cannot remain closed sociolinguistic systems but are “deformed” by, and in turn deform, literary language.² Bakhtin’s emphasis on the definitive chameleon-like property of the novel’s authorial voice, which takes on the hue and tone of various speakers’ ideologies, remains relevant; however, it is the process of productive deformation of linguistic systems that interests me here. Any such system, oral, literary, or oral-literary, is after all a theoretical bundle of forms in practice; as various systems perceived as “closed” open onto each other, their various forms enter a shared space of play, performing an interaction highly conditioned by cultural norms but never completely predictable. This interaction speaks volumes, to use an aptly oral-literate expression, of the problems of representation and abstraction; it enables recognition, albeit partial or distorted, of parallel and entangled worlds, allows them to speak to each other—without necessarily assuming the content of this speech is communicated. The literary text composed entirely in dialect presents new dimensions to the problem, highlighting voice and recasting the intellectual division of labor between language varieties. Notably, even the rare fully dialectal novel is not—cannot be—monolingual but rather partially reverses the relationship between standard and non-standard languages.

¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

² *Ibid.*

Investigating these dynamics has relevance not only for South Asian literatures, which are as intensely diverse and multilingual as the region itself, but also for global comparative literature. Regional dialect resists erasure, occupying a significant place in many world literatures, such as African American, Italian, and Arabic literature, to name a few. In each of these literatures, linguistic diversity, multilingualism, and diglossia are uniquely bound up with the complex problem of representation of identities and communities in societies deeply marked by social and political injustice—the violence of race, colonialisms, nationalisms, and other forms of inequality. Scholars have explored the contested role of dialect in African-American literature due to its associations with racial stereotyping on the one hand and its affirmation of community on the other—for example, in the work of Zora Neale Hurston—as well as representations of African-American speech in literature by both white and African-American authors, reappraising the premise of “accuracy” that underlies arguments about linguistic stereotyping by giving attention to literary function.³ These questions have bearing on South Asian literature, particularly on the representation of subaltern and Dalit communities in mainstream literature and in writing associated with the Dalit movement, which recognizes African-American literature as a source of inspiration. Arabic literature of North Africa operates within multiple layers of difference, including colonial languages such as French, Modern Standard Arabic, and the local dialects. This diglossia resonates with the case of Tamil, in which the standard written form continues to differ systematically from the various spoken forms, and Tamil linguistic identity is impacted by encounters with several politically powerful languages, including Sanskrit, English, and Hindi; Bangla also went through a diglossic period in the 19th and early 20th centuries, as discussed below. Nor is this an exclusively “postcolonial” problem, though colonialisms old and new have massive and complex implications here, arguably on both sides of the relationship. Literatures of western Europe, easy for a non-specialist to think of as self-evident due to their global recognition, have had to reckon with the centrifugal force of regional difference and internal diversity: Italy has several robust regional literatures, which challenge the hegemony of standard, unitary Italian identity and culture, as do Basque and Catalan in Spain, while multilingualism has profound importance in the writings of many towering European literary figures and is entangled with the idea of “minor literature,” conceived by Deleuze and Guattari as “minor” writing in a major language and contested by scholars such as Chana Kronfeld, who argues that this position overlooks the contributions of writing in minor languages, and that the driving force of many major literary movements has come from the “margins.”⁴

In postcolonial literary studies, yet another way of thinking about linguistic difference and intermixture has been eloquently expounded by Caribbean writer-scholars like Edouard Glissant and taken up in the South Asian context by Gayatri Spivak and Benjamin Baer: the creole. Glissant’s work, deeply grounded in the history and ecology of the Antilles, has great theoretical and aesthetic power on both local and global scales—notably, Glissant departs from the identity-based notion of “creolity” embraced by earlier

³ See Gates, Henry Louis Jr., *The signifying monkey: a theory of African-American literary criticism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; Minnick, Lisa Cohen, *Dialect and dichotomy: literary representations of African American speech*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004.

⁴ See Deleuze, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986; Chana Kronfeld, *On the margins of modernism: decentering literary dynamics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Caribbean intellectuals, and tries to theorize an Antillean “transversality” on the one hand, and, on the other, the processes of “creolization,” which go on everywhere in the world, but in forms the mutual opacity of which, he stresses, must be recognized. This makes me question the theoretical transplantation of the words “creole” and “creolity” into South Asia (whether the word applies in a strictly linguistic sense to any specific language situation is a different question), despite the broad commonalities of postcolonial experience. Furthermore, the question of the choice of a French imbued with Antillean orality over creole itself as a literary language is one that speaks to South Asian literature, but while it would be relatively easy to make a comparison with Anglophone writing from South Asia, can the question simply be rescaled to fit regional literatures’ internal “colonizations,” as Spivak seems to do? I argue that the part of Glissant’s work that has the greatest bearing on South Asia is not the idea of the creole per se, but the intimacy between orality-literature-ecology, the power of literary landscapes and soundscapes in unsettling, little by little, the cruel weight of colonial and racial violence.⁵

What I am calling “dialect” in Bengali and Tamil literature can be glossed as non-standard socioregional language varieties, as variously represented in literature. The question then arises as to what constitutes the standard for each language, what characterizes a non-standard language, and how to recognize its enregisterment as “social” and/or “regional.” No neat separation really exists between the social and regional elements in language, and any marked language is subject to multiple enregisterments. However, in English-language scholarship, Bengali dialects are usually termed “regional,” while scholars of Tamil dialects have tended to foreground what they frame as “caste dialects” and occupational dialects. This has some basis in the different histories of language politics in Bengal and Tamil Nadu, but I argue that while both (all) factors demand attention, there is greater risk of losing sight of some dimensions and over-emphasizing or standardizing others when we categorize language by “caste” rather than by region. For example, there is no pan-regional “Dalit” dialect in either language, though local dialects may tend to be spoken more intensively by subaltern communities, be marked and subdivided by occupational practice, and share some general features across regions especially in terms of literary function; even the distinctive Brahmin dialect of Tamil has recognizable regional variations. The local and the regional have conceptual significance as the place in which caste and other social, economic, and political dynamics operate, and this way of thinking is reflected in Bengali and Tamil ideas of linguistic diversity to differing degrees.

In Bangla, the technical linguistic term for “dialect” is *upabhāṣā* (sub-language), but *āñcalik bhāṣā* (regional language) has greater currency in academic and literary studies, where there is a discourse of *āñcalikatā* or regionality. The social factor in dialect usage is seen in terms of a rural-urban binary, as this language is dismissively labeled as *grāmya* (of the village, rustic), often coupled with *amārjita* (unrefined) or *asikkhita* (uneducated)—the English translation is too functional to convey the contempt with which this word is uttered in urbane Bengali discourse—while urban (Kolkata) speech is associated with

⁵ See Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013; Benjamin Conisbee Baer’s introduction to his translation of Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, *The Tale of Hām̃suli Turn*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

“babu” culture, an untranslatable term made much of in existing Bengal studies for how it captures the elite colonial encounter. The received narrative about standard Bangla, or *mānya calit bhāṣā* (“accepted current language”), is that it is based on the language of Nadia district, home of several towering historical, cultural, and literary figures; this language is also referred to as *sāntipurī bhāṣā*, the language of Shantipur in Nadia district. However, the colloquial language of Kolkata, linguistically close to and geopolitically separated from Nadia by a small part of North 24 Parganas district, acted as a prestige dialect in 19th-20th century literature and continues to have currency in present-day writing, such that Kolkata usage is a marker less of local than of social identity, of urbanity. This grey area between the “Nadia standard” and the Kolkata prestige dialect emerges in relation to the development of *calit bhāṣā*, the “current” literary standard that, in the early 20th century, gradually replaced *sādhu bhāṣā*, the formal literary standard developed in the early colonial period. This has led literary historians to see early colonial texts that represent the Kolkata dialect as early examples of *calit bhāṣā*. The colloquial phrase *dēśēr bhāṣā* evokes “land” or “country” in the sense of home place, ancestral place, etc.; while this usage, pronounced as *dasher* (“a” as in Eng. “dash”) *bhaashaa*, is associated in West Bengal with *dēśbhāg* (again *dashbhaag*) or Partition and the East Bengali refugee condition, referring to one’s home place as *dēś* is not uncommon in West Bengali speech. This construction is particularly helpful in unpacking texts that depart, in various ways, from the usual focus on Kolkata middle class problems.

In modern Tamil, the idea of dialect is best captured in the word *vaḷakku* (practice, custom, usage), which can refer to register as well as region, as in *pēccu vaḷakku* (colloquial language), *vaṭṭāra vaḷakku* (regional language); dialect can also be identified by various terms like *pēccu* (speech), *pācai* (language, from Sanskrit *bhāṣā*), *moḷi* (Tamil word for language), or simply *tamiḷ* (Tamil), linked with the names of regions and communities. However, with the notable exception of Brahmin Tamil, most dialects represented in Tamil literature are associated with places—regions called *vaṭṭāram* or *nāṭu* (land/country, a word with comparable semantic range as the Bangla *dēś*), as in *koṅku tamiḷ* (the Tamil of Konku region). Here too, the link between social stratification and linguistic difference is understood spacially, due to residential segregation, as in the phrase *cēri tamiḷ* (slum Tamil), also referred to as *madrās pācai* or Madras language, i.e. Chennai slang, associated not with urbanity but with the urban underbelly.⁶ Chennai does not seem to have exerted the same centripetal force on literary language that Kolkata has; rather, it is Brahmin Tamil which acted as a prestige dialect prior to the rise of non-Brahmin and Dravidian language politics. This is related to the virtually unchallenged authority of modern formal Tamil, which though like Bangla a product of colonial reimagining of linguistic and literary pasts never gave way to a more colloquial standard. This may be due to the availability of classical Tamil for rallying Dravidian pride, which left little need for consolidation around a single region, especially a city of purely colonial invention like Madras or Calcutta. Even present-day standard spoken Tamil is a kind of zero-dialect or avoidance of marked socioregional features associated with educational and professional spaces rather than a

⁶ This is an exception to the general association of dialects represented in literature and cinema with rural areas, comparable to Bombay Hindi. Strangely enough, even the cowboy played by Jackie Chan in the Tamil dubbed version of *Shanghai Moon* speaks in *madrās pācai*, abstracting the intense locality of this urban dialect into a generic language of illegality. M. Kannan, personal communication.

standard dialect based on the speech of the city of Chennai or any other prestige locality. However, this does not mean that regional language is unimportant in Tamil literature; on the contrary, the persistence of the formal perhaps even enables an increasing linguistic plurality in contemporary Tamil literature, whereas in Bangla this plurality has been increasingly suppressed.

The uneven historical distribution of the dissertation stems from the nearly opposite trajectories of the two literatures with regard to dialect, at least from the modernist period onward: it is impossible to imagine the classic Bangla modernist texts without dialect, regardless of whether they adopted *sādhū* or *calit bhāṣā* for narration, yet Bangla literature today is relatively linguistically homogeneous (i.e., heteroglossia notwithstanding, intensive use of linguistically marked socioregional dialect is rare); Tamil modernists did experiment with colloquial and dialectal language, but in a much more limited way, yet these languages have a strong presence in Tamil literature today. Interestingly, while translations of Bengali literature into Tamil, as into other languages of the subcontinent, had considerable resonance from the 19th century on, modernist and later Bengali writing featuring regional dialect, available in local libraries, provided food for thought for the generation of Tamil writers living and writing today. An interesting case is Atin Bandyopadhyay's *Nilkanṭha pākhīr khōñjē* (*In Search of the Blue Bird*), translated into Tamil as *Nilakaṇṭha paravaiyiṅ tēṭi*, which has since gone in and out of print but remains sought after in Tamil literary circles—researcher and editor M. Kannan jokes that they are “still searching for that blue-throated bird!” Translations of Tamil literature into Bangla do not exist on the same scale, though the work of one intrepid translator deserves mention—Cu. Krishnamurthy, a resident of Kolkata who translated a remarkable number of works between Tamil and Bangla in both directions; however, Bangla Dalit writers have a keen interest in Tamil Dalit writing as well as other Dalit literatures. This intertextual history deserves separate study.

I have designated the period under consideration in the dissertation provisionally as “modern.” The question of the modern has been discussed, debated, and decentered at length in contemporary scholarship in many disciplines, not least in South Asian and other postcolonial history and criticism. The study of dialect in literature contributes something to this debate by attending to language, discourses, and voices that have been routinely excluded from and appropriated by most conceptions of the “modern.” I address these exclusions and appropriations in due course in the chapters. And yet I want to bracket this important debate somewhat for the dissertation's time-being, as I find it distracting to chase after the meaning or even the application of “modernity” when it exists only as a name for certain hegemonic understandings of the present's relation to the past. After all, “we have never been modern.”⁷ The “modern” and “modernist” in Bangla are designated as *ādhunik*, while the “modern” in Tamil has a lasting and elastic association with the “new,” as in the pen-name of the preeminent modernist writer, Pudumaippittan (“Crazy for Newness”) or the later *putukavitai* (“new poetry”) movement. In functional terms, the “modern” in my title refers to writing from the 1920s-present, beginning with *ādhunik* or modernist literature in Bangla and ending with *tar̥kāla* or present-day writing in Tamil, specifically the work of living authors. However, the dissertation is organized by ideas

⁷ See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

rather than periods, so the chapters overlap in time and extend beyond the texts' historical present to trace intertextual threads.

Exploring the possibilities of dialect in literature takes us into the liminal spaces of oral-literate culture. South Asian literatures, like perhaps any literature, have inseparable ties with orality, performance, the folk, the popular, and regional material histories of writing and print culture. General theories of orality and literacy want to arrive at neat conclusions by comparing cultures perceived as quintessentially literate to those in a state of pristine orality. On the one hand, the effort to recognize orality as not merely literacy minus writing but something that must be approached on its own terms has value in acknowledging the sophistication of oral knowledge systems and creativity, understanding the role of writing as a technology, and unsettling assumptions about universal human consciousness. On the other hand, the tendency to privilege pristine "primary orality" and to see literacy as a product specifically of the Greek alphabet reinforces the same stagism such studies wish to contest by posing orality as origin and thus a completed phase of the human past, and together with this the Eurocentrism that defines the terms of the debate.⁸ Does this not call for a rethinking of the notion of literacy and its conceptual privilege in the western intellectual tradition, which produces both the desire to hermetically seal literacy from orality and the somewhat psychotic mistrust of writing and valorization of speech deconstructed by Derrida and others, rather than a masked disqualification of the world's other writing systems as pulled back by vestiges of orality? As the same study argues, the interface between orality and literacy has been productive ever since the invention of literacy—a point that may seem obvious but is worth making in the face of originary purism. While the extent and significance of differences between oral-dominant and literacy-dominant cultures should not be underestimated, the existence of a "pristine" oral culture or indeed an unequivocally literate one is speculative at best, in the present world quite imaginary, and this undermines any noble intentions such arguments may have to accord unadulterated respect to oral cultures by not imposing literate categories on them. In any case, even the most elementary familiarity with South Asia makes it evident that the region's cultures were, are, and probably will continue to be inseparably oraliterate.

Surprisingly, dialect has not received sufficient attention either from literary historians or historians of print culture, despite its vital, living, generative presence on and off the page. Nor has dialect been given its due from cultural historians concerned with nationalism, class, caste, subalternity, indigeneity, minority politics, gender, or the environment despite being a key index, if nothing else, of all these fields. Despite the shift initiated in South Asian history by Subaltern Studies, South Asian cultural studies and literary history in English remain limited to canonical figures. In the case of Bengal, for example, much has been made—and with good reason, no doubt—of Rabindranath Tagore, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, and Ishwarchandra Bidyasagar in English-language scholarship, often omitting or dismissing the rest of Bengali literature.⁹ We even find a

⁸ See Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986; Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, London: Routledge, 1982; Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

⁹ See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, University of Minnesota Press, 1993; Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India*, Oxford University Press, 1998; Dipesh Chakrabarty,

scholar like Andrew Sartori, in his attempt to bring a fresh and sophisticated “global concept history” perspective to 19th century Bengal, the favorite period of postcolonial cultural scholars, defending his focus on the usual cast of eminent characters with the claim that after all, they were the ones who really had a say.¹⁰ Bangla literary studies of course has a much greater breadth and depth but is often limited by its adherence to conventional ideas of literary merit.¹¹ A valuable body of work on print culture makes a strong case for the necessity of exploring the dynamic and vibrant world of 19th century popular publishing, but without fully succeeding in changing the terms of the debate on this literature.¹² Language, which would seem to be central to both the elite 19th century “Renaissance” and its others, does not take center stage in any of these studies. The possible exception is Partition studies, where the intense affects of refugee dialects have not gone unnoticed by scholars.¹³ Finally, Dalit studies has been largely ignored in Bangla scholarship but taken up enthusiastically in English-language academia, thus compounding the problem of content vs. form that plagues Dalit literature by adding another linguistic barrier. In the case of modern Tamil, there is considerable work in English and Tamil on 19th century figures and a lone work on print culture, but little in English on 20th century to contemporary Tamil writing, though of course there is plenty in Tamil.¹⁴ In the chapters, I draw on South Asian vernacular scholarship in the fields of folklore and linguistics, which, though not without the usual disciplinary problems and assumptions, provide valuable insights on the problem of dialect due to their painstaking attention to and sheer volume of relevant detail.

The emergent field of comparative South Asian literature has barely begun to realize its tremendous potential.¹⁵ Meanwhile, conventional Comparative Literature in English-

Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference, Princeton University Press, 2000, and *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*, University of Chicago Press, 2002.

¹⁰ Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

¹¹ See Kshetra Gupta, *Bānglā sāhityēr samagra itihās (Complete history of Bengali literature)*, Kolkata: Granthanilaya, 1992; Asit Kumar Bandyopadhyay, *Bānglā sāhityēr sampūrṇa itibritta (Complete history of Bangla literature)*, Kolkata: Modern Book Agency, 2007.

¹² See Sripantha, *Battala*, Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1997 and *Jokhon chapakhana elo (When the printing press came)*, Kolkata: Paschimbanga Bangla Akademi, 1996; Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta*, Kolkata: Seagull, 1989; Anindita Ghosh, *Power in print: popular publishing and the politics of language and culture in a colonial society, 1778-1905*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006; for a critique of this body of work, see Gautam Bhadra, "Nyārā baṭṭalāy jāy ko'bār? (How many times does the bald man go to Battala?)." *Ababhas: unish shataker bangla upanyās (The Nineteenth-Century Bangla Novel)*, October-December 2006: 10-30.

¹³ See Debjani Sengupta, *The Partition of Bengal: Fragile Borders and New Identities*, Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

¹⁴ See Sascha Ebeling, *Colonizing the realm of words: the transformation of Tamil literature in nineteenth-century South India*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010; A.R. Venkatachalapathy, *The province of the book: scholars, scribes, and scribblers in colonial Tamilnadu*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012. For a modern literary study, see Kiran Keshavamurthy, *Beyond desire: sexuality in modern Tamil literature*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016.

¹⁵ Very little comparative work on modern South Asian literature has been done in English. For perspectives on a comp-lit of the global South, see Susanne Klengel, Alexandra Ortiz Wallner, eds.; *Sur/South: poetics and politics of thinking Latin America / India*, Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2011 (volume arising from a conference in Berlin). For Indian comparative literature, see Amiya Dev, *The idea of comparative literature in India*, Calcutta: Papyrus, 1984; Rambhau Badode, Afzal Khan, and Arvind Mardikar, eds., *New directions in comparative*

language academia remains extremely limited in terms of linguistic/geographical diversity, despite the interventions of a few theorists like Spivak and others. It is not possible to “provincialize Europe” simply by insisting on the failure of European theory to properly apply: this is ultimately not as dramatic a shift as it seems from asserting the failure of South Asian writing to measure up—as the Hatter said to the Dormouse when he raised the objection, “You might as well say ‘I breathe when I sleep’ is the same as ‘I sleep when I breathe,’” “It is the same with you.” Interestingly, in another absurdist text, the erudite goat defends neglected bodies of knowledge and thought when he informs us, “You say ‘*Pāgolē kī nā balē, cāgalē kī nā khāy* (what will a madman not say, what will a goat not eat). But there are many things a goat will not eat.”¹⁶ But the point remains that any theory must come from somewhere and a theory of South Asian comparative literature that comes out of South Asian literature may have different things to offer than an imported one—either from the traditional theory centers or even from other places in the global south. Therefore, I have attempted to “theorize from the text and not onto it,” as Prof. Chana Kronfeld likes to say, or to build the theoretical framework of this dissertation as directly as possible from the texts themselves—and by the same token, to let the Bangla and Tamil sections of the dissertation shape themselves without imposing the categories of one on the other. This does not mean seeing them as hermetically sealed or overlooking their intertextual relationships with other bodies of literature and theory, but it means shifting priority from the east-west negotiations that have been so much discussed and debated to the power of local and regional thought, ubiquitous in literature but almost untapped in what goes by the name of theory in English-language academia, and, I argue, no less global in its implications. Nevertheless, having chosen to take this path to its logical end and focus on dialect, the theoretical models that have emerged for me from the texts are themselves

literature, New Delhi: Macmillan, 2007; Satya P. Mohanty, *Colonialism, modernity, and literature: a view from India*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Preetha Mani’s work is unusual in comparing modern Tamil and Hindi literature (*Gender, Genre, and the Idea of Indian Literature: The Short Story in Hindi and Tamil, 1950-1970*, dissertation, UC Berkeley, 2012), while especially relevant to this project is Mariola Offredi, ed., *Language versus dialect: linguistic and literary essays on Hindi, Tamil, and Sarnami*, New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1990. Some comparative studies of Hindi with Bangla or Tamil exist, such as Soma Bandyopadhyay, *Phaṇīśvaranātha Renu evaṃ Tārāśaṅkara Bandyopādhyāya: vaṃcitom ke kathākār (Renu and Tarashankar: storytellers of the deprived)*, Nayi Dilli: RajaKamalāPrakaśana, 2014 and Ha. Duraiswami, *Ādhunik hindī aur tāmīl kāvyā mem sāmājīk cetanā (Social thought in modern Hindi and Tamil poetry)*, Patna: Bihar Rashtrabhasha Parishad, 2014; comparative studies of Dalit literature are common in many Indian languages, due to the need for pan-Indian Dalit solidarity—see for example Omprakash Valmiki, *Hindī dalit kavītā aur marāṭhī dalit kavītā kā tulanātmak adhyāyan aur dalit āndolan par unkā prabhāv (Comparative study of Hindi and Marathi dalit poetry and their effect on the dalit movement)*, Simla: Bharatiya Uccha Adhyayan Samsthan, 2015. There has been, to my knowledge, almost no comparative work on Bengali and Tamil literature in any language, except for a list of translations between the two languages in a volume on *Tamil Nadu-Bengal cultural relations*, ed. A.N. Perumal, Ranganayaki Mahapatra, and K. Subbiah Pillai, Madras: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 1987 and one study on *Tagore, Bharathi, and T.S. Eliot: towards creative unity* by K. Chellappan, Annamalai University, 1987. Intriguingly, there is a study entitled *Politics and theatre: a comparative study of the construction of nation and gender in conterminary Sinhalese and Bengali theatres*, Neluka Silva, Colombo: Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, 1999.

¹⁶ The first quotation is from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*; the second is from *Hajabarala* (a nonsensical string of letters) by Sukumar Ray, a contemporary of Carroll and like him engaged in both children’s literature and technology—Ray was a pioneer of photography, printing, and lithography in India. Ray’s text may have been inspired by *Alice*, but its absurdist humor is at least equally incomparable and untranslatable.

not expressed in dialectal words but in standard, though colloquial ones. No language is inherently incapable of functioning on any level, but the resistance to recognizing this capacity even by those who cultivate it is curiously strong. Is it asking too much to want to see dialect in literature as thought and not only as representation, to see it not as immutably bounded by ideology but seething with limitless possibilities? I think not. Even if this desire (not in the capitalist sense but in that of the Bangla *bāsanā* or the Tamil *ācai*, embracing hope, wish, intention, and love) has not been fully realized in literature, it is there, and that is a beginning.

In the introduction to each section, I have tried to give sufficient context about the state of dialect in each literature at the historical moment in question and over time. But as my approach is firmly rooted in close reading, I have been able to examine only a few texts in depth; therefore, these texts are not to be taken as representative but as a plurality of entrances into the core questions of the dissertation. As to the selection of these individual works, I can only say that it was done “*nijēr manēr karṭṭē* (on the authority of my own mind),” to quote yet again from a novel by Jibanananda Das, aptly titled *Kārubāsanā* (*Longing for Art*).

Chapter 1

Dialect in Bangla literature: an overview

“Bangla” and its dialects

The linguistic entity understood as “Bangla,” like many other languages of course, represents centuries of amalgamation of various languages. Bengali linguists, beginning with the eminent Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay and continuing with Sukumar Sen and present-day scholars such as Suhridkumar Bhoumik, have suggested that the Bangla language owes a great debt to the indigenous languages of the region, mostly classified as belonging to the Kol-Austric and Dravidian language families, not only in trace elements such as place-names and cultural residue but in the syntax of the language. Bhoumik, whose work Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay amusingly endorsed as “sane, sound, and based on knowledge,” makes in all seriousness an important contribution to this argument by pointing to the similarity in syntactical and metrical patterns in Bangla and indigenous languages such as Santhali.¹⁷ Within what is accepted as modern Bangla, there are numerous regional dialects, which can be roughly divided into half a dozen families: the western border dialects and the *rāḍhi* family including the west-central or Nadia-Kolkata dialects that form the basis of standard Bangla; the east-central or *bāṅgāl* dialects; the South Bengal or *sundarban* dialects and the North Bengal dialects. The latter two groups span the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. The dialects of Sylhet and Chottogram/Chatgaon are so different that some classify them as separate languages. Within each of these families, however, the dialects vary from district to district and village to village.

Dialect in premodern to 19th century Bangla literature

The earliest extant literary texts in a language that can be claimed as Bangla are the *Caryāpada*, Tantric Buddhist songs the composers of which were marginalized in social, political, and religious terms and wrote in a code known as “*sāndhya bhāṣā* (twilight language),” drawing symbolically on the everyday life of indigenous and low-caste communities and linguistically on various neighbors including Maithili, Oriya, etc. The language of the later Vaishnava *padābali* literature (lyric poetry centered on the Radha-Krishna theme and later the figure of *bhakti* leader Chaitanya Mahaprabhu), though closer to modern Bangla, similarly has regional and inter-linguistic features—most of the major poets in this genre lived in the Rarh region of West Bengal, and they also temporarily adopted an artificial language close to Maithili (a relative of Hindi spoken mainly in eastern Bihar) called *brajabuli* (“dialect of Braj,” where Krishna plays with the *gōpīs*). The language of *maṅgalkābya* (“poetry of well-being,” or narrative poetry centered on local deities), and *pāñcālī* (another form of ritual narrative poetry), forms which remained popular well into the colonial period, share literary and linguistic conventions across Bangla-speaking regions, but as compositions circulated in manuscript form and in oral performance in areas of varying size, regional language entered freely into them, whether at the time of composition or in the hands and mouths of later copyists, writers, and performers. Often,

¹⁷ Suhridkumar Bhoumik, *Ādibāsīder bhasha o bangla (Indigenous languages and Bangla)*, Midnapur: Marang Buru Press, 1999.

these instances of regional usage become important clues for historians seeking to date these works and understand them in their historical and religious contexts. This literature, for centuries written by hand and circulated by mouth (*mukhē mukhē*), and then in the 19th century printed and sold like hotcakes in Kolkata, Dhaka, and the *mafassal* (mofussil or outstation), was organically connected to orality and performance and to what is now designated as *lōksāhitya* or “folklore”—oral forms that may have astonishingly global elements,¹⁸ but are also intensely local, a dynamic that has been variously handled by the early collectors of folklore in print, such as UpendraKiśōr Raychoudhuri and Dakshinaranjan Majumdar.¹⁹

Scholars of early print culture in Bengal have underscored the continuity between premodern classics, rural and urban folklore, and 19th century “popular” literature, while Bangla literary historians have striven to demonstrate the “modernity” of colonial high literature as distinct from the former by emphasizing its dissociation from orality and performance and labeling regionality as *grāmyatā dōṣ* (the flaw of rusticity) and a sign of an uneducated poet (*aśikkhita kabī*), while perplexingly also asserting continuity between the colonial *sādhu bhāṣā* and the literary conventions of the premodern classics. Yet the most elementary study of *ādhunik* or modern Bangla literature will show the persistent attraction of oral forms, rural and urban, and regional and/or gendered colloquial language at every stage.

The colonial understanding of Bangla as a derivative of Sanskrit produced the standard narrative in which the language passed through several stages of decadence as Magadhi Prakrit, *apabhraṃśa* (“corrupted language”), etc. and finally acquired a form that must be made “modern” by invigorating its hoary Sanskrit roots and purging it of Persian, Arabic, and Urdu. This project, taken up by scholars at Fort William College, produced what eventually became known as *sādhu bhāṣā* or “refined language,” a Sanskritized literary Bangla perceived as newly capable of intellectual rigor—and yet this same project involved experimentation with dialect, colloquial language, folklore, and oratory, as no amount of indoctrination could really gloss over the awkward combination of overly Sanskritic constructions with Bangla syntax. This tension and the experimentation it generated are evident in the work of early writers like Mrityunjay Bidyalankar as in the later novels of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, both undisputed masters of Sanskritic Bangla who nevertheless drew significantly on oral and colloquial forms. Alongside these literary efforts, the grammars and textbooks produced for colonial officials inevitably included vivid representations of regional dialect. Thus orality and linguistic diversity had a place in 19th century Bangla writing of all kinds, including the works of “high” literary writers in their “refined” (*sādhu*) language, those of contemporary satirists (also elite), the supposed progenitors of the *calit bhāṣā* (“current language”) which eventually replaced *sādhu bhāṣā* as the literary standard, and those “popular” works which were often sold by hawkers, recited orally to nonliterate audiences; there were also the *dōbhāṣī puthi* or “bilingual manuscripts” written in an Urdu-Bangla.

¹⁸ See for example Vladimir Propp, “The Structure of Russian Fairy Tales.” *International Folkloristics: Classic Contributions by the Founders of Folklore*. Ed. Alan Dundes. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999.

¹⁹ See Bansari Mitra, *The renovation of folk tales by five modern Bengali writers*, Kolkata: Anthropological Survey of India, Ministry of Culture, Dept. of Culture, 2002.

Dialect, modernity, and modernism

Bangla dialect in the broad historical period discussed in this dissertation represents the confluence of the centripetal discourse of *ādhunikatā*, modernity and modernism, and the centrifugal discourses of *āñcalikatā* or regionality, with the ambiguous middle term of the *calit/calti* (“current”): the modern cannot be thought without recourse to its margins, while the “current” or urban standard colloquial sits uncomfortably with its less fashionable cousins.²⁰

While straight-ahead representation of regional dialect may not have been a salient feature of Rabindranath Tagore’s own work or his generation, Tagore, who wrote in both *sādhū* and *calit bhāṣā*, had a keen interest in folklore, including the collection efforts of contemporaries such as Dakshinaranjan Majumdar, and himself took initiative in promoting the *bāul* songs of Birbhum and the Rarh region around Shantiniketan, his family’s estate where he later founded a university. The renowned *bidrōhī kabi* or “rebellious poet” Kazi Nazrul Islam composed and sang songs in a *lēṭō* (folk theater of the Bardhaman-Birbhum region) troupe as a child and retained many regional and folkloric elements in his poetry.²¹

In the 1920s-50s, the post-Tagore generation of writers, some of them self-designated as *ādhunik* (this time denoting “modernist”) and some aligned with the *pragatibādī* or progressive movement, found the representation of dialect integral to their search for new ways of looking at contemporary everyday Bengali life. This can be seen as a part of their efforts towards what has been understood somewhat reductively as “realism.” I argue that this labeling, while not entirely incorrect, is not adequate to understand the multiple and complex functions of dialect in works such as those I examine in Chapter 1. Jibanananda Das, Manik Bandyopadhyay, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, and Advaita Mallabharman belong to this generation and are eclectically and tangentially associated with these movements.

In the 1960s, a group of writers declared themselves the Hungry Generation, indicating literary omnivorousness. Among them, Shakti Chattopadhyay, known primarily as a poet, wrote several semi-autobiographical prose texts using *dogno*, or the dialect of his native South Bengal. In his novel *Kuyōtalā (At the well)*, which takes a loosely stream-of-consciousness approach to growing up in rural South 24 Parganas, the dialect gives body to the voice of the child narrator; however, literary circles at the time were not enthusiastic about this kind of writing and the text languished for many years, though the writer came back to this theme and language time and again. Another Hungry Generation writer, Subimal Basak, wrote a collection of poems in *bāngāl bhāṣā* (East Bengali) titled *Hābi jābi*

²⁰ The idea of the “*calti*” is captured in the title song of the 1958 Hindi film *Calti kā nām gādi* (literally, *Everything that runs is called a vehicle*), dir. Satyen Bose, lyrics by Majrooh Sultanpuri: “*tūṭī phūṭī sahī, cal jāye ṭhīk hai/saccī jhūṭī sahī, cal jāye ṭhīk hai* (so what if it’s broken, as long as it runs (works)/so what if it’s true or false, as long as it works).” In the case of *calit/calti bhāṣā*, of course, the idea is “common usage,” comparable to the Tamil *nāṭōṭippāṣai* (colloquial language, lit. “the language that works throughout [a given] region/country).

²¹ Buddhadeb Bandyopadhyay’s *Nazrul sāhityē laukik jīban o saṁskṛiti (Folk life and culture in Nazrul’s work*, Kolkata: Loksamskriti o ādibāsī sanskriti kendra, 2008) provides some fascinating examples, but is disappointing in presenting them in a laundry-list format without really exploring their literary function and significance.

(1970) and published a collection of folk songs called *Biyār gīt ō dhākāi charā* (Wedding songs and Dhakai rhymes) as well as a collection of “superstitions” or *kusaṃskār*.

In the 1970s, a body of poetry emerged that openly labeled itself as *āñcalik* or regional. The discourse of *āñcalikatā* was not necessarily new, especially regarding novels, but this work, mainly based in the western region of Bengal known as Rarh, embraced dialect as poetic language and was rooted in the lives of marginalized rural people. Many *āñcalik* poets later became associated with the Dalit literature movement that emerged full-fledgedly in the 1990s.

This Bangla Dalit literature has constructed an eclectic history and inclusive identity for itself which claims writers and texts from various times, movements, regions, and communities: the Caryā poets, the unsung poet-singers of the second 19th century “renaissance” associated with the Matua movement that began in southern East Bengal, the modernist writer Advaita Mallabarman who came from a Malo (fishing) community of northern East Bengal, the Hungry Generation poet Binoy Majumdar (despite the complete absence of any claim to Dalitness in his work), the Rarh poets, indigenous writers, writers from East Bengali refugee communities, and Muslim writers. Dialect plays a complex role in negotiating these various identities in terms of Dalit consciousness. In some of this writing, dialect gives force, nuance, and articulation to the predicament of the marginalized; Smritikana Haoladar’s poetry is notable in this respect. Elsewhere, linguistic diversity has completely vanished into the “*bābu*” or “*śāntipuri*” language in an effort to drive the point home to the mainstream at all costs.

In present-day Bangla literature generally, dialect has a much lower profile than it did in the modernist period. However, some writers are experimenting with writing entire texts in dialect, such as Hasan Azizul Haq’s *Āgunpākhi* (*Firebird*, 2006) in the dialect of Bardhaman, West Bengal. *Āgunpākhi* is a fictional autobiography of a semi-literate Muslim woman living in rural Bardhaman district in the Rarh region of West Bengal, who refuses to leave her village after Partition. While her story at times gains pathos from the naivete of her perspective—as a secluded housewife in an upperclass joint family with no formal education or independent access to the outside world—, her conviction is clearly not naïve obstinacy but stems from her maturity, insight, and powers of analysis. Her authorial voice is candid and assured, and her narrative sustained and roughly chronological. Though she has learned basic reading and writing from her husband, her consistently dialectal pronunciation and diction is represented orthographically as if she has delivered the narrative orally. Standard Bangla enters the text primarily in the voice of her husband, who is educated, active in local politics, and travels often to Kolkata. Thus, the usual heteroglossic relationship between languages is reversed, with the dialect dominating the narrative and allowing itself to be colored by the standard. A few contemporary writers are experimenting with dialect mainly in poetry, such as Sumit Pati, Abhimanyu Mahato, and others.

So we see that despite the inevitable labeling of regionality and regional dialect as “backward,” they have tacitly occupied the avant garde in nearly every wave of newness in Bangla literature: modernity (*ādhunikatā*) in the 19th century, modernism (again *ādhunikatā*) and progressivism (*pragatibād*) in the 1920s-50s, the Hungry Generation of the 1960s, the pointedly *āñcalik* writing of the 1970s, and the Dalit movement finally coming to the fore in the 1990s. It is hardly surprising that generating cultural newness involves an imaged return to a source, nor that recognizing diversity comes in handy when

cultivating cultural and political unity. Thus dialect has had a presence in each of the historical moments which produced the above literary movements: the early colonial encounter, the transition from colonial power to partitioned independence, the *bhāṣā āndōlan* (language movement) and independence of Bangladesh, the Naxalite movement, ongoing refugee and landgrabbing crises, etc.: dialect raises many questions about identity and representation and about constructions of the “modern,” “nation,” and “global.” In a time when the threats to ecological and cultural diversity, not to mention sheer survival, loom large, it is not surprising that linguistic diversity and the ecologies and practices that produce it are yet again beginning to find a place in literature, if intermittently.

In the following chapters, I try to unpack dialect, understood as *dēśēr kathā* (lit. “[home]country language” or “the way we talk back home),” first taking the common word *kathā* as an entry point into the relationship between dialect and literary form, and then approaching the idea of *deś*, which “pulls” (*ṭānē*) *kathā* back to itself.

Chapter 2

Kathā: dialect and form in the Bangla modernist novel

nānān janēr nānān kathā
śōnahum nā karum rāo
 Various people say various things,
 I listen without uttering a sound
...manatē mōr lakkha rē kathā,
kār bā āge kaum
 There are thousands of things in my heart,
 which one should I speak of first
 —*bhāwāiyā* song²²

kathā: word, proverb, statement, discourse, conversation, manner of speaking, dialect, story, history, news; a melodic, metered form of professional narration (also *kathakatā*)
kathā/śāhitya: narrative literature, prose literature

Kathār kathā (a few words on *kathā*):

In trying to think about *kathā*, the word that presented itself to me as embodying the oraliterary, dialogic-discursive-narrative liminality that emerges in literary engagements with dialect (colloquially, the *kathā* of x place or people), I found myself having an imaginary conversation (*kathā*) with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in Bengali, because her work has a stubborn refusal to succumb to the elegance or convenience of a translation that elides inaccessible worlds. I used some dialectal words (*kathā*) from East Bengal to illustrate my point and refrained from bringing up a saying (*kathā*) which she had reportedly used in a talk in Kolkata long ago. She did not say anything, since I did not know what she would possibly say in such a conversation, but she listened attentively, because that is the expectation inherent in *kathā*, no matter how often and deeply disappointed.

I am telling this story (*kathā*) to show why I am entrusting this small Bangla word with the big task of holding together the otherwise unruly proliferation of theoretical terms I could choose to discuss literary engagements with dialect. One sense of *kathā* is a “saying,” as in “*kathāy balē*, they say in words (*kathā*);” here *kathā* is not marked plural or singular but carries the sense of collocation, some number of words that travel together and cooperatively affirm something; if one wants to theorize by the typical process of naming, one has to say “*ek kathāy*, in one word.” So, this is an attempt to explore the theoretical potential of *kathā* by accepting the name and responding to its demand for attentive listening. However, *kathā* is best understood not as a narrow concept, but a dramatization in Deleuze’s sense—the idea of *kathā* does not subsume but opens up a multiplicity of relations.²³ In a sense, Deleuze is not far from the old-school pedagogy of literature in Bengal, which would pose such questions as, “*ēi kathāṭā kāhār ukti?* (Whose

²² Lyrics traditional. *Bhāwāiyā* is a type of folk song from North Bengal, on both sides of the border with Bangladesh.

²³ See Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

utterance is this [*kathā*]?) *ke kāhāke kakhan baliyāchen?* (Who said this to whom and when?)”

Kathā is an everyday Bengali word, etymologically a *tatsama* word (one that comes “as-is” from Sanskrit) and historically a literary and performance genre, but neither esoteric nor charged with the intersecting force-fields of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial discourses of the good in quite the same way as some Sanskrit terms that are well known outside of India, for example, *satī*. The present reflections are shaped by *kathā*’s particular semantic range in everyday modern Bangla, approached with a sense of its paleonymy; a comparative etymology of the word in South Asian languages would be intriguing, but outside the scope of this chapter.²⁴ What makes it compelling for me here is that it is irreducible to either speech-act or narrativity, but offers a more fundamental premise of the verbal presentation of thought in which there is an inbuilt expectation of attentive listening. *Kathā* can thus be actualized as dialogue, discourse, or narrative, fragment or form, dialect or idiolect, professional narration or casual conversation, history or news, text or spoken-sung rhythm-melody; it plays across the entire oraliterate spectrum, from erudite classicist texts to the erotic mortal body of the *bāul* philosophical songs. Yet it is not simply a synonym for “language,” as it is inherently particular, indicating the mode of articulation. It is possible to think of *kathā* as a kind of “open relation,” holding lightly together a multiplicity of semiopaque, untranslatable forms.²⁵ In *kathā* as inscribed in modern literature, the centripetal and centrifugal forces of language and the heteroglossia and polyphony of the novel form come up against the unintelligibility of the subaltern.²⁶ It is this untranslatable particularity of *kathā*, due to the structural inequalities

²⁴ On paleonymy, see Spivak, “Translating into English,” in *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, ed. Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. On *kathā* in other South Asian languages, in Hindi, for example, it would be a *śuddh* (“pure/refined,” i.e. Sanskrit-origin) word subject to grammatical gender and number and would thus become “*ek kathā—ane kathāen* (one story—many stories [f.])” as in the 1974 animated national integration film *Ek, Anek, Aur Ektā* (loosely, Unity in Multiplicity), while in the transformal sense of particular verbal presentation *kathā* would be replaced by the colloquial *bāt*; cf. the 1983 social drama *Kathā (Story)*, which plays on the fable of the tortoise and the hare, vs. *Choṭi si bāt* (A little matter, 1975). In Indian Tamil *kathā*, naturalized as *katai*, refers somewhat more narrowly to narrative, while in Sri Lankan Tamil it is also verbalized as *kataikkiratu* (to converse), opening up the performative and dialogic aspect. Even within Bangla, there are dialectal variations in usage of the word *kathā*.

²⁵ See Glissant 1997. Not all the verbal forms and conceptions I engage here necessarily bear the name of *kathā*. As the independent name of a particular form, *kathā* can refer to the professional narration of scriptural stories, in a substitution of the thing narrated for the act of embodying narration known as *kathakatā* (the act of being the story-er, *kathak*, or the one who performs the story, *kathā*); those forms named as *kathā* with various affixes highlight the element of narrativity (*rūpkathā* “form-story” or fairy tale, *upakathā* “sub-story” or folk tale—with reference to the practice of embedding stories-within-stories—, *itikathā* “so-it-was-story”—here the element of narrativity which, for Hayden White, distinguishes the chronicle, a mere list of events, from what we understand as “history” is not limited to *itihās* “thus it was,” the Sanskrit genre term adopted for the modern discipline of history, but is even more clearly inscribed in *itikathā*, which is nevertheless usually translated as “chronicle” for the sake of distinguishing it from *itihās*) See White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1, On Narrative (Autumn, 1980), pp. 5-27. But I am not primarily interested in Sanskrit as origin or authority; Bangla has many narrative forms with independent names, some of which come from Arabic, Persian, Urdu, or indigenous languages, and it is well worth dwelling on each of these names. What I want to do here is to think *kathā* in its everyday, transformal sense of that which is said and how.

²⁶ See Bakhtin 1981.

of intellectual circulation but also to creative intransigence and the resonances and dissonances of belongings, that demands attention.

The anxiety around modernity in Bengali literary criticism and literary history has led to a conflation of the oral and the colloquial and an elision of the dialectal in discussions of literary language and form. The word *kathā* makes a frequent appearance, not surprisingly given its long literary history and wide semantic range. Dialogue, dialect, orality, oratory, and a large, familiar body of oral and written sayings and tales played a formative role in the development of early modern Bengali prose literature, which though driven by colonial anxieties nevertheless tapped into the living intertexts of the language, even belying its own Sanskritist impulses to sense indigenous cadences. Among the early Bengali printed texts, William Carey's *Kathōpkathan* (*kathā* + *upakathan*, or "dialogues") placed the colonial official in conversation with a cast of native characters speaking socioregional dialects. Mrityunjay Bidyalkar, a Sanskrit scholar at Fort William College and one of the founders of the early modern Bengali literary style known as *sādhu bhāṣā* (pure/refined language), experimented with *kathakatā* (oratory in the style of the professional narrator of scriptural stories) and with the stylistic and narrative resources of *laukik* or "folk" language. The critical demarcation of a *kathyarīti* or "spoken style" that eventually gave birth to the later written standard known as *calit bhāṣā* (current language) elides the key role of dialect by reading fully dialectal texts such as *Hutōm pyāñcār nakṣā* (Owl's Sketches), a satire the force and pleasures of which come from the meticulous reproduction of the speech of 19th century Calcutta, as proto-*calit*, overlooking the possibility that the fertility of dialect, even a prestige dialect like that of the Calcutta *bābus*, of which certain features were emulated by educated people from elsewhere in Bengal, lies precisely in its irreducibility to a standard, especially one which does not yet exist. Critics striving to establish a definition of Bengali literary modernity thus stumble on the inadequacies of their own categories: orality and theatricality cannot be extracted from formal literary styles, nor can the "current," colloquial, and dialectal languages they persistently conflate be reduced to representation of orality; the distinct modernity of prose nevertheless resonates with the rhythms and images of earlier poetic narrative forms and these forms, designated as premodern regardless of the time of their performance, articulate their own relations to material and stylistic markers of modernity.²⁷

The present chapter concerns the articulations of *kathā* in a handful of Bengali novels, in some sense marginal yet ultimately key texts of the Bengali *ādhunik* (modernist) literature of the 1920s-50s. These novels fundamentally explore *kathā* as the performance of colloquial and dialectal language staged by but exceeding the conventional division of labor between the written standard used for narration and the dialect limited mostly to dialogue. In between the two partitions of Bengal and in the interstices of the putative shift from *sādhu bhāṣā* to *calit bhāṣā*, these texts, regardless of which standard they employ, insist implicitly or explicitly on its dialogic relation with socioregional and -local nonstandard verbal forms. The nation (*dēś*) desired, debated, and divided, the discourses of nationalism (not derived from *dēś* but *jātiyatā*, from *jāti* or "birth-community," often reductively translated as "caste"), and the dominant narratives of the Partition and

²⁷ See Gupta 1992, Asit Kumar Bandyopadhyay, *Puratan bangla gadyagrantha samkalan* (Collection of Old Bengali Prose Texts), Kolkata: Paschimbanga Bangla Akademi, 2003, and A.K. Bandyopadhyay 2007.

communalism are powerfully challenged by the refugee's *dyāsēr* (pron. "dash-er") *kathā* (the language of the homeland, *dyās*=East Bengali dial. for *dēs* in the sense of micro-region) and by the dialectal forms of economically and socially marginalized communities.

Take the dialectal words of a Muslim butler on a steamer in East Bengal to a Hindu passenger on the eve of the Partition of 1947, which deftly navigate the currents of *kathā*—subtly moving between familiar and emergent personas of the East Bengali (the macro-region), Barisali (the micro-region), Muslim (a site under construction), about-to-be East Pakistani, servant, host, and friend—as the steamer moves along the river, all in the course of a conversation about the passenger's limited, yet infinitely debatable options for lunch:

"...*Cācā*'s got a way with words [*kathā*]. So what if he doesn't know how to read and write? He says the scribes—let that be!..."

"Oh, so he's quite a talented man—"

"Tremendously talented! You know what I think—*Hātemtāi* comes in the night and whispers to the old man—[...] Did that [*kathā*] sound blasphemous?"

"What?"

"What I said [*kathā*] about *Hātemtāi*? I could have said something [*kathā*] about *Khodā* instead—what do you say, sir? *Khodā-tālā* made Masud *cācā* and taught him what he knows—what do you say?"

"Yes [...] *Allāh-tālā* won't get angry, he doesn't listen to what people say [*mukhēr kathā*, words of the mouth], it's enough if you have your heart in the right place, you're all right—"

"Did *Lalon Fakir* say that [*kathā*], sir? What you said?"

"*Fakir sāhēb* has said it much better than I."

"True [*Hācā kathāḍā*]."

This passage is from the 1948 novel *Bāsmatir Upākhyān* (The Tale of [the town of] Basmati) by Jibanananda Das. Jibanananda's work stages the utter breakdown of language, sociality, and empathy from the perspective of the subjectivity of writing, through three recurring themes: the materiality and mortality of the bodies of writer, reader, and text; *bilās*, or the sensuality of literature; and *kārubāsanā*, or the longing for art that withdraws the artist or artist manqué from full participation in *samsār* (the home and the world in one word).²⁸ The following section examines *mukhēr kathā*, "mouth words" or colloquial language, in Jibanananda's fiction and sets the stage for an exploration of orality in the ethnographic novels of his contemporaries Manik Bandyopadhyay, Advaita Mallabarmān, and Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay.

²⁸ The English title of Tagore's *The Home and the World* is a loose translation of *Ghore bāire*, "in the home and outside," while *samsār* is both home (domesticity) and world (economics, politics), the expectations of which the ascetic eschews in practice, and the artist at least in desire.

Mukhēr kathā (mouth words): body, discourse, soundscape

<p>“<i>mā hawā ki mukhēr kathā?</i> <i>śudhu prasab korle hoy nā mātā</i> <i>jadi nā bōjhē santānēr byathā</i> —Ramprasad Sen</p>	<p>Is being a ‘mother’ merely a word? one is not a mother merely by giving birth if she does not understand her child’s pain”</p>
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His saying it came out in a language neither literary nor at home in their own mouths: this is not the ambrosial language of man’s blood, water, sweat, and tears.

—Jibanananda Das

The entrance of speech-forms into the literary text draws attention to their orality even as they surrender something of it to textuality, which in turn loses some of its distinctness. In Das’s 1948 novel *Mālyabān* (pron. “Maallobaan”), the estranging of colloquial language pushes the novel’s modernist interiorization out into theatricality. *Mālyabān*’s interior discourse seems to spill over into the dialogue, where the incongruence of his own half-literary, half-colloquial language and the violent excess of his wife Utpalā’s highly idiomatic language play out their irreconcilable desires through familiar-peculiar figurations. For *Mālyabān*, this culminates in a crisis of trust in the possibility of empathy. This theater of the language of the mouth manifests bodily: the opacity perceptible behind Utpalā’s show of discontent thins momentarily only when we see literally through her eyes—from the outside seemingly piercing, burning, but with slightly impaired eyesight, blinded by light and unable to focus; the muteness in *Mālyabān*’s half-crafted sentences is held in his tobacco-stained teeth; and the unlove becoming painfully clear between them gives everyone indigestion. The sensation of linguistic incongruence is likewise thoroughly material: his language is not *mukhēr bhāṣā*, “of the mouth,” nor is it the divinely sweet language of bodily fluids, iterated here in an undulating register the low point of which is *ghām*, “sweat.” Nor is it “literary.” What is “literary” here? A philological discussion of the words and figures in the passage would be beside the point—*Mālyabān*’s silence on this question speaks for itself. At times, *Mālyabān* seems to think of his own thoughts as drafts of literary compositions, full of awkward figures and x-ings-out, even as they follow his body’s tossing and turning in bed and circling in the city streets. Jibanananda Das reportedly said that writing is the product of an “exchange of blows” between reading material and the “lump of matter” that is one’s store of experience. Literatures are like speech communities: tinges of texts read come into texts written, just as, when you spend time in a given community, “the accent of its spoken language (*kathār ṭān*) comes to your tongue.”²⁹ The “literary,” then, is an interaction of bodies, a dialogue of tongues, in which spoken and written, texts and experiences conflict and converge. In orality too, bodies of words rendered memorable by form bump into someone’s thinking and create new bodies of words. Why then the assertion in the breach of the boundary between the language of the mouth and that of the written page?

²⁹ Quoted in Bhumendra Guha, “‘Ōrā jakhan thākben nā, āmiō thākbo nā..!’ (‘When they and I will be no longer...’).” In *Jibānānanda: jīban ār śriṣṭi (Jibanananda: life and work)*, ed. Subrata Rudra, 129-144, Kolkata: Nath Publishing, 1999, pp. 138.

Histories of Bengali literature describe writers as “discovering” the natural properties of Bangla and of attempting to write in a language increasingly “close to the spoken word” (*mukhēr kathār kāchākāchī*). Particularly in studies tracing the development of Bengali prose and of the “*kathyarīti* (spoken style)” used primarily in dialogue that laid the foundation of the “current” written standard known as *calit bhāṣā*, critics often fall back on a sense of texture to classify a given text, sometimes anachronistically or despite the writer’s professed stylistic allegiance.³⁰ This sense of texture may have a contemporary relevance as a way of reading “old” Bangla texts, but the classifying project reveals less about the essence of established literary styles and much more about the inevitable but endlessly self-defying process of establishing a conventional literary idiom and about its mutability, permeability, and mortality. The framing of the problematic question of naturalness belies a categorical confusion between the “colloquial” and the oral and involves an elision of the dialectal and of heteroglossia in general. In fact, these same critics are forced to conclude that writers have never been as *śucibāyugrasta* (germophobic) as themselves when it comes to incorporating and mingling language varieties, registers, and styles.

Mālyabān’s experimentation with the colloquial questions the demand for a literary language that approximates orality. On the one hand, the literary cannot and does not simply mimic the oral: the processes of representation are infinitely complex, and the role of nonrepresentational play cannot be underestimated. On the other hand, orality and textuality are bound together by performativity, materiality, and sensuality. In this passage quoted above, the notion of naturalness is profoundly unsettled as *Mālyabān* struggles to strip his language of “ornament” (*alañkāra*, the literary term for “rhetoric”) and speak a naked language which does not exist: oral or literary, language itself seems to be an excess, a beautiful, superfluous body we sculpt and adorn, adore and lament. The novel’s profusion and frequently deviant use of collocations in both dialogue and narration at once invokes and estranges the speech community and, at the same time, forces the new literary standard to confront its own in-betweenness as a language “close to the spoken” which cannot be reduced to a representation of speech.

This play with oral-textual liminality is best understood through the form of dialogue. Most of *Jibanananda*’s prose works are dominated by dialogue and free indirect discourse. Dialogue is a form that cannot be entirely emptied of orality even when it is filled in with a cultivated literate style of discourse; nor can it ever be a perfectly “realistic” representation of speech. Rather, it is a projection of thought and a performance, in which spoken and written discourse converge and diverge. *Jibanananda*’s work emphasizes the entanglement of writing with oral rhetorical forms and the utter dysfunctionality of oral and written language as a medium of communication. The dialogue, particularly as it presents and distorts received figures of speech and as it traces the life of symbols that

³⁰See A.K. Bandyopadhyay 2007, 5, 40; Gupta 1992, 239. The strong bias of both Gupta and A.K. Bandyopadhyay against *musalmāni, islāmi, or adālāti bānglā* (Muslim, Islamic, or Court Bangla) for its “unnatural,” un-Bengali, or “unnecessary” Persianization call to mind Spivak’s discussion of “paleonymy” in which the purged Indo-Persian elements in Bangla make a comeback in contemporary Bangladeshi poetry, confronting the standard Bangla-speaking/West Bengali/Hindu reader with the history of how this lexicon became foreign to her (Spivak 2005). A particularly fertile site for exploring this history is the *dobhāshi punthi* (“bilingual manuscripts,” a popular literary genre using a heavily Persianized Bangla, printed out of Battala, Kolkata’s vernacular publishing hub, and Ketabpatti, its counterpart in Dhaka).

come into being in the dialogue itself, lays bare the collaborative construction of centrifugal meanings. For instance, in *Mālyabān* and in *Bāsmatir Upākhyān*, quoted earlier, the characters and the implied author attach cumulative and changeable significance to images and idioms in a kind of symbolic negotiation, achieving moments of recognition but never consensus. In *Mālyabān*, the humor and horror of this shifting ground is captured in scenes of linguistic breakdown, in which the speaker finds himself reduced to silence by the sense that his rhetoric is falling on deaf ears. Throughout Jibanananda's work, the central problem of the text unfolds through typical conversations between the husband/*artiste manqué* and the wife, *manquée* in unequal but not uncorrelated ways, or various male relatives and friends, sometimes likeminded but usually capitalistic and lacking artistic sensibility. The gendered ideologies of domesticity, feminism, nationalism, capitalism, art, education, etc. enter in here, but the characters do not represent or embody these ideologies so much as perform them in a plastic language susceptible to multiple enregisterments. In other words, the point that must be made is that the hopeless distance staged here is not simply between identities, types, or ideologies, but between resonances and dissonances reverberating within and between bodies: as if each speaker is an instrument tuned to a different *śruti* (base tone), trying out various styles and phrases on each other, and achieving neither *aikatān* (a common chord) nor *jugalbandī* (a duet in which the improvisations of two musicians are held together by a common rhythmic and melodic pattern) but an unpredictable, fragmented kind of music.

Mālyabān's half-feigned anxiety, then, comes from an internal disjunction, between the teeming of resonances and belongings an utterance can evoke and create, and the dissonances and gaps with which it confronts us. To circle back to the question of orality and textuality, let us turn to a set of texts dominated by edgily colloquial dialogue in which the materiality of speech, of manuscript and book, and of the body of the artist takes center stage.³¹ The novel *Kārubāsanā* (*Longing for Art*) lingers on the decay of little-read, but much cherished books, manuscripts, and letters, victims of fungus and termites. This leads sometimes into conversations that betray pathological neglect and indulgence of human bodies and bodily cravings, and sometimes into accesses of longing for intellectual and creative fulfillment, confronted time and again with both the incompatibility of art with "normal" life and the foolishness of supposing art can be extracted from the splendid, sordid everyday. The story "Boi (Books)" revisits these problems during a conversation between a book-loving father and son: the father laments the loss of his library to termites and forgetful borrowers; the son admits to respecting books more than reading them but challenges his father's respect for the author-figure on the grounds of domestic violence. That the editors were not able to decipher most of the titles of texts and names of writers in the manuscript contributes a stroke of unintended genius, the proliferation of ellipses making its own statement on the author and the work. The story "Bilās (Sensuality)," in which an office worker hoards books which he will never read and defends himself to an old headmaster in a dream shortly before his inexplicable death, posits literature as a mode of attention and the desire for art as demanding an asceticism bordering on selfishness, but opening up a vast terrain of inextricably physical-intellectual sensuality that stands in

³¹ Jibanananda's body of prose, all published posthumously and still growing like a creature that refuses to die, works interminably through the same problems, so that his stories, novellas, and novels seem almost like endless drafts of the same text; this makes it almost impossible to discuss any one text in isolation.

opposition to the crass materialism of the capitalist. In each of these texts, which dramatize the notion of intertextuality on and off the page with which we began, the dialogue is hardly realistic, but it is colloquial and embodied, it breathes and has stained teeth: this cannot be done with a conception of literary language that disavows the vast, untranslatable, only partially representable archives of orality.

Such metatextual discourse on orality/textuality and the insurmountable opacity and materiality of language might seem to have no place for the sociolinguistic distinction between the dialectal, the colloquial, and the standard. But even as the innumerable, often linguistically unmarked “expressive possibilities” of literary heteroglossia demand attentive listening, there are elephants in the room which quietly remind us of the political and aesthetic potential of linguistically marked dialect, which is not diminished by linguistic difference being one of multiple intersecting systems of difference, but rather enhanced by dialect itself being a site of these multiple intersections. The elephant that looms largest is place, its affective and ethical dimensions grown enormous on the massive uprootings of Partition, but also fed by many other kinds of displacements. The potential of regional dialect to evoke the huge sense of loss, exile, and estrangement produced by these dislocating events has been amply demonstrated in post-Partition literature and film as well as in works like those explored in this chapter, which deal with subaltern communities set adrift by ecological, economic, social, and political changes. But these works also demonstrate the capacity of dialect to draw attention to the everyday demands and tensions, continuities and contingencies, arts and tactics of living in a place, be it *pāḍā* (neighborhood), village, town, suburb, city, or refugee colony, ancestral home, rented house, or migrant workers’ quarters. If the discourse of orality/textuality focuses on the bodies of speaker, writer, language, and text and the ideologies they perform, the significance of dialect is that it sets the stage with the habitats and habitations, roots and migrations, and labors and pleasures of these bodies.

While Jibanananda’s work does not foreground linguistically marked dialect per se, negotiating rather the liminal spaces of orality/textuality, resonance and dissonance, its hyper-attentiveness to soundscapes makes the locality of language impossible to ignore. This locality is closely tied to migration, cyclical and permanent, the centripetal pull of the city of Kolkata, and centrifugal longings for the semirural landscape of East Bengal. There is no simplistic city|country binary here, even when one is invoked, but a rururban palimpsest of memory, desire, and sensual experience.³² As discussed above, Jibanananda’s

³² Dipesh Chakrabarty’s argument in “Memories of Displacement” (*Habitations of Modernity* 2002) hinges on a distinction between *bāri* (the ancestral home or one the speaker owns), and *bāsā* (a rented house or habitation). For the Hindu Partition refugee living in West Bengal, the choice of this word would be marked by the loss of the *bāri*, but in a constructive sense, it is a home in the making. Chakrabarty imposes on these two words a nationalist, implicitly anti-Muslim romanticization of the countryside, implicating in this the writings of Bengali modernists, including Jibanananda Das, and proposing as a countercurrent the comic stereotype of the *bāngāl* (East Bengali) as country bumpkin in literature and film. Too many things are being conflated here: the word *bāsā* points to rururban migrations that did not begin or end with Partition, post-Partition dialectal usage intensifying its affective significance in response to the traumatic event; the stereotyping of *bāngāl* (East Bengali) and *ghoṭi* (West Bengali) through the use of dialect is multifaceted and has a complex history related to those migrations, routine and eventful; and Jibanananda’s vision of the countryside, by no means a “purely nationalist construction” but surreal and literally “specific,” does not subscribe to a city|country binary or a lost-Eden paradigm but to a kind of phenomenology of habitation, insisting on the routine trauma of migration and its links to memory. Chakrabarty’s reading of the

prose uses the “colloquial,” more specifically the prestige dialect of Kolkata, in an ambiguous way that brings the “standard” and its literary value into question. Part of this ambiguity comes from the emplacement of the colloquial: while characters regardless of region emulate the speech of Kolkata, according to its pan-Bengali status, the particularity and locality of this speech comes to life in *Mālyabān* and other works set in Kolkata, becoming rich and strange in the mouths of characters like Mālyabān who have no roots in the city, but call it home. In his other post-Partition work, *bāṅgāl* (East Bengali) dialect makes a few appearances in the mouths of minor characters, where it becomes complexly evocative of a place and community coming apart at the seams or already left behind, but in a way that stresses wear and tear on an everyday level rather than Partition as a traumatic event. Beyond instances of dialect usage, a kind of aural intertextuality connects sounds lived and remembered, close and distant, rural and urban, among them dialects, regional musical forms, nonverbal human sounds, birdcalls, other natural sounds, and mechanical sounds. This attention to ecologies of sound and texture has an ethical underpinning, interrogating our relationship to place, nature, and culture, and is highly sensual, belonging to the same *bilās* betrayed by characters’ love of books.

In the following sections of this chapter, I want to bring this sense of a stubbornly nonstandard language throbbing with precarity, sensuality, and desire to bear on a set of contemporary works in which socioregional dialect features prominently: Manik Bandyopadhyay’s *Padmā nadīr mājhi* (Boatman of the river Padma, 1936), Advaita Mallabharman’s *Titās ekṭi nadīr nām* (Titash is the name of a river, published posthumously in 1956), and Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay’s *Hāṁsuli bāṅkēr upakathā* (The Tale of Hāṁsuli Turn, 1951). Unlike Jibanananda’s virtually all-discourse, no-story texts, these works share a central interest in narrative, specifically oral-literate forms of narrative in performance; they explore the material and sensual relationship of dialectal forms to local ecologies and the precarious lives of the subaltern communities that depend on them. Again, to begin with the premise of linguistically marked dialect is not to reduce heteroglossia to a single system of difference (the regional), but to insist on the importance of place, community, and local linguistic and creative forms in approaching the intersections of gender, caste/ethnic/religious identity, and class. In other words, it is not so much that the individual utterance represents an ideology, but that there are forms available to the speaker to perform and critique identities and ideologies, and these forms operate in a local-translocal, oral-textual, dialectal-transdialectal interface. In these works of ethnographic fiction, dialect speech and verbal art forms are sites where questions of narrative and community, memory and agency intersect.³³

posthumously published book of sonnets called *Rūpasi bāṅglā*, often translated as *Bengal the Beautiful*, is superficial and ignores the intimate ecology of nature, human, machine, death, decay, and desire that encompasses Jibanananda’s work in both country and city.

³³ Anthropologists have acknowledged the “epistemological proximity” of ethnography and fiction as forms of narrative, weaving fictions into a claim to truth (See Veena Das, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003, 31). I use the word “ethnographic” more specifically here in relation to practices of observation, representation, and translation, the object of which is a community rather than society at large or the individual psyche. Even this categorization is somewhat loose: of the three novels I explore here, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay’s *Hāṁsuli bāṅkēr upakathā* will be most readily recognizable as an ethnographic work, as it builds on something like “fieldwork” (the author toured his home district of Birbhum and talked to people in the villages, some of whom were the models for characters in the novel), draws explicit attention to the cultural practices, language, and worldview of the

Rūpkathā, upakathā, kathakatā (formstory, substory, storyagency)

The literary convention of using standard language, “literary” or “colloquial,” for narration and dialect primarily in dialogue seems to reinforce the association of dialect with speech, whether this association appears simply natural, as in works in which the characters are expected to reveal typical mentalities through speech and action without assuming any authorial or analytic functions, or whether it underlines the orality of dialect in contrast to the literary language and literate culture. As noted earlier, this equation elides the relationship between dialect and aesthetic forms that rarely exist in a state of pristine primary orality, but are entangled with literate society in complex, dynamic, problematic, and productive ways. Even when limited to the speech of the community represented, and/or acting, in the text, a dialect is not raw material, but teeming with forms—idiomatic, poetic, narrative, and dramatic—that enter into dialogue with the authorial narrative. Key forms in each novel, *rūpkathā* (lit. form-story or fairy tale), *upakathā* (lit. substory or folktale), and *kathakatā* (lit. storyagency or professional narration) prompt us to think about narrative, habitation, and habits of listening.

Rūpkathā, pāṛār kathā, bāsanār kathā
(*form-tales, community politics, and narratives of desire*):
Manik Bandyopadhyay’s *Padmā Nadīr Mājhi*

In Manik Bandyopadhyay’s *Padmā nadīr mājhi* (often translated as *Boatman of the River Padma*, 1936), the dialect of the *jēlē* (fishing) community on the Padma river in East Bengal forms, informs, and performs the discourses of desire and materiality that drive the narrative. This tightly crafted novel lends itself to a Bakhtinian reading, in the sense of the dialogic relationship between languages and ideologies in the text: *Padmā*’s narrative seems tightly controlled by the authorial voice, which uses *sādhu bhāṣā* with power and precision, yet this narrative and its honed language are drawn into dialogue with the characters’ modes of expression and contaminated by their language, especially in what Bakhtin calls the “character zones,” where it sometimes escapes the confines of dialogue and momentarily takes hold of the narration.³⁴ As all the speaking characters in the novel belong to the same linguistic and local community, though two religious communities, the expressive possibilities of their language clearly go beyond the regional identity and social stratum broadly indicated by the use of the dialect to the micropolitics of *jēlēpārā* and the

community represented, and combines within its own fictional narrative references to both documents and oral histories). Advaita Mallabarman’s *Titās ekṭi nadīr nām* could be termed auto-ethnographic in that it creatively documents the community to which the author belonged. Manik Bandyopadhyay’s *Padmā nadīr mājhi* is not so much an attempt to represent holistically a community and its culture as an attempt to understand a community and its material contexts as the complex site of intersecting political, ethical, and aesthetic problems.

³⁴ Repeatedly throughout the novel, the narrator seems to ventriloquize Kubēr with the dialectal utterance “*ha, ...* (Yes, ...)” (“*na, ...*” or “no, ...” also occurs in the same way, but this pronunciation is common to both standard and dialect). But it is precisely where narrator and character resist this kind of collapse that the text’s core tensions come into view.

multiple narratives coexisting and competing within it.³⁵ Here, I explore the boatman's call and forms of address particular to the *jēlē* community along with what I have loosely called *pārār kathā* or "neighborhood talk," including gossip, rumor, and anecdotes; the figure of the skillful teller of fairytales (*rūpkathā*); and the irreplaceability of dialect in the novel's central narrative of desire (*bāsana*).

The *jēlē* community's vocative forms seem fitting to open the conversation on the narratives that run through the dialogue. The opening page of the novel minutely describes the conditions, technology, techniques, and beauty of fishing for *iliś* (hilsa) on the Padma river late at night in monsoon season: the work arrangement between boat owners and hired hands, the size and structure of the boat, the working of the net like a mouth opening wide and closing over the fish, the lights of the boats glowing like fireflies, and the shimmering dead fish with their eyes like blue gems.³⁶ The first lines of dialogue are an exchange between two fishing boats about the going rate for the fish they have caught. This exchange not only exhibits dialectal features, but also has a form particular to the *jēlē* community: Kubēr calls out (*hāñkiyā koy*) across the water, "Jadu hē-ē-ē-ē—*māch kibā?*" (Hey-y-y-y Jadu—what's the fish [i.e., catch] like?) (8). Hearing the response, the owner of Kubēr's boat, Dhanañjay, remarks pithily, "*hālār māch dhoirā zut nāi* (no use catching these damned fish)" (ibid). Returning from another night on the Padma, Kubēr brings the news of the return of Rāsu, a *jēlē* who had gone to work in a sort of indentured servitude on the mysterious island colony of Moynādīp. Rāsu calls out to Kubēr across the water in a cry (*hāñk*) at first wordless, then slowly acquiring the shape of words as the boat giving him an obligatory, but grudging lift home drifts closer to the one on which Kubēr works. Here, the narrator comments extensively on this form as a language of sound-waves and sound-amplifying gesture intimately related to the waves of the river and open air.³⁷ It is this environment which produces the boatmen's songs, *bhāṭiyāli*,³⁸ such as Kubēr's friend Gaṇēś sings—tunelessly, but as the narrator comments, "*baḍa sahaj gān noy* (it's not a simple song)" (10). Interestingly, the narrator does not quote the song in dialect, but paraphrases

³⁵ At the outset, the novel pointedly presents an outsider's view of the marginalized, low-caste *jēlē* community, most often referred to in the novel by the space they inhabit, *jēlēpārā* (the fishermen's quarter). But the passage moves closer and closer to the putting a finger on the knot of problems facing, and epitomized in, the community: the narrative voice first approaches *jēlēpārā* with privileged assumptions, only to realize there is more than meets the eye; the haphazard cluster of huts surrounded by open land seems unnecessarily, unhealthily cramped until it dawns on the viewer that it is the landowners who have pushed them into this tiny space.

³⁶ Hilsa is a proverbially prized fish in Bengal, found in both the Ganga (Ganges) and Padma rivers. Which river produces better hilsa is a matter of endless debate, but there has long been high demand for Padma river hilsa in Kolkata and what is now West Bengal. In the following scene in the local market, where Kubēr and his coworkers sell the fish wholesale for export, the narrator does not omit to mention that "the air of Kolkata will be filled with the fragrance of frying Padma river hilsa" (10).

³⁷ "This is a kind of language, no one knows this language except men of the boatman class in East Bengal. This language has no words, only rippling sound. Across the open land, the broad breast of the river, this sound comes farther and farther, fainter and fainter, but the interval of the waves remains unchanged. If this sound strikes the ear even softly like an indistinct hum, the Padma river boatman listens carefully and understands. Gazing in the elusive direction of the sound, he fills his lungs with air. Putting his left hand behind his ear and bringing his right hand in front of his mouth, he utters and puts in motion a continuous sound, making waves" (23).

³⁸ Loosely, "downstream songs," from *bhāṭi*, downstream or lowland, and *aal*, a bund between fields (in this region usually rice or jute fields). D. Chaudhuri 2002, 9.

it in *sādhubhāṣā*: “Why someone does not attain the one he loves, the song speaks of this deep problem” (10); the emphasis here is not on the song’s linguistic particularity, but its source and participation in the ecology of the Padma. Yet the contours of the local language, articulated in the boatmen’s call and response, are an integral part of this distinctly local ecology.³⁹

We sense as soon as the narrative sets foot on land in *jēlēpārā* that it is a site of complex community politics, crisscrossed with narratives of vulnerability, resistance, loss, and desire. These narratives, unfolding in gossip, rumor, chitchat, and other fleeting remarks and exchanges in the local dialect, form an essential counterpoint to the sustained authorial narrative. In them, the vulnerability of the community to exploitation and manipulation by the landowners, middlemen, and shady entrepreneurs as well as to occupational and other kinds of everyday risks makes itself keenly felt. As Kubēr makes his way home after a night on the Padma, a neighbor gives him the news that his wife has given birth to a fair-skinned son, insinuating that the real father is Māijābābu/Māijākartā (dial., in dialogue) or Mējobābu/Mējokartā (standard, in narration), the landowner of the village. This jibe expresses the vulnerability, both physical and symbolic, of women’s bodies to the landowning upper-castes, a specter invoked again near the end of the novel when the narrator recalls Mējobābu’s tour of the *pārā* on, ironically, an educational campaign; yet Kubēr’s response shows that this concern is subordinated to the more pressing and immediate concern for survival: while he takes silent offense at the neighbor’s comment, he lashes out at his friend Gaṇēś for being innocent enough to celebrate the real news of the child’s birth—“*pōlā diyā karum kī? nijēgōr khāōn zōṭe nā, pōlā!* (what am I going to do with a son? We can’t get enough to eat ourselves, a son!)” (14).

An even more insidious figure than Mējobābu is Hōsēn Miyā, a member of the *jēlē* community who has made it big in some shady business (opium, it turns out) and started an island colony called Moynādīp. When Rāsu returns from Moynādīp, the news spreads throughout *jēlēpārā* even before he, Kubēr, Gaṇēś, and Dhanañjay reach Dhanañjay’s house. The whole neighborhood gathers there to hear his story (embellished as per audience demand) and later at his uncle’s house to demand an explanation from Hōsēn Miyā, whose

³⁹ Dinendra Chaudhuri (*Bhāṭiyāli gān [Bhāṭiyāli songs]*, Kolkata: Loksamskriti o ādibāsī samskriti kendra, 2002) points to the regionality of the *bhāṭiyāli* form despite its wide popularity outside its home region. He asks, “Why are the boatmen’s songs sung on the Surma, Padma, Meghna, Dhaleshwari, and Karnaphuli rivers [in East Bengal/Bangladesh] considered *bhāṭiyāli*, while those of the Torsha or Tista [rivers in North Bengal/Bangladesh] are not?” This question is directly impacted by linguistic factors: while *bhāṭiyāli* shares much with the North Bengali forms *kkhīrōl* and *dariyā bhāwāiyā* in terms of range and melodic structure, they are distinct in terms of *gāyaki* (singing style), phonetics, pronunciation, and intonation (34).

On the boatman’s call, see the following *bhāṭiyāli* song, sung by Ranen Roychaudhuri, which appears in Ritwik Ghatak’s *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960). The melodic pattern mimics the boatman’s call:

<i>Asamayē dini guwaiyā asamayē</i>	I wasted the day, at the wrong time,
<i>Ō mon asamayē āilām nadīr pārē</i>	<i>Ō mon</i> (heart/mind), at the wrong time I came to the riverbank
<i>Mājhi tōr nām jāni nā āmi dāk dimu kāre</i>	<i>Mājhi</i> , I don’t know your name, whom should I call out to
<i>Nāo āse kheowāni nāi rē</i>	There’s a boat but no boatman,
<i>mānuṣ nāi rē pārē</i>	no one on the riverbank
<i>Ō mon mānuṣ nāi rē pārē</i>	<i>Ō mon</i> , no one on the riverbank
<i>Mājhi tōr nām jāni nā āmi dāk dimu kāre</i>	<i>Mājhi</i> , I don’t know your name, whom should I call out to

The verses of the song are sung at a low pitch in a meditative tone, while the refrain jumps up an octave (in Indian music, the standard reference would be *saptak* or hectave) in the form of a call (*mājhi*, I don’t know your name), dropping down half an octave again as the singer wonders to whom he is addressing this call.

narrative of benevolence now seems about to be countered by Rāsu's narrative of loss. But the gathering's animosity is diffused as Hōsēn Miyā skillfully plays the familiarity card: before anyone broaches the subject of Moynādīp, he singles out Kubēr, who is strangely susceptible to Hōsēn Miyā's dangerous charisma, to begin a seemingly innocent line of conversation with the obligatory "*khānāpinā hoy nāi?* (Haven't you eaten?)" and asking after Kubēr's absent friend Gaṇēś, following up on Kubēr's response to deflect interest in himself to the community's other nemesis, Mējokartā; from here the matter devolves into a petty fight over a piece of neighborhood gossip (again centered on women's bodies, the alleged pregnancy of a *jēlē's* daughter who is living with Mējokartā's clerk and the suspicious fairness of Kubēr's new son, attributed as we know to Mējokartā). Hōsēn Miyā now has the upper hand and can put in the first and final word on Moynādīp himself, with a show of concern for Rāsu. Another *mājhi*, Āminuddi, voices a resistance that now seems incongruous with the gathering's lighter mood: "*āmi moynādīpē zāmu nā. koyā thuilām.* (I won't go to Moynādīp. I give my word.)" This only gives Hōsēn Miyā an opportunity to laugh and say, "*khush nā holi kyān zābā?* (Why should you go if you're not happy about it?)"—a question he cruelly repeats verbatim when Āminuddi's family is killed in a storm and, devastated, he sets off for Moynādīp in a trajectory opposite to Rāsu's. These narratives of risk and vulnerability point to the limits of individual choice and of the ability of the exploited to resist even when they can see clearly how they are being exploited.

The repetition of Hōsēn Miyā's question is a key to the formal properties of his power over the *jēlē's*: he not only exploits the conventional forms through which their own narratives are scattered (gossip, rumor, chitchat), strengthening his bonds with the community, but is an originator of formulaic statements and even poetry, which enhances the weight and aura of his persona. After the gathering discussed above, Kubēr discovers that Hōsēn Miyā is equally skilled at verse composition (*gāhān bāindhā*, lit. to "bind a song;" the phrase is current in standard usage, but the orthography represents dialectal pronunciation) as at the art of conversation. The narrator speculates that, had Hoshein Miya fallen into "other circumstances," he might have composed a few *gītikā* (ballads) that would travel "from mouth to mouth [*mukhē mukhē*] and found a place in the undying unwritten poetry of the century's collected village-*gītikā*," earning him the title of *fakir*.⁴⁰ Notably, Hoshein Miya's song (not "sung" but "spoken melodically") is quoted in full in the local dialect, unlike the *bhāṭiyāli* song discussed above, which seems to reinforce rather than dispel the ambiguity of Hōsēn Miyā's proclaimed empathy with the *jēlē* community. Kubēr's question "*mukhē mukhē bānāilēn miyā bāi?* Did you just make that up, Miya Bhai (lit., did you make it in your mouth, i.e. compose it orally)?" does not so much express astonishment at the skill itself, which he has just ascribed to another *jēlē* as well (*āmāgōr jugoilā pāre. mukhē mukhē chaḍa bāindhya dēy.* Our Jugoila can do that. He makes up rhymes [using the same phrase].)⁴¹ Rather, it expresses a deadly fascination with, and at the same time a difficulty digesting, the phenomenon of Hōsēn Miyā, whose rise from the *jēlē's* own ranks makes his success as seductive as it is suspicious. Hōsēn Miyā's

⁴⁰ This could be commenting on the fetishization of dialect in the context of commodification of "folk" forms for the urban market.

⁴¹ Etymologically, the word *charā* (rhyme) means both "scattered" and "strung together," like beads on a string (Bhabataran Dutta, ed., *Bānglār charā (A Collection of Bengali Folk Rhymes)*, Kolkata: Paschimanga Bangla Akademi, 1997, 11); the bits of oral thought that crystallize in memorable form are scattered through the community, but strung together over generations

psychopathic desire for benevolent domination is at the same time a distorted blow-up of the *jēlēs'* desires for agency and self-determination, and a kind of miniature palimpsest of power, layered with the colonial enterprise and local complicities that created the economic conditions in which they struggle, and with the precolonial process of agricultural expansion into the jungles of Bengal, linked with the spread of Islam and deeply implicated in ecology.⁴² Unlike Mējobābu, an intruder whose power over the *jēlēs* operates through legality, class relations, and the apparatus of “modern,” literate social reform (e.g., his organizing for the education of the *jēlēs*, interpreted by them as a ploy to sleep with their women), making him the more mundane face of colonialism on the ground, Hōsēn Miyā is master of local, oral, and dialectal forms, both prosaic and poetic, that invest him with a darkly symbolic power.

And yet, such skills cannot be monopolized by those with power, licit or illicit, but are found in equal measure in the most utterly disabled and dispossessed members of the community. While everyone in the community participates in piecing together the patchwork narratives already described, the figure of the storyteller is represented to some extent by Rāsu and especially by Kubēr's disabled wife Mālā, who enthralls her children, husband, and neighbors with her *rūpkathā* or fairy tales. The form, content, and community function of Rāsu's and Mālā's narrative differs, though they share a loosely similar performance structure: curious villagers gather haphazardly in the courtyard to hear Rāsu's ostensibly factual story and then form a “beautifully ordered assembly” around him to ask by turns for more fantastic details (26); Mālā's family and neighbors come one by one to sit nearby and hear her perform, but it is she who engages each of them between the lines of her fantastic tales with everyday chitchat. In terms of function, Rāsu's anecdotes transfix the listeners with the specter of a potential reality, whereas Mālā's tales do not so much transport them out of everyday reality as weave into its coarse cloth a shimmering yarn of desire. Curiously, we get a few snippets of Rāsu's Q&A session in dialect, but we are not given any sample of Mālā's storytelling, as with Gaṇēś's song mentioned earlier and the amateur *jātrā* with its *khicuṛi bhāṣā* (“one-pot” language, a concoction of *sādhu bhāṣā* and local dialect)⁴³ that appears in a later scene, and so we have no access to its dialectal

⁴² See Richard Eaton's *The Rise of Islam in the Bengal Frontier: 1204-1760*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. I would think that “spread” would be a more accurate word than “rise” given the literally horizontal nature of this advancement. The Bengali novels of Manoj Basu set in the Sundarban, and the work of anthropologist Annu Jalais on local understandings of ecology in the Sundarban are particularly interesting in connection with this layered relationship with the land, its resources, and its masters variously conceived. See for example Jalais, “Bonbibi: Bridging worlds,” *Indian Folklife*, Serial No. 28, January 2008, 6-7; “Unmasking the Cosmopolitan Tiger,” *Nature and Culture* 3(1), Spring 2008: 25-40.

⁴³ This brings up the important point that “oral” or “folk” forms do not always use dialect extensively; in a society where literacy is known to all communities even if it is not accessible to them, the use of dialect for a given form is a conscious choice. D. Chaudhuri makes the same point in relation to *bhāṭijāli*, which does use dialect. *Jātrā*, along with *maṅgalkābya* songs/recitation and some other forms, use *sādhu bhāṣā* or an older conventional literary language that resembles *sādhu bhāṣā* in many respects, though the latter convention was highly permeable to regional dialect. The choice of language variety may depend on several factors: while *bhāṭijāli* is a contemplative form closely tied to local ecology, *jātrā* is a dramatic form drawing heavily on mythological narratives in which ostentatious language goes along with splendid, if makeshift, sets and costumes and stylized gesture and delivery. Satyajit Ray's *Nāyaka* (1966) has a memorable scene that captures the transition between stage acting, in a dramatic tradition that drew heavily on *jātrā* in its formative stages, and movie acting, the technology of which enables a demand for naturalness. The language of *maṅgalkābya*, a

particularity. These choices, though they may be missed opportunities to see the dialect's narrative, poetic, and dramatic potential in action, seem to underscore the spellbinding, community-building power of form, eliding to some extent the role of the dialectal medium in shaping it. It is not the fantastic nature of Mālā's stories but her artisanal skill that arrests the narrator and strikes him as incongruous:

Mālā has lice in her hair, dirt on her skin, a torn and stinking cloth on her body, so that the very incongruity of it makes clear what an utterly flawless lady she is at this moment...A primitive, uncivilized environment [*ābēṣṭani*, also "enclosure," suggesting that she is hemmed in]. A performance of polished civilization (39).

Moreover, Mālā's storytelling and even the form of her love for her children are identified as luxuries made possible by her disability, which keeps her aloof from some of the brutality of *jēlēpārā* life. The ironic tone should not be missed. Ambiguous remarks on the conditions of possibility of creative expression and even emotion appear repeatedly in the narration, and taken in isolation, often seem to suggest that the grim realities of life in *jēlēpārā* have rendered its inhabitants joyless, loveless, and ruthless in their struggle for survival. In fact, Manik wrote elsewhere of the need for literature to move away from *niyatibād* (fatalism) and attend to the economic factors behind the fatalistic behavior of the rural poor.⁴⁴ However, such remarks belie a palpable conviction that desire and creative expression are as basic to a hand-to-mouth, exploited community like *jēlēpārā* as they are to the typical *bhadralōk* heroes, heroines, producers, and consumers of novels.

The language of incongruity points to the double nature of desire as material and in excess of the material, manifested in and deeply affected, though not determined, by the everyday. With this understanding, the comment on Mālā's "luxury" becomes intriguing and multivalent: the play of desire and creativity, affect and aesthetic enjoyment drives and sustains the lives of *bhadralōk* and *chōṭolōk* ("small people," derogatory term for lower-caste/class people) alike, and yet this play is by definition a kind of excess, something that does not quite fit the space delimited for it by everyday life, and to which not everyone can give themselves over. The passage on Mālā's storytelling is one of many that draw attention to performance and patchwork in the everyday lives of the marginalized *jēlē* community. These passages stress the vulnerability of the community and the aesthetic and affective power of the makeshift and the amateur both in terms of coping with everyday risks and

devotional form of considerable age and transregional presence, has never been homogeneous, but has nevertheless been handed down with a decent amount of archaism intact.

⁴⁴ "The philosophy of economic determinism seems to have been overlooked in literature. We have been much too focused on *niyatibād* (fatalism) without a proper analysis of what causes human beings to act despondently and tragically. In the case of the economically downtrodden as the fishermen, the bagdi and the lower-class population of the rural people of Bengal, such beliefs are almost always the product of exploitation. The real tragedy is that they know where it comes from but are seldom inspired to act against it" M. Bandyopadhaya, *Pratibimba (Reflections)*, 1942-43, 4-7. Kubēr's emotional and philosophical capacity seems directly related to his stomach: when he is in need, a weak pride drugs him into indifference to the fates of his children and the cruel games of his beloved, but when his belly is full, he feels a terrible disquiet that is "not the smooth, refined distress of poetry," but "just as much as is congruent [*khāp khāy*] with his timid nature" (100). Despite its apparent similarity to the statements on Mālā and Jugī's emotional luxuries, this comment seems directly opposed to the discourse of incongruity discussed below.

lacks and in terms of creative expression in verbal, non-verbal, and material forms.⁴⁵ Alongside the fixed, carnivalesque excesses of Holi and *pūjā*, stock scenarios in South Asian writing and cinema, the unpredictable everyday excesses of desire and creativity make themselves felt. The outburst of emotion to which Rāsu's uncle Pītam Mājhi succumbs on seeing him return without his wife and children is *ekēbārē bēkhāppā* (completely incongruent) not because he never lifted a finger to help Rāsu when dire poverty forced him to take the plunge and go to Moynādīp—this, the narrator insists, has long been forgotten or assimilated into a general history of suffering—but because it is a sudden surge of emotion amid the instant monotony of lament, part of a curious ebb-and-flow pattern in the cathartic performance of mourning.⁴⁶ Āminuddi's challenge to Hōsēn Miyā is incongruent in a slightly different way, as his adamant display of anger indicates that he is not playing along with the game that has already succeeded in distracting the rest of the community. Mālā's artful narrative is *khāpchārā* (incongruent) not because she is poor, crippled, or dirty, but because no art is congruent with the everyday by which it is generated.

The narrative of desire played out between Kubēr and his sister-in-law Kapila is integral to the novel's exploration of the materiality of desire and the life of ethical and aesthetic forms in a community designated by the *bhadralōk* as *chōṭolōk* ("small" or mean-minded people), automatically linking socioeconomic marginality with moral and intellectual liminality. In expressing this, the dialect is irreplaceable, as it distills both the desires of its speakers and the material contexts of those desires. Take the challenge Kapila throws to Kubēr at the end of the novel, first articulated flirtatiously and then repeated as he sets off into the known unknown of Moynādīp: *āmārē nibā mājhi lage?* (Will you take me with you, *mājhi*?). The indomitable desire expressed in this question cannot be dampened even by the prospect of Moynādīp, synonymous with banishment and servitude; on the contrary, this desire is so excessive it can only end in banishment. Significantly, however, this challenge idiomatically invokes Kubēr's role as *mājhi* or boatman. This form of address, embedded in the dialect and pointing back to the "traditional" occupation of *mājhi*, which in

⁴⁵ Material examples include the makeshift screens the Muslim *mājhis* put up around their homes as a symbolic approximation of *pardā* (seclusion of women), a kind of patchwork *izzat* (honor), and the care Kapila takes with her appearance, though her only beauty supplies are one purple sari and lots of hair oil. There is some similarity in the description of Kubēr's daughter Gopi, far from *bhadralōk* standards of beauty but full of the allure of youth, as the object of Rāsu's desire; however, we are shown Kapila not only as the object of Kubēr's desire but as the subject of her own desires.

⁴⁶ Compare this to the laments of the bereft mothers of *jēlēpārā*, whom the narrator claims are too short of time and hardened by poverty to mourn according to *bhadralōk* expectations but cry melodically (*sur kore kande*). This comment is echoed in Manik's diary a decade later (Jugantar Chakrabarti, ed. *Aprakāśita Mānik Bandyōpādhyāy: dāyēri o ciṭhipatra [Unpublished Manik Bandyopadhyay: diary and letters]*, Kolkata: De's Publishing, 1990), where he writes:

16 January 1946 Wednesday

At the end of the evening it came to me suddenly: there is a relationship between musical tone and the way people laugh and cry. It appears clearly in the way grieving people cry in a number of tones. I'll have to think about this and write an essay. Melody is related to all the prosodic styles of sound-utterance of the various emotions in everyday life.

Scientific research on this topic. I'll have to buy a book on tone. (84)

What seems in the novel to be a comment on the effects of poverty on emotional life turns out to be a basic principle of human expression, worthy of scientific inquiry.

the *bhāṭiyāli* tradition invoked at the opening of the novel is analogous with *monēr mānuṣ* or the mystical self/godhead, here implicates Kubēr in his own mundane and sordid destruction, entangling his present journey with his past trips in the employ of Hōsēn Miyā, ferrying loads of opium and passengers bound for Moynādīp, destitute and on-the-run as he is now. At this point, all roads seem to lead to the same place, all narratives to the same ending—Rāsu’s total loss and Mālā’s incurable disability are confirmed, Kubēr’s daughter Gopi’s youth is sold, Āminuddi’s resistance is broken, Kubēr’s double seduction (by Kapila and by Hoshein Miya) bears bitter fruit—and yet Kapila’s question in its proper dialectal form leaves its indelible mark, the signature of some surplus that cannot be taken away. My own language stops me here: is this permanence, which suggested to me at the time I wrote that sentence the metaphor of mark and signature, a function of writing and thus not properly Kapila’s at all (i.e., is it not only written by a novelist and printed in a book, but also a “literary” touch)?⁴⁷ Beyond the obvious (we are talking about a novel by Manik Bandyopadhyay), the memorability of Kapila’s question, as with Hōsēn Miyā’s, is reinforced by the (basically, not exclusively) oral properties of repetition, idiomatic form, and dialectal rhythm. The novel’s “literary” skill integrally involves bringing the oral forms of the community into play.

*Samṣārikatā, sāmājikatā, samālōcanā (domesticity, sociality, critique):
women’s narratives in Advaita Mallabharman’s Titās ekṭi nadīr nām*

“*kānē sōnā dilē porē anēk kathā jāy nā sōnā
sōnā kānē porār cēyēō dāmi kathā kānē sōnā*

Once you put gold (*sōnā*) in your ears, there’s a lot of *kathā* you can’t hear (*sōnā*)
it’s worth more than wearing gold in your ears to use your ears to listen to *kathā*”

—1967 Bengali “*ādhunik* (modern)” song, lyrics by Kanu Ghosh, music by Salil Chowdhury, sung by Geeta Dutt

In Advaita Mallabharman’s *Titās ekṭi nadīr nām* (*Titash is the Name of a River*, published posthumously in 1956), the narrative voice approaches the Malo fishing community on the Titash river in Brahmanbaria, then part of Comilla district in East Bengal, now a separate district of Bangladesh, with an intimacy unique in contemporary Bengali literature, gathering multiple narratives around it in a collective act of remembering. In the long opening passage, which devotes unhurried attention to the Malos’ everyday work rhythms, leisure, and pleasures, the repeated assertion of the Malos’ affection for the Titash gains strength each time by comparison with more impressive, more historic rivers and with smaller, fickle rivers; this sense of intimacy becomes poignant when the river silts up at the end of the novel, betraying the Malos’ unwavering trust.⁴⁸ The novel’s close description of the Malos’ language, culture, rituals, and domestic

⁴⁷ Ong laments the inability of literate scholars to conceive of orality in anything other than literate terms (Ong 1982). While this complaint has greater relevance to the study of “primary orality,” in studying a literary text’s representation of orality, it has interesting implications for both the text and the critic.

⁴⁸ Advaita’s *Titās*, Manik’s *Padmā*, and Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay’s *Hāṃsuli bāñkēr upakathā*, discussed in the next section, have been categorized as *nadīkendrik upanyās* or “river-centered novels,” along with other works such as Tarashankar’s *Kālindī* (1940), Narayan Gangopadhyay’s *Upanibēś* (1944-47), Bibhutibhusan

and community life gains a similar poignancy with the breakup of the community. Within this broad narrative arc, the community's narrative forms come into play.

Before entering the text on its own terms, a word about the writer is in order. Advaita Mallabarman, a Malo and the first member of his community to complete higher education, has entered the almost exclusively uppercaste canon of Bengali modernist literature without much ado. *Titās*, his best-known work, is often read without any reference to his background, acknowledging the work's "literary merit" but evading reflection on the entrenched biases of the literary establishment. When writing *Titās*, Advaita reportedly responded to a friend's remark that the ultimate river novel had already been written, namely Manik's *Padmā*, by stating "Manik Bandyopadhyay is a great artist, master artist, but a Brahmin's son (*bāōnēr pōlā*)—romantic. And I'm a fisherman's son (*jāulār pōlā*)."⁴⁹ This comment, along with the novel's moments of reflection on intercaste and -class violence, has led Dalit writers and critics to claim it as an important predecessor.⁵⁰ Recognizing this now canonized text as the work of a Malo has political importance. In terms of aesthetics, however, *Titās* does not espouse the hardhitting, visceral techniques of the later Dalit "literature of protest," even though it was written in the context of Partition violence, which had disproportionate fallout on low-caste communities like the Malos.⁵¹ The novel's strongest affects center on the community:

Bandopadhyay's *Ichāmati* (1949), Kamal Kumar Majumdar's *Antarjali jātrā* (1954), Syed Waliullah's *Kāñḍō nadi kāñḍō* (1968), Samaresh Basu's *Gangā* (1974), Humayun Ahmed's *Mayurākkhi* (1982), and Debesh Roy's *Tistāpārēr brittānta* (1997). The relationship between river and community, fundamental in a region riddled with rivers, tributaries, and channels, takes many different courses in these diverse texts. My interest in these three novels, as already stated, has to do with the relationship between community and narrative, an understanding of which is shaped by the entanglement of voices and forms of language in each work, though all three are unthinkable without the local dialects that assert their presence, aptness, and untranslatability on almost every page.

⁴⁹ This is my translation of Subodh Choudhuri's recounting of the comment in an interview with Chaturtha Duniya staff: "*Subodh-dā, Manik Bandyopadhyay baṛo artist, master artist, kintu bāōnēr pōlā—romantik. Ār āmi to jāulār pōlā.*" ("Khāñṭi sōnā tāi bheṅge gelo (Real gold, so it broke)," interview with Subodh Choudhuri in Achintya Biswas, ed., *Advaita Mallabarman: bisēṣ saṅkhyā* (Special Issue on Advaita Mallabarman), Kolkata: Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha, 1994.) Meenakshi Mukherjee translates Manoranjan Byapari's report of this comment simply as, "The son of a brahman has written from his point of view. I will write from mine" (Manoranjan Byapari and Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Is there Dalit writing in Bangla?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 42, No. 41 (Oct. 13-19, 2007), pp. 4116-4120, 4119). Kalpana Bardhan, translator of the novel into English, who interviewed Choudhuri herself, paraphrases it as: "[Advaita] said he greatly admired [*Padmā's*] artistry, but since its author came from an educated Brahman family he knew about fisherfolk's life only from the outside; it reflected "a Brahman's son's romantic view" (Appendix to *A River Called Titash*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, 266).

⁵⁰ See Chaturtha Duniya's special issue on Advaita, cited above.

⁵¹ Manoranjan Byapari discusses the near-disappearance of literature by Dalits due to extreme hardship in the years following the Partition. While large numbers of people across the caste and class spectrum on both sides of the border suffered displacement and violence, the effects of these were especially brutal for already disadvantaged and marginalized communities, who also faced discrimination within the refugee community (Byapari 2007). Significantly, *Titās* emphasizes the feeling of unity among low-caste Hindus like the Malos and the Muslim peasant farmers, explicitly blaming caste- and class violence for the disunity between and within these communities, which challenges the notion of Partition violence as a "communal" affair—while the usual narrative is one of longstanding Hindu-Muslim brotherhood turned fratricidal by colonial politics, this narrative reminds us of the deep fissures within the two communities that actively fed into the split, not to mention making its impact unevenly distributed. Mihir Sengupta, though not without nostalgia for the

desire for community, pleasure in its creative forms, and pain at its disintegration. The language of the community and its narrative forms play a critical role in creating these affects.

The authorial narrative, technically separated from those of the characters by the use of *sādhu bhāṣā* vs. the local dialect, nevertheless tends to blend with those voices through free indirect speech, a tone that hovers between colloquial and lyrical, and predominantly informal diction, which allows dialect words to enter unremarked.⁵² Though dialogue is relatively sparse especially in the first part of the novel, the narration often enters the Malos' thoughts with the refrain *mālōrā bhābe* (the Malos think), *jēlēdēr bou-jhirā bhābē* (the fishermen's wives think), etc. The narration of the characters' thoughts tends to be in *sādhu bhāṣā* like the rest of the narration, and yet when interspersed with dialogue, the transition is hardly noticeable. Take the following sentence, which appears without quotation marks in between two lines of dialogue: "*nā, lōkṭār kēbal pēṭi śukhāy nāi. māthāō śukhāiyā giyāchē.* (No, it's not only the guy's belly that's dried up. His head's dried up too [i.e., he's stopped thinking].)" This sentence will be read as *sādhu bhāṣā* despite its colloquial feel. But due mainly to the latter, and partly to certain aural affinities that the *bāngāl* or East Bengali dialects have with *sādhu bhāṣā*,⁵³ this utterance slips in without breaking the flow of the characters' speech. In the dialogue itself, the local dialect seems irreplaceable for its aptness, force, and texture. And yet in some passages, an unusually long speech by a character shifts almost imperceptibly into *sādhu bhāṣā*, as if the narrator has taken on the character's persona. This linguistic liminality allows multiple narratives to meet on common, if eroding, ground.

The primary narrative of *Titās* formally echoes forms of narrative preceding and coexisting orally with the novel and actively shares the task of telling the story of the Malo community with the oral narratives of community members. The novel is divided into four parts. While the first chapter, bearing the same title as the book, introduces a river insignificant in the mainstream imagination—"Titash is the name of a river" is an utterance that would be nonsensically obvious if replaced by "Padma" or "Ganga"—the second chapter in the first part of the novel is titled *prabās khaṇḍa*: the first word, *prabās*, denotes

system that benefited his high-caste, well-off family in Barisal, likewise stresses the caste/class dynamic in pre-Partition Hindu-Muslim relations (*Ujāni khālēr sōñtā*, Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2000).

⁵² The mixing of *sādhu bhāṣā* and local dialect has ample precedent in folk/literary forms such as *maṅgalkābya* and *padābali*, in which dialectal words and colloquial expressions entered freely into a pan-Bengali conventional literary idiom. However, Advaita's use of *sādhu bhāṣā* and dialect as if in a common register contrasts with Manik's *Padmā*, in which the two forms of language each realize their literary potential without seeming interchangeable, though there is some seepage of dialect into the narrative voice as discussed above.

⁵³ Though *sādhu bhāṣā* and the *bāngāl* dialects may seem on opposite ends of the spectrum of literary prestige—the *bāngāl* dialects carrying associations of rusticity and, post-Partition, refugee life—they have striking affinities in vowel sounds and grammatical endings. Dialects generally have the tendency to conserve features from older forms of the language, and this is true of western Bengali dialects as well. However, the vowel sounds and verb endings of the western dialects are closer to those of *calit bhāṣā*, and indeed the dialect of western deltaic Bengal including Kolkata forms the basis of written *calit bhāṣā* as well as standard colloquial speech. In themselves, these affinities are not likely to determine the writer's choice to use *sādhu* vs. *calit bhāṣā* in conjunction with a given dialect, but they can be exploited to create a certain texture and, arguably, to shape the reader's perception of the dialect.

living away from home;⁵⁴ the second, *khaṇḍa* or “part,” connects the novel’s narrative structure to premodern Bengali folk/literary⁵⁵ verse narratives. Like those narratives, *Titās* carries with it the everyday life and livelihood, domesticity, material culture, customs, rituals, practices, and bodies of knowledge of ordinary people; unlike them, the novel does not need a mythological excuse for this, as it tells the story of the community itself. But the relationship between novelistic and “oral”⁵⁶ narrative forms is not oppositional; there is no “progress” indicated from one to the other.⁵⁷ The novel incorporates these forms of narrative, including gossip, anecdotes, *kechchā* (scandalous stories), *kiṃbadanti* (tall tales), *kathakatā* (professional narration of mythological narratives with or without the *puthi* or manuscript for reference or as ritual object), songs and figures of speech on themes drawn from the Radha-Krishna and *manasāmaṅgal* narratives, opening and closing statements by elders during community meetings, *gāli* (abuse), and running commentary in the form of *charā* (rhymes), *śilōk* (riddles), proverbs, and other idioms and witticisms. While *kathakatā* and elders’ statements are the province of men, most of the narratives woven into the novel come from women as they gather to welcome new arrivals (newcomers and newborns), see off a friend going to visit her paternal home, or perform routine and ritual tasks such as *sutā kāṭā* (spinning yarn, here for fishnets), preparations for *pūjā* (worship), and making *piṭhā* (sweet rice cakes, a typical festive item in East Bengal where rice is the staple). It is perhaps not so much ironic as logical that it falls to the women of the community, themselves uprooted at a young age as a matter of course and thus agents of active community-building, to spin the yarns that bind the community together. The most sustained and distinct of these narratives belong to three women whose personal desires for intimacy and respect are orchestrated by a strong desire for community in the face of precarity and erosion. Each narrative articulates a different mode of aesthetic and ethical

⁵⁴ Though *Titās* begins with the classic trope of the journey, it does not end with the return home, which is only the beginning of another painful journey through the disintegration of home and community.

⁵⁵ Medieval Bengali literature is considered to owe a large debt to regional folk forms, and poets such as Chandidas are celebrated for embedding classical narratives in rural Bengali life. 17th century poet Ray Shekhar openly defended his use of “folk” language (here understood as Bangla in relation to the “literary” language, Sanskrit, but extending in principle to regional varieties of Bangla), as discussed in chapter 3 (Gupta 1992, 118. Paradoxically, while continuing to celebrate these poets, present-day critics still fault some medieval poetry for “rustic” deviations from the conventional literary Bangla of the time. Such narratives circulated orally in a variety of forms before and after the composition of the works surviving in written form today, which became widely available in print in the early colonial period and are considered literary classics. Palmleaf manuscripts or *puthi* retained prestige in ritual contexts, as seen in *Titās* when a *padmāpurāṇ puthi* is brought out to be sung during an annual festival and carefully kept away for the following year.

⁵⁶ Orality in South Asia does not exist in isolation from, but in a dynamic relationship with literate culture. “Oral” performance often involves the ritual and/or functional use of palmleaf manuscript or printed text. The quotation marks here indicate a wide range of loosely “oral” narrative practices. See introduction for an in-depth discussion of “orality” and its relationship to modern literature.

⁵⁷ Bengali literary historians tend to see verse narrative forms as premodern anticipations of modern prose narrative, even when they coexist at a given historical moment (especially the early colonial period). Thus, the *maṅgalkābya* and other narratives in *payār chanda* (a popular meter) are appreciated for their “proselike” and “novelistic” qualities, but the hallmarks of failure to be fully modern are continued preference for metered verse on the one hand, and at least superficially mythological subject matter on the other. See for instance the introduction to *Purātan bāṅglā gadyagrantha saṃkalan* (*Collection of Old Bengali Prose Texts*) (A.K. Bandyopadhyay 2003)—the “old” in the title refers to the development of print culture and prose literature in Bengal in the early colonial period, approximately 1830s-1950s—and the “*ēkāl* (‘This time,’ i.e. the modern era, as opposed to *sēkāl*, ‘that time’ or the premodern era)” section of Gupta 1992.

engagement with the community. The women’s narratives are intertwined with two narratives that have had a long life both in local and in pan-Bengali cultural heritage, in oral art forms and in literature: the Radha-Krishna story and the *manasā maṅgal*. This raises the loaded question of how to understand orality in relation to literature especially through the lens of subalternity.

Bāsantī is the voice of protest—against the oppression of widows, the dependency and disposability of women, and the capitulation of the Malo community to cultural homogeneity in the form of commodified *jātrā*.⁵⁸ She is thus both the strongest critic of the society that has sidelined her and the strongest defender of the Malos’ close-knit community and cultural specificity.⁵⁹ Bāsantī’s critique (*samālōcanā*) is articulated as clearly in her assertion “*jāni, kintuk komu nā* (I know, but I won’t tell)”⁶⁰ as in her open reproaches to her loved ones and community members. Her language is highly idiomatic, frequently using river and water metaphors, and punctuated with *gāli* (abusive language), which has both an aesthetic form⁶¹ and a tactical value as practically the only method of self-defense and assertion available to her. Having nothing else with which to bargain, she threatens to reclaim her body (*gotor*, the physical body as repository of strength, health, and capacity to work) and sexual desires, depriving her parents of their only remaining claim to respect in the community and also of the only body they depend on for subsistence, to manipulate them into enabling her support for the struggling Anantar Mā. How could they understand, she asks, the depth of her “river of pain”? As she has just

⁵⁸ *Jātrā* (lit. “commencement of a journey”) is a dramatic form usually performed in the open air in rural areas by an all-male cast, featuring song and primarily mythological narratives. Modern stage theater in colonial Bengal began with a creative reworking of *jātrā*. In the novel, the Malos have their own *jātrā* performances, but when the uppercaste *jātrā* troupe infiltrates Mālōpārā with new, trendy, “light” songs, creating pro- and anti-*jātrā* factions among the Malos, this is seen as a serious threat to the Malos’ unique culture and a sign of its imminent downfall. The uniqueness in the Malos’ songs lies in their nuanced correspondence to the local ecology, shown in the allocation of specific genres to times of the day and night. The association of *raag* (melodic pattern) with times of day is a feature of Hindustani classical music as well, and the themes of the songs are obviously shared with pan-Bengali culture. Here, however, the specific relation of time to theme underlines the intimate knowledge, part intuitive and part learned, that these songs demand of singer and listener alike: the narrator insists repetitively and as if at a loss for more illustrative words the particularity and ineffable richness of the Malo culture, “difficult for an outsider to grasp” (375). D. Choudhuri’s comment is worth remembering here: apparently similar, perhaps related forms nevertheless retain a distinctness difficult to explain except with reference to highly local linguistic and stylistic features.

⁵⁹ The distinction between society and community may be helpful here, as Bāsantī’s feminism calls out inequalities present in varying forms and degrees throughout Bengali society, both vertically (up and down the caste hierarchy) and horizontally (across local communities), while her support for the community remains strong in recognition of the need for unity against caste violence and cultural homogenization. However, the Bangla *samāj* refers to both society and community. In Malo usage, *samāj* also denotes a section of the community to which certain social and practical functions are delegated, composed of a varying number of households (*ghar*). When Anantar Mā comes to the village, she is accepted into Mangala’s *samāj*, as it is the smallest, consisting of his, Bāsantī’s, and Kiśōr’s households. The word thus applies to social organization on at least three scales. It is also the root of *sāmājīk* (social) and *sāmājīkata* (sociality), which is most fully embodied in Udaytārā. Bāsantī is not *asāmājīk* (antisocial)—that is the village women’s unspoken charge against Anantar Mā before they get to know her. Rather, Bāsantī’s outspokenness makes both spontaneous and strategic use of local idiom, particularly *gāli* (abuse), as explored here, and earns her both animosity and respect.

⁶⁰ 161. Bāsantī uses this phrase during an exchange of stories with Anantar Mā, discussed in depth below.

⁶¹ Mihir Sengupta explores the aesthetics of *khamār* (*gāli* or abuse) in Barisal, another region of East Bengal/Bangladesh (Sengupta 2000).

confided to Anantar Mā, she has vowed to live without men, who are “raindrops, they fall and that’s it. They’re a flood tide. They give a little pleasure and suck the river’s breast dry” (166). When Bāsantī is harassed by uppercaste young men after a fight with Udaytārā over the orphaned Ananta, she stands by the Mālōpārā house where the uppercaste youth hold their *jātrā* practice and lets loose an hour-long stream of *gāli*, which the neighbors characterize as “*bāñdhē khārā* (lit. ‘standing on a dam’),” suggesting something unstoppable (301). We learn on the same page that the respected Malo leader Rāmprasād’s campaign for widow remarriage has been thwarted by the Malos’ blind trust in the word of the Brahmin priest, but Bāsantī’s bold, hotheaded statements against the uppercaste infiltration of Mālōpārā—which targets both women’s bodies and the body of songs that channels Malo identity—manages to galvanize some community action, if temporarily. This matter-of-factly related series of events complicates narratives of traditionality, modernity, and the relatively polite and privileged uppercaste feminism that takes center stage in most studies of social reform in the colonial period. In Mālōpārā, a lowcaste community on the margins of modernizing Bengali society, “traditional” leadership tries and fails to initiate a social reform associated with colonial modernity due to the deadly combination of a conservatism born of structural dependence on the one hand, and a nearly wholesale surrender to the commodification of folk culture on the other.⁶² Yet it is the most marginalized member of the community—a penniless widow who has lost even the pleasure of female friendship and the honor of caring for an orphaned child, and now has nothing more to lose—who, without setting aside her lucid feminist critique, tries with some success to build a united front against the forces threatening the community as a whole, even if this resistance also founders. That she carries out all this in a thoroughly local, idiomatic, dialectal language raises a question about the conventional functions tacitly assigned to standard and nonstandard language varieties in speech and in writing. In other words, though the authorial narration and the dialogue in the novel can be designated as *sādhū* and dialect, Bāsantī’s language performs not only narrative, but also analytic functions that are often implicitly denied to orality no matter how much respect is accorded to it.⁶³ To some extent, her critique from the margins aligns her with the critical

⁶² Here, both the effort and the failure are significant: the effort indicates the potential of local leadership to promote what in contemporary language we would call social justice, making the point that the constructed continuity of “traditional” structures and forms can actively contribute to as well as passively accommodate change. The failure indicates a lack of receptivity to such issues in the community at this time, which the narrative relates directly to its disunity and susceptibility to commodifying and homogenizing pressures linked to shifts in the economic, political, geographical, and geological landscape: while the disintegration of the community is both actually and figuratively linked to the changes in the river that has sustained it, the communal violence and massive, multifaceted ramifications of Partition loom silently in the background.

⁶³ My point here is that even if a text seems to participate in the convention that separates the functions of written and spoken, standard and dialectal language, it may demonstrate the capacity of spoken and/or nonstandard language to perform complex critical as well as creative functions, the forms of which may be deeply affected by access to literacy. Granted, the role of formula and repetition in orality is worth a thought here: it is not that oral language does not engage in analysis and abstraction, as Bāsantī clearly does, but such engagements may not last in the collective memory unless they are given a repeatable form or recorded (translated into literacy).

distance of the writer, enabled by a kind of *asaṃsārikatā* (detachment from domesticity), even though she has no access to writing.⁶⁴

The difference between Bāsantī and Anantar Mā is summed up by the narrator in terms of habitation: in Bāsantī resides a “revolutionary woman” (*biplabī nārī bās karē*), while a “destructive desire for domesticity” (*sarbanāśā sām̐sārik kāmanā*) has taken up residence (*bāsā bāñdhiyāchē*) in Anantar Mā (171).⁶⁵ Why is her desire to build a home—seemingly simple, commonplace, and constructive—so destructive? If Bāsantī’s desire for personal and collective respect enables her to know her own mind and fight against all odds, the Radha-like intensity of Anantar Mā’s desire for union incapacitates her, making her the picture of uncertainty, ineptitude, and vulnerability, by turns pathetic, frustrating, and endearing to the women of the community. This is shown by her apparent lack of everyday verbal, social, and manual skills and her instinctive response to all questions with “I don’t know.” Yet her story is highly melodramatic and dense with *bhāb* (feeling, affect). When the girl later known as Anantar Mā first sees Kiśōr during *dōl* (Holi, a festival celebrating baby Krishna) in her home village, she stops in the middle of the women’s dance and has to be shunted out of the circle so as not to break the rhythm, and when an attack by a rival group breaks up the gathering, she faints in Kiśōr’s arms.⁶⁶ After the tragedy that separates them, when her thwarted desire for domesticity brings her to Gokanghat village in search of her lost husband, she feels an immediate bond with the

⁶⁴ I borrow this word from Jibanananda Das’s *Karubāsanā* (Longing for Art), which muses extensively on the incompatibility of domesticity and writing. It may be argued that this is a position made possible by male privilege, and that female writers may or may not have or make the choice to eschew family life for their writing and still produce significant works. But *asaṃsārikatā* is not the same as an abdication of responsibility; Bāsantī still supports her elderly parents, and the narrator of Jibanananda’s short story “Books” somewhat impishly punctures his father’s idolization of Tolstoy by insisting that the writer’s abuse of his wife was not, as his father argues, an excusable byproduct of his “excessive life force” but that “there have been many great men, and not all of them abused their wives”—even if the husband and wife throughout Jibanananda’s work engage in a kind of perpetual, delicate, unequal but mutual torture. Rather, it is an ascetic detachment associated for Jibanananda with *bilās* (intellectual-physical sensuality), a way of being modeled in some sense on the *dēhatattva* (body theory) of Bengal’s philosophical sects, practitioners of oral or oral-literate verbal arts, but which also enables the self-referential game of writing. In Bāsantī’s case, asceticism is not solely imposed on her by patriarchal customs but is a choice she makes as a part of her resistance to those customs, among other social ills.

⁶⁵ The narrator continues with repetitive emphasis, “She wants to be domestic. Let him [the madman] come and make a home with her” (171).

⁶⁶ In the novel, the mood for this scene is set by a lengthy excerpt of songs sung by male singers, who are divided into two groups, Radha’s and Krishna’s, and exchange verses in a bantering format. Radha’s group is “*bhadra* (polite)” and “patient,” dwelling on the heart’s pain in separation, while Krishna’s group is excitable and “uncivilized,” emphasizing sexual desire with reference to Radha’s clothing and to the law (“*tōmār joubane korbo āin-jāri* [I’ll enforce a law on your youth]) (70). (A slightly different version of this line is quoted by D. Choudhuri in his study of *bhāṭiyāli* as one of many examples of how the genre’s vocabulary has expanded beyond the typical boat and boatman to include modern and contemporary technologies, of travel and of rule. Here, the significance of the invocation of law has to do with the liminality embodied in the Radha-Krishna story, explored below.) The women’s song and dance which follows is not quoted, but merely acts as a backdrop to the girl’s Radha-like self-forgetfulness. In Ritwik Ghatak’s film version of *Titās* (1973), clips from the women’s song “*līlābālī līlābālī ghōr jubati soi gō kī diyā sājāimu tōrē* (Leelabali [lit. ‘playful girl’], your youth is dazzling, what can I dress you up with)” used in this scene are played back in the later scene when, after Anantar Mā exchanges stories with Bāsantī, she offers a *piṭhā* to the madman, who she now knows is her husband.

women of the village⁶⁷ and especially with Bāsantī. But at first, the women find her aloof, as she seems unresponsive to their *kichchā* (scandalous stories) and *raṅg-tāmāśā* (fun and jokes).⁶⁸ Bāsantī loses patience with her seeming ignorance and lack of initiative, exclaiming, “The house is like a *śūdrānī* [woman of the lowest caste]’s temple. There’s neither a ball of yarn nor a spindle. Herself, she’s like a *phul-bāmnī* [‘flowerlike Brahmin woman,’ i.e. someone who can afford to be delicate, since she doesn’t have to work]” (108), and she laughs at Anantar Mā’s first attempts at spinning yarn. Anantar Mā finds a place only the community’s smallest and most marginal *samāj*—of the three households in this *samāj*, two belong to elderly couples whose only children are a madman (Kīśōr) and a widow (Bāsantī), the other belongs to Maṅgalā, husband of the woman known as Maṅgalār Bou (Maṅgalā’s wife). There is, however, one task for which Anantar Mā seems to have a special gift: she alone has some success in bringing the madman back to himself. Anantar Mā is immediately drawn to the madman, and when she begins to sense that he is her lost husband, she is determined to reunite with him, despite the scandal inevitable in this whether she reveals her identity. She defends herself to Bāsantī by saying that even if she cannot help Kīśōr find his *manēr mānuṣ* (lit. the person one’s mind/heart seeks, not only a “soulmate” or “lost love,” but also the self), or the person whose loss made him mad, she can try to be that person herself. When her efforts finally bring about a form of recognition, she loses him again at the hands of the community, which misrecognizes their union as violence and comes to her rescue, only to destroy her. The repeated identification of her story with that of Radha gives us the key to the question: the destructive element in her desire is its liminality, its seeming congruence with community values belying a formidable transgressive power. Yet this liminality is not foreign to, but simply exceeds the community; it is a familiar but inexhaustible source of play, central to the community’s verbal art forms.⁶⁹

The palimpsest-like story of Bāsantī, Kīśōr, and Anantar Mā allows us to see the overlapping, converging, diverging, and incongruent forms of narrative in the novel. This story forms the second chapter of the novel, the *prabās khaṇḍa*, where it is told in the authorial voice from the perspective of Kīśōr. It is retold by the two women in a later

⁶⁷ “She felt very happy, as if these women are her own. The little waves of the Titash are coming to lay their heads on the shore. I feel like the waves in my breast are going wild to lay their heads on the breasts of those women...Anantar Mā felt that all these women were her own. She lays her head on their breasts and, like them, gazes compassionately at the madman, like them, she forgets about going home and keeps looking at the madman with tearfilled eyes. She had a desire to put her arms around the madman’s neck and cry out loud a little too [like his mother was doing]” (100-101).

⁶⁸ “They think, this woman is very distant. She’s just a slip of a girl. They can’t even get her to join their group. Such arrogance.” Later, however, they do take her into their fold: she is called upon to participate in welcoming the birth of a boy (135), an *annaprāśan* (ceremony for the baby’s first solid food) (137), a wedding (139), *dōl* (holi), and *kālīpūjā* (143).

⁶⁹ The love-play, union, and separation of Radha and Krishna has been at the heart of much of pan-Bengali culture since the medieval period; while the earliest extant literature in Bengali belongs to a Tantric-Buddhist body of philosophy and practice, Jayadeva’s Sanskrit *Gītāgōbinda* is often seen as the father of Bengali literature for its grounding of the mythological Radha-Krishna narrative, marginal in the Sanskrit tradition, in rural Bengali life and its extensive use of regional folk meters. Medieval Bengali *padābali sāhitya* both before and after the *bhakti* movement that gathered around Chaitanya had the Radha-Krishna story as a central theme, and it remains important in folk music up to the present day, in some traditions mixed with Shakta, Tantric-Buddhist, and Sufi themes and ideas. In the novel, we learn when Kīśōr and his companions reach the first stop on their journey that they are *kriṣṇamantri* (Vaishnavites) rather than *śibmantri* (Shaivites).

chapter, in which Bāsantī, Anantar Mā, and Maṅgalār Bou sit down together to make *piṭhā* in the house of Kiśōr’s parents. As they work, Maṅgalār Bou asks for a story, identified as *galpa* (“story,” a standard colloquial word) in the narration and as *parastāb* (“proposal” or “topic,” used dialectally as “story,” but carrying the sense of initiating an exchange of stories) in the dialogue. Here, Anantar Mā’s utter failure to spin a good yarn gives her away: she thinks to herself that “her own life is so full of strange story that if she rejects it, no received story will take shape, it won’t sound good, and she won’t be able to put her heart in it” (154). But before she even begins, Mangalar Bou jolts her out of her reverie with a complaint lent force by its proverbial form: “*ki gō bindābanēr nārī, kālōchōṛā loṛdā gese mairā bāmśir bāri* [Hey Brindavan girl (Radha), that dark boy (Krishna) hit you with his flute]. If you’re going to tell a story, go ahead and tell it, *bhoīn* [sister]. This is no fun. If you don’t know one, don’t do it, if you know one, tell it” (155). Anantar Mā gives up after the opening line of her story, claiming forgetfulness, and Mangalar Bou calls her out for omitting the heart of the story: “That’s your story? ...You didn’t tell us the most important thing, you suppressed it.” Bāsantī takes over from here, telling her own side of the story as if it belonged to someone else, marked by the refrain, “*jāni, kintuk komu nā* (I know, but I won’t tell)” (152).⁷⁰ Meanwhile, the madman, around whom the two women’s story revolves, sits listening: “Like a manuscript (*puṭhi*) being read aloud, page after page of the history of his own madness was flipped over the madman’s mind” (161). The women’s narratives, orally composed, become a text to be read aloud, a handwritten text with ritual value as material object and as the basis of recitation from memory—here designated as *itihās*, a word that denotes a classical narrative genre and the modern discipline of history, used colloquially in the sense of “backstory.” The novel’s task, it seems, is not to record unwritten stories, but to take the spoken narrative into itself as a form of writing—and to channel the affective power of even the unspoken, patchwork narrative of someone unskilled in verbal arts.

If Bāsantī’s critique, a genuinely grassroots form of community engagement, nevertheless ends up severing ties and setting her “adrift,” and if the liminality of Anantar Mā’s longing for intimacy, though familiar, renders her unintelligible to the community, Udaytārā has mastered the art of community, which critically involves transforming personal joys and sorrows into collective banter and rituals of celebration and mourning. Udaytārā embodies *sāmājikatā* (sociality), her quick tongue and ready wit providing a running commentary even as her *charā kātā* (rhyming) and *śilōk* (riddles) reinforce community ties and cultural and practical memory. Curiously, we first encounter Udaytārā as the object of an inexplicably intense longing for friendship on the part of Jamilā, a new Muslim bride on her way to her husband’s house, who glimpses Udaytārā, a Hindu woman, from a boat on the river when the sari draped around her as a screen flutters in the wind. Jamilā finally meets the woman many years later, but at that time Udaytārā finds her desire

⁷⁰ In the novel, Bāsantī’s narrative starts out as quoted dialect, ending with “*jāni, kintuk komu nā*,” and then continues without quotes in *sādhu bhāṣā*, changing the phrase to “*jāni, kintu bolibo nā*.” In fact, the narrator describes Bāsantī as relating the events of the “*prabās-khaṇḍa*,” i.e. matching his own narration. In Ghatak’s film version of *Titās*, Bāsantī speaks the entire narrative, delivering the refrain in its dialectal form in a playful singsong that only intensifies the anger and sadness palpable in her telling.

for friendship sadly naïve.⁷¹ Ananta first meets Udaytārā when she takes over from Bāsanti in guiding him through his mother’s last rites. When we get to know Udaytārā, we learn that she is the queen of *charā*,⁷² *śilōk*,⁷³ and other verbal forms that act as intellectual exercise, repository of practical and cultural knowledge, community-building tools, and defense against human, natural, and supernatural aggression. In other words, she knows “how to do things with words.” When a big storm hits Mālōpārā, Udaytārā shelters Ananta, the son of Anantar Mā, if we can put it thus redundantly, in her house and “competes” with the storm, shouting out to all three hundred thousand gods in the Hindu pantheon, then playing on the storm’s soft side, “your nephew’s wife lives in this house, don’t touch it don’t touch it,” and finally cussing it out, “get lost you bugger, go to the hills, go to the mountains, go fight with big trees!”—and at that, the storm “bows its head” (210). When Udaytārā takes Ananta with her on a visit to her brother’s house in Nabinagar village, her identity changes from Labacandrar Bou (Labacandra’s wife) to Banamālir Bōn (Banamali’s sister), and she shares this proud moment with another woman from her paternal village looking on sadly as she sets off, calling out to her and lightening the mood with *hāsi-tāmāsā* (laughter and jokes) (219). The woman calls Udaytārā *jāmāithokānī* (son-in-law-trickster), with reference to the tradition of teasing a new bridegroom. On the river, she feels stifled by the “ugly silence,” wondering how she can transfer her social skills from the crowded village to the empty river, and finally ventures to try out a *charā* on Ananta, whose thoughtful questions lead her to dub him Lakhai Pandit, after the young man brought back from death in the *manasāmaṅgal*. When her sisters Nayantara and Asmantara come to visit, the three of them give a virtuoso performance of *śilōk* as they stay up late making *pitha*. Udaytārā participates in a ritual known as *jālā-biyā*, a wedding staged between two women with *jālā* or young rice plants symbolizing Behula’s wifhood—the history (*itihās*) of this ritual, the narrator slyly remarks, may have been “unknown to the author of the [*padmā*]purāṇ [or *manasā maṅgal*], but it is not unknown to the women of Mālōpārā”

⁷¹ Their lost opportunity for intimacy could stand for the ties between the Muslim farming community and the low-caste Hindu fishing community, shown in the novel through friendly encounters between men and described as indestructible, but threatened by Partition violence at the time of writing.

⁷² The *charā* or folk rhyme has a long and rich history in spoken and written Bengali. Suhridkumar Bhoumik argues that the typical *charā* meter originated in the indigenous Kol-Austrian languages of the region (Bhoumik 1999). When the notion of folklore as an object of conservation and analysis was introduced in the colonial period, large numbers of *charā* were collected from oral sources and put down in print, with practices of transcription and “translation” into standard language as well as identification of regional origin varying across collections. With the explosion of print in colonial Calcutta, the *charā* form not only made it into print but also served as a suitable form for exhibiting and passing on new knowledge: gentlemen would show off their English by competing as to who could rattle off more English words in the form of a *charā*. Eminent literary figures such as Rabindranath Tagore, “nonsense” poet par excellence Sukumar Ray, and others wrote extensively in *charā* meter and form.

⁷³ Known by various names in different regions of Bengal, riddles (*heyāli*, *dhāndhā*, *śilōk*, or *bhāṅgāni*) were an integral part of rural social, intellectual, and cultural life, as discussed here in relation to the novel. As with *charā*, proverbs, and other folkloric forms, despite their shared presence across regional boundaries, the linguistic particularity of *śilōk* is important as it holds not only the stylistic qualities of oral performance but also regional, local, and microlocal knowledges related to flora, fauna, the edible, the medicinal, livelihood, sociality, sexuality, and myriad other practices and ideologies. As Mani Mandal comments in the introduction to his collection of Barisali *bhāṅgāni* (*Bhanganī, barisaler gramīn jibane (Riddles in rural Barisal life)*, Kolkata: Silabhana Publications, 1983), rendering them in *kolkātāiyā* (East Bengali word for Calcutta dialect) would “break their back” and take all the fun out of them.

(244). This “meaningless” ritual, highly amusing to Ananta, reminds Udaytārā of her real wedding long ago, making her laugh, and her new “wife’s” story about her wedding in childhood ends in an exchange that reveals one of Udaytārā’s hidden sorrows: her childlessness, which the other woman claims is why she still feels young (at twenty-one!), but is nevertheless an unfulfilled desire that explains the intensity of her caring for, and jealousy over, Ananta. In a fascinating moment, Udaytārā sums up the ephemerality of verbal art and the performativity that nevertheless allows it to make a significant impression: listening to the songs sung by competitors in a boat race, Udaytārā suddenly laughs at the thought that none of these songs, good or bad, leaves any trace on the surface of the water—but they draw her attention to the “real thing” (*āsal kathā*), which is human affection in the form of puppy love between Ananta and a local girl, Anantabālā. Udaytārā’s narrative demonstrates the empathetic and performative power of both ritual and improvisational elements of language, embedded in concentric microlocal, local, and regional spheres of belonging.

The *manasā maṅgal*, another story of the journey,⁷⁴ enters with Udaytārā and accompanies Ananta on the first steps of his journey into the wider world. Udaytārā is not personally associated with any figure from the *manasā maṅgal* as Anantar Mā is with Radha—in fact, it is the widowed Bāsantī who protests the untimely death of her husband and whom the narrator suggests is “adrift on the great current of time,” but unlike Bēhulā, no gods await her to restore her husband to life. However, Udaytārā earns Ananta’s respect with her knowledge of the narrative and it is while living with her in her brother’s home that he is first fully caught up in the cultural forms to which he had earlier been only a spectator. Significantly, it is at this same place and time when he first gains access to literate education, signaled by Udaytārā’s comment on Lakhāi Pandit and enabled by a local *sādhubābājī* (ascetic). When Ananta arrives in Nabinagar, it is monsoon, the season for readings and songs from the *padmāpurāṇ* (a late 15th century *manasā maṅgal kābya* by Bijoy Gupta). Udaytārā’s brother Banamali is the town’s best exponent of *padmāpurāṇ gān*. The *sādhubābājī* reads aloud from the manuscript,⁷⁵ pausing to ask Banamali and his backup singers (*dōhār*) to sing the type of song (*lācāri* or *dīśā*) that matches the meter of the upcoming section of the narrative.⁷⁶ Among the backup singers, only Ananta, whom the

⁷⁴ Multiple journeys, with the extraordinary journey of Bēhulā, the temporarily widowed wife of Lakhindar (Lakhāi), overshadowing the routine if eventful trip of her father-in-law, Cāñd *sadāgar* (“merchant”).

⁷⁵ The practice of reading text aloud for a non-literate audience (regardless of age) is not only relevant to caste-based practices around manuscript. It continued well into the era of print and even up to the present day, bridging the literacy gap that still yawns despite the democratization associated with print and public education. The publications of colonial Calcutta’s Battala (the hub of cheap vernacular publishing) were often read aloud in the open air to nonliterate audiences. There is a large literature on Battala: see Sukumar Sen, *Battalar chhapa o chhobi (Battala printing and pictures)*, Kolkata: Ananda, 1989; Banerjee 1989; Sripantha 1996 and 1997; Ghosh 2006; Bhadra 2006.

⁷⁶ This alternation of meters for the narrative and lyrical sections of a sung or sing-songed verse composition has a long history. Thibaut d’Hubert notes this practice in the *pāñcālī* compositions of Alaol, a Bengali court poet in the kingdom of Arakan (“Patterns of Composition in the Seventeenth-Century Bengali Literature of Arakan,” *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*, ed. Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler Schofield, Open Book Publishers 2015, 423-444). Works from the early days of Bengali prose and print culture, such as Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay’s *nakṣā* (satirical sketches) *Nababābu bilās* and *Nababibi bilās*, alternated contemporary prose, *gadya-chanda* (prose meter) and *payār*, a meter used ubiquitously for narrative segments in Bengali verse narrative forms such as *pāñcālī*, *maṅgalkābya*,

sādhubābājī initially mistakes for an avatar of Chaitanya, is able to carry the tune (242). Impressed, the *sādhubābājī* suggests that he should go to school (245). The boy's aptitude for a form in which oral art and literate skill are complementary and interdependent, but which reinforces inequality of access to literacy, nevertheless provides his point of entry to literacy. The novel's incorporation of other narrative forms perhaps acknowledges this debt. But at the same time, the technology of writing makes an impression socially, intellectually, and sensually. Ananta takes up the rare opportunity to pursue an education and goes to the city, meeting with continued caste prejudice and feeling the pull of the community he left behind, which brings him back to his home village on the premise of famine relief work. The first part of this narrative has some resemblance to the Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's classic *Pathēr Pāñcālī*, in which an impoverished rural Brahmin boy's thirst for knowledge brings him to the big city and turns him into a writer. The obvious difference is that Ananta is not a Brahmin, with hereditary access to scripture and by extension, all written Knowledge, but a Malo with other, unwritten knowledges at his fingertips and at the tip of his tongue, among them the knowledge of the social power of writing usually denied to his community. Ananta's initial fascination with the form, combinations and permutations of the letters and the intellectual and sensual stimulation of learning to write them carry two kinds of excitement: that of participating in a new form of play, which has its particular beauties and challenges just like each of the familiar oral forms, and that of touching and manipulating something powerful, but formerly out of reach.⁷⁷ Yet when Ananta is fully a part of the literate world, a university student and budding writer, it is the community that recedes out of reach, due not only to his diverging path but also to its disintegration under the combined forces of environmental, social, and political change.

Advaita is remembered not only for *Titās*, but also for his massive, thoughtfully accumulated collection of books.⁷⁸ It is said that the only luxury Advaita permitted himself was buying books, the rest of his income as a journalist going, after subsistence needs, to various relatives in the village. This luxury—what Jibanananda called *bilās*—is a necessary excess, existing also in oral forms: for instance, the Malos' splurging on four nights of *jātrā* (musical theater) and four nights of *kabi* (sung poetic competition), an expense equivalent to that of opening a community school.⁷⁹ In fact, more than the work of this working

srikrīṣṇakīrtan, etc. and frequently cited as differing from rhythmic prose only by the absence of the *bhābjati* (sense-pause), with lyrical meters such as *tripadi*, etc.

⁷⁷ Incidentally, Advaita lost the manuscript of *Titās* halfway through and had to start again from scratch. The sensual-intellectual pleasures of writing and reading, and their pretense to eternity, are complemented by the materiality of manuscript and book, cheerfully consumed by fire, water, and insects. The quintessential text on this theme is Jibanananda Das's *Kārubāsanā*, briefly discussed in x section. It also comes up in Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's *Hāṁsuli bāñkēr upakathā*, discussed in the next section.

⁷⁸ Chaturtha Duniya's special issue on Advaita Mallabarman contains a partial list of the books donated to the Rammohan Library. Among them are works in Bangla on China, Russia, ancient Greece, ancient and contemporary India (including historian "Kālpēñcā" or Binoy Ghosh's *Kolkātā kālcār (Culture of Kolkata)* and in English on various topics in anthropology, literature, and politics).

⁷⁹ A Malo and a Muslim farmer in conversation: "Aren't you going to sing *jāri* [songs on the martyrdom of Hussain, sung in the month of Muharram]?" "No, we held back this time. The way the paddy's ripening, who has time to go around looking for a *jāri* singer?" "..." Aren't you going to have singing [for Kalipuja]?" "Yes, eight *pālās*. Four *jātrā* and four *kabi*." "Ei-ght *pālās*? If they used that money to open a school in Mālōpārā." "School! The Malos are dying with joy, they'll open a school!" "Look *mātabbar*, I never learned so much as *ka*

community, its play preoccupies the narrative and heightens the poignancy of its remembering: a chapter called “birth, death, wedding” (*janma mrityu bibāha*) gives a precise accounting of expenditures, monetary, energetic, and emotional, on these events, while another, “red boat” (*rāñā nāō*) explores in detail the collective artisanal and competitive pleasures of building and racing a handcrafted boat.⁸⁰ Yet these amusements and festivities, signs of a healthy community and identity, are distinguished by the narrator from the tainted pleasures associated with the uppercaste *jātrāwālās*: charmed by their light tunes and novel styles, the Malo women’s indulgence in “luxury” and ends in hunger and generalized impotence. The excesses of celebration, lament, ritual, performance, and handicraft are tied to a life cycle that is itself full of creative excesses.

Upakathā, upanyās, itihās (folktale, novel, history):
Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay’s Hāṃsuli Bāñkēr Upakathā

Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay’s *Hāṃsuli Bāñkēr Upakathā* (1951) emphatically directs attention to dialect through descriptive and translational strategies that call out the assumptions built into the conventional use of dialect in literature and into *calit bhāṣā* as the emergent literary standard. This linguistic obsession is situated in a conversation between *upakathā* (folktale), *upanyās* (novel), and *itihās* (history) as forms of remembering, recording, and representing communities.⁸¹ The narrative voice performs ethnography of the Kāhār community in Birbhum district in the Paschim (Western) Rarh region of West Bengal, using *calit bhāṣā* to describe, comment on, and translate their dialect as part of a holistic engagement with their lifeworld.⁸² The dialect of Paschim Rarh is

kha. But I have some sense now of what kind of thing ‘black letters’ are. The library we’ve opened next to the mosque, when I go by it in the afternoon I stand there, they read, it’s like honey to my ears.” “Bāhārullā bhāi, if you say the right thing, the Malos want to kick you out. That’s why I left the village and went to live somewhere else.” (126) For a study of *jāri*, see Ratna Rashid, *Jāri jāñg mōrśiyā*, Kolkata: Loksamskriti o Ādibāsī Samskriti Kendra, 2008.

⁸⁰ In an afterword to her English translation of *Titās*, Kalpana Bardhan suggests that the dependable Titash may have afforded the Malo community more opportunity for leisure and pleasure activities than other working communities in harsher environments, making the rich culture appreciated in the novel not only unique, but a genuine rarity (K. Bardhan 1993). By this reading, Manik’s fishermen have a real cultural handicap due to living on the huge, unpredictable Padma. While the relationships between communities and the rivers that support them, and between environmental and cultural diversity, are not to be underestimated, I would argue in line with my reading of Manik that the luxury of creative expression is an basic one and cannot be quantitatively or qualitatively compared.

⁸¹ I take exception to Benjamin Baer’s characterization of the novel as an “experiment in how to do a novel in India” (Baer 2011). The novel was well established in India and in Bangla by this time, so Tarashankar’s experiments have little to do with how to translate a foreign form into a local idiom. Rather, they represent an accomplished novelist’s explorations of the form’s heteroglossic and narrative possibilities. As for “India,” while Tarashankar’s project could be seen as an attempt to coopt a marginalized community into the “nation,” *Hāṃsuli* is thoroughly grounded in a deep ethnographic engagement in a time of nationalist struggle, so despite its own tensions the novel must be acknowledged as questioning the limitations of nationalist concepts of “India,” “Bengal,” and “Bangla.” I take up this theme in the next chapter in my discussion of Bauri poets from the same region.

⁸² Tarashankar was born in Labpur, Birbhum and did extensive fieldwork in the villages of the district. The Paschim Rarh region is home to an impressive number of major figures and works of premodern and modern literature, including Rabindranath Tagore, whose ashram and university at Shantiniketan (near Bolpur, relatively close to Labpur), is a cultural landmark. Tagore promoted an education integrated with the

relatively close to spoken *calit bhāṣā* as compared to the dialects of East Bengal, for example, and as such does not present an immediate barrier to understanding; in fact, the differences between the dialect and the standard as used in the novel are almost exclusively phonetic, so its untranslatability become clear only in the attempt to know more deeply the lifeworld that sustains it.⁸³ The novel's enregisterment⁸⁴ of specific

environment and made efforts at rural development in the surrounding areas—see Dikshit Sinha, *Rabindranath pallipunargathan prayas (Rabindranath's effort for rural reconstruction)*, Kolkata: Paschimbanga Bangla Akademi, 2011. However, these efforts were “holistic” in the humanist sense of developing the mind, body, and spirit; while Tagore was a patron of and inspired by folk arts such as *bāul* songs and the work of contemporary artists from underprivileged backgrounds, such as sculptor Ramkinkar Baij, he did not so much seek a holistic understanding, in the ethnographic sense, of the communities that produced these arts, but distilled the elements most meaningful for him in his own work. Andrew Sartori describes Tagore's “campaign” for *saṁskṛiti*, “purification, the extraction of man's spiritual self from the phenomenal attachments of the grossly material” as opposed to *kriṣṭi*, “tied...to the practice of tilling the soil, a mundane association at profound odds with the rarified significance of culture in its higher sense,” as the Bengali translation of culture, understood as “[t]he human aspiration to free self-cultivation” (Sartori 2008, 3). I am not sure these associations can be so neatly separated even in Tagore's case, but in the case of Tarashankar, culture is closely tied to cultivation of the soil, the self, and the community—the missing term in Sartori's binary, as in anthropologist Anand Pandian's study of another Criminal Tribe, the Kallars (*Crooked Stalks: Cultivating Virtue in South India*, Duke University Press, 2009). While Pandian's ethnography of the Kallars provides interesting points of comparison with Tarashankar's portrayal of the Kāhārs, as noted below, its focus on the binary of the moral and the material takes for granted something the construction and continual reconstruction of which *Hāṁsuli* directly explores: the community itself.

⁸³ I question Baer's assumption that the Kāhār dialect is a tribal-Bangla “creole” and that the novel's translational devices are intended to highlight this “creolity.” This assumption, which he inherits from Gayatri Spivak's work (on Mahasweta Devi and Bangla literacy projects in tribal communities), does not seem to come out of a linguistic or a sociohistorical engagement, but is a direct theoretical borrowing from Edouard Glissant. As I have argued earlier, without disputing the value of Glissant's work in this context, it is not “creolity” but “open relation” and the continual mingling of mutually opaque forms that demands recognition, a point that, I argue here, *Hāṁsuli* makes in its own way. Linguistically, several features are enregistered in the novel as belonging specifically to the Kāhār dialect, which is not shared with local uppercaste speakers (who speak standard Bangla); we are given no sample of the speech of other low-caste and tribal communities with which to compare, though several such communities are mentioned in the novel. However, the majority of the Kāhār usages highlighted in the text are simply variant pronunciations, not grammatical features that could indicate the type of language mixture referred to as a “creole.” These variant pronunciations, including the initial *r* discussed below, also appear in folklore and linguistic studies of other communities in the Paschim Rarh region, while it is generally held that regional dialectal features tend to be exhibited more by the lower-caste and minority speakers that form the majority of the region's population than by upper-caste speakers, who have more access to education and media in the standard language. Sociohistorically, the Kāhārs are represented in the novel as a low-caste, exclusively Bangla-speaking community, designated by the colonial government as a Criminal Tribe: in other words, their identity is constructed in the liminal space between caste and tribe. Baer suggests that the *ādibāsīs* have been subject to a kind of multiple colonization—by the Aryans, the caste Hindus, and the British—resulting in the “creolity” of their language. Although the long-ongoing process of integration of tribal groups into the lower rungs of the caste system makes it possible to argue that their variety of Bangla has tribal features, this argument would have to be extended to all varieties of Bangla, standard and dialectal, as has been done by Suhriddkumar Bhoumik (Bhoumik 1999).

⁸⁴ The concept of enregisterment, developed by linguist Asif Agha (“The social life of a cultural value,” *Language and Communication* 23: 231-273, 2003), refers to the process by which a given feature becomes associated with a social identity, such as a region or social group. In most cases, this leads to a codification of certain features as belonging to that group of speakers, but in performance, enregisterment can also be multivalent, allowing features to be associated with more than one identity (see Barbara Johnstone, “Dialect Enregisterment in Performance,” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 0:00, 2011: 1-23). Here, the initial *r* is clearly

features of the Kāhār dialect and its insistent translation of dialect words and orthographies with the word *arthāt* (“meaning..., that is...”) seem determined to draw attention to a specificity and opacity that might otherwise be overlooked by a standard-speaking reader accustomed to the conventional format of narration=standard (*sādhū* or *calit*), dialogue=dialect. The handiest example is the word on which much of the narrative hinges: *ong*, the Kāhār pronunciation of *rong* (color, paint, exaggeration, sexual passion, love), exhibiting the typical dropping of *r* in the initial position.⁸⁵ This is the feature most strongly enregistered as belonging to the Kāhār dialect, although it is also found in folklore texts from the region;⁸⁶ other features, such as the frequent switching of initial *n* and *l*, often appear in single quotes but are common to many Bengali dialects within and outside the region. What might seem to be exaggeration in the emphasis on linguistic difference, and, more problematically, on women’s sexuality in Kāhārpara,⁸⁷ is part of an effort to question the assumed accessibility on the one hand, and the ambiguous distance on the other, of the subaltern and the dialectal to the mainstream and the standard. In other words, *ong* is more than “local color;” it leads to an exploration of the entanglements of liminality, intelligibility, form, and agency in the construction of memory. Within the forward-looking authorial narrative of Kāhārpara’s struggle to adapt itself to the dominant discourses of modernity without losing its integrity as a community—the ostensible subject of the novel (*upanyās*)—the tale (*upakathā*) of Kāhārpara told by the old

attached to the Kāhārs as a particular social/ethnic group, but taken as a whole, the use of dialect in the novel ascribes to the Kāhārs an intersectional identity, highlighting at various moments ethnicity (in the designation as a Criminal Tribe), caste (in relations with uppercastes in Bāṁśbādi and Cannanpur), class (in the discourse of subalternity that underpins the narrative), occupation (in relation to other local low-caste and tribal groups and within the Kāhārs between the *ātpourēs* and the *bēhārās*), locality (in the constant evocation of the Kōpāi, the *hāṁsuli*-shaped river bend, and Bāṁśbādi’s bamboo groves), and gender (in the practice of verbal art forms).

⁸⁵ “The people here, that is, the people of Hāṁsuli Bend, call love between men and women ‘*rong*.’ Not *rong*—they say ‘*ong*’. For ‘*Rām*’ they say ‘*ām*’ [which happens to mean mango], for *Rajani* they say ‘*ajuni*’, for *ritkaran* they say ‘*itkaran*’, for *rātbirēt* they say ‘*ātbirēt*’. Meaning [*arthāt*], if there is a *ra* at the beginning they turn the *ra* into an *a*. It’s not that the sound won’t roll off their tongues otherwise. In the middle of a word they pronounce *ra* splendidly. If there is love between a man and a woman, they say—*ong lāgāyēchē du’janātē* [the two of them have painted each other]. It’s *rong* all right. Deep red *rong*” (14).

The narrator omits to mention that the missing initial *r* shows up in words that do not have it in standard Bangla. As this pattern is like the Cockney dropped *h*, Baer has chosen to translate *ong* as “eat,” which, although it has a partially comparable semantic range, misses the philosophical dimension of *rong*, not to mention the unfortunate aural/visual similarity to “eat.”

⁸⁶ For instance, the additional initial *r* appears in a *gītikā* (ballad) called “Bārūni” by one Nasiba Bibi, a Muslim woman from Bardhaman district, neighboring Birbhum (Muhammad Ayub Hosen, ed. *Pascimbanga gītika* (*Ballads of West Bengal*), Siuri, Birbhum: Rarh, 2012).

⁸⁷ There is some romantic hyperbole in the narrator’s description of the Kāhār girls’ sexual freedom and passion, likened to the Kōpāi river in flood, and such passions play important side parts in the central drama enacted between the conservative village headman Banwārī and the young man Karālī, who practically forces the community to accept the discourse and promise of modernity. The same narrative, however, demonstrates with ethnographic detail that sexuality in Kāhārpara does not exist in some primordial state but is simply governed by values and practices differing from the *bhadralōk* norm. These values and practices are threatened by the availability (in the cases cited, not forced, but psychologically imposed) of Kāhār women’s bodies to colonial and local masters and even railway workers, sometimes manifest in the color of their children’s skin. The trope of miscegenation, which appears in Padma as an indication of physical and psychological vulnerability of the community and in Titash as a threat to its integrity, here has to do also with the problem of subaltern intelligibility.

village woman Sucāṅḍ calls on the community to look back.⁸⁸ Not, that is, at some mythical origin, but at the time when the Kāhārs first came to Bāṁśbādi village, transplanted there from some unknown place by the British owners of an indigo plantation, for whom they worked as guards (*aṣṭaprahari*) and as *pālki*-bearers (*bēhārā*), splitting into two groups accordingly (the *āṭpourē kāhārs* and the *bēhārā kāhārs*), and when the plantation's *sāhēb-mēm* (foreign master and mistress) were drowned in a great flood and replaced by the Chaudhuris (the family of a Bengali *nāyēb* or colonial administrator and rent-collector) as “benefactors” of the Kāhārs. It is the narrator who imparts primordality to the Kāhārs.⁸⁹ Yet this same narrator supplements Sucāṅḍ's account, the texture of which in this instance is oral-historical, despite mythical tinges, with information from documents in the Chaudhuris' possession.⁹⁰ At the end of the novel, the tale is subsumed, not in the novel, but in history (*itihās*).⁹¹ Sucāṅḍ, lamenting the end of the tale, which has no new tellers willing to commit it to memory, requests the novelist to record it in writing. In Baer's translation:

‘S an ‘eart thing, ya know—keep it in yer ‘ead, lice’ll eat it; bury it in earth, termites’ll geddit; ‘old it in yer ‘and an’ yer nails’ll mark it, or sweat stains; so I’ve ‘eld it in me ‘eart. If ya keep an ‘eart thing in the ‘eart—it stays there. None took this un, nor kept it. This tale’s gonna end wi’ me, yeh. But if ya can, keep it in writin’” (Baer 2011, 372).

The proper place for the tale is *mon* (heart, mind, memory); the first phrase after the dash should thus read “keep it *on* your head,” as the *māthā* or “head” here is not “mind” as opposed to “heart” (*māthā* and *mon* can be used interchangeably, as in *monē rēkhō/māthāy rēkhō* “keep in mind,” the second option having perhaps more of a warning tone), nor even the figurative head as in *māthāy rākhā* “to treat with care and respect,” but the physical head, which might bear the material (written) text, so easily damaged by sweaty hands, sharp nails, and hungry termites.⁹² Yet in the absence of practitioners of community

⁸⁸ Sucāṅḍ's role as storyteller is complemented by Pāgol (Madman) Kāhār, a wandering singer, and Nasudidi, the village transvestite dancer, the three of them integral to any celebration or performance of mourning, and by Banwārī, the village headman, as conservators of the community's cultural memory.

⁸⁹ Baer links the aesthetic tension in the novel between the evocation of the primordial and the historical to “primitivist modernisms,” citing art historian Partha Mitter's work. Baer rightly notes the fascination of modern Bengali writers, artists, and filmmakers with the aboriginal, but does not explore it further. I take up this question in chapter 2.

⁹⁰ Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Schulman, and Sanjay Subramaniam's *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600-1800*, Delhi: Permanent Black: 2001 argues that “history” in premodern South India is not limited to a particular genre, but would have been recognizable as a “texture” to the contemporary native speaker, pointing back to a long line of inquiries into history and narrativity, representation, and the construction of “truth” and “fact”—see for example White 1980, Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946, 2003). Though Rao et al.'s argument is problematic on many levels, the notion of “texture” is helpful, if often difficult to determine. In this case, it is *Hāṁsulī*'s narrator who seems to identify the historical “texture” of Sucāṅḍ's narrative even as he locates it in the folktale genre and in a mythical mode of understanding and lets us experience it as performance.

⁹¹ “The tale's Kōpāi [local river] merges into history's Ganges” (373).

⁹² This memory differs from “memorization” (implicitly, from text): “by heart” in Bangla is *mukhastha* or *kaṅthastha*, “placed in the mouth” or “placed in the throat,” associated not with the mind but with the muscle memory of the speech organs. Though transmission of memory “from mouth to mouth” (*muhkē mukhē*) also relies on formal and physical repetition, the emphasis here is on the capacity of *mon* to hold and care for the thing remembered (*monēr jinis*, a thing of the heart). There is no lack of mouths to repeat the tale, but none of them cares to do so.

memory, Sucāñd still entrusts the tale to writing, recognizing that the life of the written word exceeds the material life of text in a textual community, as the life of the remembered word does the life of the rememberer in a living speech community, and further, that the conditions of possibility of a community of texts, even texts that transcribe oral tales, are more favorable at this time than those of a community of storytellers.

Kāhārpārā's women, including the transgender Nasudidi, bear both the brunt of subalternity and the burden of community-building through the construction of narrative in prosaic and poetic forms. Women's bodies bear the marks of white and uppercaste transgressions (fair-skinned children) or are markedly absent from Kāhārpārā (and for hire in Channanpur), but they hold the community's most valued bodies of knowledge, its (hi)story and its performing arts. Sucāñd's function as vessel of collective memory extends beyond her recounting of the community's "tale" to the twin arts of lament and abuse. She traces the practice of lament to the story of an old woman like herself, the village grief specialist, who cried for everyone, human and animal.⁹³ In Kāhārpārā, as in *Padmā's jēlēpārā*, deaths are too many to be accounted for; when the bailiff comes around with the birth and death register, the Kāhārs don't bother to count the children who have died. But while the women of *jēlēpārā* only wail melodically, the women of Kāhārpārā, at least the older generation, engage in elaborate performances of mourning not only immediately after a death, but also on all festive occasions, honoring their forefathers' call to remember those who are gone on days of celebration. Sucāñd and another Kāhār woman, Noyānēr Mā (Noyān's mother), take a wedding and a *pūjō* (ritual celebration) as opportunities to mourn past and recent deaths. These laments have a cathartic function, releasing grief and bitterness and restoring calm and peace to the community. If Sucāñd's frenzy of wailing for long-dead relations over a little picnic of alcohol, puffed rice, and chilies seems comically excessive, the other woman's tears for her dead son Noyān "put the Kāhārs to shame" and wash all the bitterness from her tongue (81, 254). The quoted laments give us a sense of the poetics of mourning, appearing in a highly alliterative, repetitive, onomatopoetic prose in the form of an address, either generalized or directed personally to the deceased.⁹⁴ For instance, the laments of Sucāñd and Nasudidi for the headman's first wife Gōpālibālā:

⁹³ "In the tale of that village—in the tale of penance from so long ago, it's said, 'In the village there was a childless old woman, she did penance, she did her duty, sorrowing in the village's sorrow was her only joy. If she couldn't cry for anyone, the old woman wandered around in search of animals and birds to cry for. On a morning like this she sat and thought to herself... "My heart tells me to cry, my soul can't be satisfied without crying, an elephant is dying in the big forest, let me go put my arms around his neck and cry."' Old Sucāñd of Hāñsuli Bend is that same old woman, it seems" (131).

⁹⁴ These laments share many features with Tamil women's *oppu* or *oppāri* (elegies), which appear in novels by "dialect" writers such as Imaiyam, Kanmani Gunasekaran, and Tamilselvi, as explored in chapter 3. *Hāñsuli's* portrayal of lament strikingly resembles the description of *oppu* in Anand Pandian's study of the Kallars of Tamil Nadu: as poetic performance, as a litany of personal sorrows recited in an act of collective grief, and as a dying custom. Specific features found in both *Hāñsuli* and the *oppu* Pandian observed include a "threefold resemblance" of form, content, and imagery, personal address, lack of restraint, a pattern of crescendo and calming, and contagion among the women of the community. Pandian interprets this practice as seeking to connect self and other, individual and collective, immediate dead and history of loss, lost and remaining, past and present through an allegorical rather than identifying relation of sympathy. Finally, Sucāñd shares with the Kallar women a concern that the custom is dying, and that girls today are too composed and indifferent to death (Pandian 2009, 207-219).

kiser pāp, kiser aparādh! kiser śāp, kiser śāpānto rē! punyabati bhāgyabati sinthēr sindur niyē bhorā bhorthi bhādor māse dyangdyangiyē cale gelo rē! hāste hāste cale gelo rē! cho-mās satin-kāñṭār dukh bhōg korle nā rē! ār āmi porē oilām rē!

(What sin, what crime! What curse, what dreadful curse! The virtuous, the fortunate, with *sindur* in the parting of her hair, the month of Bhador [harvest time] in full swing, she left joyfully [as if to the beat of a drum]! She left laughing! Not even for six months she bore the thorn of living with a co-wife! And I'm left behind!) (245)

āh—āh—hāy hāy gō! Gōpālikāki āmār māṭir mānuṣ, sōnār pitimē gō. mukhē jharto amitti, kathā śunlē porān jurāto, hātē chilo kōpāiyēr ṭhāṇḍā paraś, buliyē dilē ongo juriyē jeto! āh, kōthā geli mā gō—pārār nokkhī mā rē!

(ah—ah—*haay haay go!* My Gopali Auntie was a humble woman, a golden idol. Nectar flowed from her mouth, her words cooled the soul, in her hands was the cool touch of the Kōpāi, the stroke of her fingers soothed the limbs! Aah, where did you go, my mother—oh, Nokkhi [*<Lokkhi<Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune*] of the neighborhood!) (246)

(Note the same play on *sōnā* (gold) and *sōnā* (listen/hear) as in the “modern” (*ādhunik*) song quoted early in the chapter!) The same women who have the gift of lament are also skilled at *gāli* (abuse), meticulously cursing every part of their victim’s body. The narrator specifically comments on the “tight construction” (*bāñḍhuni*) of *gāli* as part of the Kāhār heritage of “quarrel-culture” (*kalaha-saṃskṛiti*) (62). If Sucāñḍ’s “tale” of Kāhārpara resembles an oral history, in which the narrator-cum-researcher presumes “fact” can teased out of “fiction” (ignoring the crucial narrative element in “history”), the form of remembering embodied in the lament and the curse shares with the novel form the centrality of synechdoche: simultaneous empathy for Gopali or Noyān and for all the dead of Kāhārpara, animosity towards an eye or a finger and towards a whole person and the whole complex of disturbing things they come to embody, understanding of Sucāñḍ-the-storyteller and of the life of oral narrative in the modern world.

Both (oral) prose (*kathā*) and poetic forms are integral and complementary elements in the performance of the narrative—in both Sucāñḍ’s telling and the novelist’s. The narrator claims: “Sucāñḍ tells the tale [*upakathā*] of Hāṃsuli Bend, Pāgol [“Crazy”]⁹⁵ sings Hāṃsuli Bend’s *charā-pāñcāli* [verse forms]” (198). Most of the songs (*gān*) attributed to Pāgol and Nasudidi fall into three categories: *charā* and *pāñcāli*, mentioned here, and *ghēntu gān*. *Charā*, which we encountered in *Titās* from the mouth of Udaytārā, is the most basic category of folk rhyme, with room for a huge body of authorless verses and for the practice of spontaneous oral composition; *pāñcāli* is a narrative form with a broadly devotional and/or didactic orientation, usually sung accompanied by gesture or, when written or printed, read out in a sing-song with a rocking motion.⁹⁶ Pāgol composes *charā*

⁹⁵ Pāgol Kāhār is a sometime resident of Kāhārpārā, who roams far and wide and shows up from time to time with a song on his lips. The novel nowhere refers to Pāgol as a *bāul*, but his portrayal as a wandering minstrel whose “madness” gifts him the ability to craft songs that touch deep chords in the community strongly resembles the figure of the *bāul*.

⁹⁶ The name, if nothing else, of this form is known outside Bengal primarily through Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s *Pather Pāñcāli* (usually translated as “Song of the Little Road”), made into the classic film by Satyajit Ray. Dashu Ray’s 19th century *pāñcāli* version of the Ramayana enjoyed immense popularity; Mandakranta Bose suggests the narrative is tailored for oral entertainment with its musicality, humor, and

on the headman's wedding and a death in the village, and those designated as songs of the "tale" of Kāhārpara seem to fall under the general *charā-pāñcālī* category. These forms are also key to the community's understanding of history: when the war begins to seriously impact Kāhārpara, the older Kāhārs get a hold on this issue through *charā* and *pāñcālī*. As the headman Banwārī discusses the war with Pagal and the rebellious young man Karali, Sucāñd suddenly speaks up, "War war! What war! Who knows?" When Karali explains it is a war between the "*sāyēb nōk* (Europeans)," Sucāñd dismisses this, "Nonsense. A war happened long ago. The *bargis* came. [(Marathi cavalry who raided Bengal regularly from about 1740-50); quoting an old *ghumpārāni charā* or lullaby] *Chēlē ghumalo pāṛā jurolo borgi ēlo dēsē* (My son is sleeping, the neighborhood is relieved, the *bargis* came into the country)" and she describes what she has heard of this war. Pāgol confuses this with the *saotal hangama* (Santhal rebellion, an uprising of the Santhal tribe against colonial and uppercaste oppression in 1855-6). He is then asked to sing *pāñcālī* on the mythological war between Rama and Ravana. The Kāhārs' rapt attention is broken by the sound of war planes flying over their heads. If the *charā* and *pāñcālī* forms enable an understanding of the present historical moment, in which mythological narrative provides the form and historical fragments embedded in the everyday serve as points of reference, then the songs referred to in the novel as *ghēñtu gān* offer a space for commentary. The *ghēñtu gān* are highly topical songs, sung predominantly in the month of *chaitra* (late spring). They relate current events and issues impacting the Kāhārs, including colonial infrastructure, industry, and the war machine.⁹⁷ In one passage, the image of the river and its *ghāṭ* are superimposed on the rail line and Channanpur station:

concise action ("Reinventing the Ramayana in Twentieth-Century Bengali Literature" in *The Ramayana Revisited*, New York: Oxford, 2004, 109), but in addition to public performance, housewives would read the printed text in the traditional manner, rocking gently to the singsong meter. Thibaut d'Hubert's article on the *pāñcālī* compositions of Alaol, a Bengali court-poet in the kingdom of Arakan (present-day Myanmar), stresses the importance of understanding verse narrative forms as compositions for performance. In bringing *pāñcālī* into the Indo-Persian *majlis* or gathering, he suggests, Alaol inclined toward textuality and at the same time emphasized the lyrical parts of the form, giving centrality to speech by inviting the audience to engage in metadiscourse (D'Hubert 2015, 425, 441). D'Hubert claims that early Bengali *pāñcālī* were not "ornate" like Sanskrit poetry but were heavily narrative and the aesthetic pleasure they provided came from the performance as a whole, with the figure of the performer as a vessel of inspiration rather than the figure of the poet as wordsmith. His conclusion that the story, then, took precedence over the "word" seems a bit hasty, however: while the words would and continue to vary from performance to performance, the vital role played by the particular language of each performance in its own milieu should not be dismissed, especially in the context of *pāñcālī*'s pan-regional presence. This point is perhaps easily missed when looking at the form from the perspective of a highly erudite poet who actively brought Sanskrit and Indo-Persian knowledges to bear on a regional tradition (as d'Hubert points out, unlike North and South Indian regional literatures, the aesthetics and prosody of premodern Bengali literature was largely autonomous from Sanskrit). The life of *pāñcālī*, alongside other ritual-domestic forms such as *bratakathā* (women's rites), in diverse localities where musicality, orality, and textuality were intertwined, together with the openness of premodern Bengali literary language to regional and dialectal ingressions suggests that not only in urbane, cosmopolitan contexts, but also in mundane, rural contexts, the locality and multivocality of the word should not be underestimated.

⁹⁷ In their topicality, these songs resemble *kabigān* or "poet's songs," in which a topic is debated in song by two competing poets. This form has a complex rururban history, emerging from a speculative rural past as an urban "folk" form, composed orally by primarily lower-caste poets at soirees (*āsar*) in the homes of the infamous *bābus* (nouveau riche) of the burgeoning colonial capital of Kolkata, and involving open critique of contemporary Kolkata society, including the *bābus* themselves; at this stage it became, and up to the present day in Bengali literary criticism still is, known as a scandalous and vulgar practice with little artistic merit,

The steam-engine came to Cannanpur. They laid an iron line...Cannanpur became a river-*ghāṭ* ('*ladī'r* [standard *nadīr*] *ghāṭ*). All the waves of the time of the world's breakdown come and break first on that Cannanpur. The *bābus* can embrace those waves. They're 'Bambhon' [Brahmins], they know how to read and write ('*nēkanpaṭhan*' [standard *lēkhāparā*]), god has installed Queen Lakshmi in their homes, by her grace when the waves come only the good bit gets in, just like the Kōpāi's floods bring gold-bearing earth onto the land of the fortunate. If that wave hits the Kāhārs' chests they are destroyed, just as the Kōpāi's floods just dump sand, sand and sand onto the land of the unfortunate...now a new wave has come—the wave of war! (147)

This passage, unattributed to any character, but rendered in the dialect, follows as an elaboration on one of Pāgol's *ghēṅṭu* songs, which reads:

Oh, the saheb built a road!/ah, in the end times!/in the course of time, overnight, the saheb built a road—/he made the engine go six month's distance in an instant/ the red-faced saheb came, with tawny eyes—/people flocked in from all over the world—/oh, the saheb built a road—/he took food out of the mouths of all the Kāhār clan/all the *bābus* left their *palkis* and got on the train! (145-6)

Looking at the *chaṛā*, *pāñcāli*, and *ghēṅṭu* songs together, the narrator's comment that they are "songs of the tale" makes sense: though they are performed as independent lyrics, without an extended narrative structure, the songs are fragments of the narrative which runs beneath the surface of life in the community.⁹⁸

though this is now being challenged primarily in English-language historical studies and to some extent in Bengali-language folklore studies. When its urban heyday ended, the form returned to its speculative rural roots and became widely popular particularly in the villages of Paschim Rarh and of certain regions of East Bengal, until its revival as a tool of political consciousness by working-class activist-poets in the industrial-suburban areas of Kolkata (Deepak Biswas, *Kabigān*, Kolkata: Loksamskriti o Adibasi Samskriti Kendra, 2004). The *kabi* form, composed orally or recorded longhand, has a counterpart in print known as *hētō boi* or "market books," the name deriving from the proverbial *hātē hāri bhāṅgā* ("to break a pot in the marketplace" or to publicly denounce a scandal), which in turn refers to an old practice of literally breaking a pot in the marketplace as a symbolic gesture accompanied by verbal denunciation. These chapbooks, sold by hawkers in suburban and rural areas, contained verse compositions by local poets on current local, regional, and national events, which, though sensational in style, showed a genuine critical and even activist spirit (Bireshwar Bandyopadhyay, *Hētō boi*, Kolkata: Loksamskriti o Adibasi Samskriti Kendra, 2006). Tarashankar wrote another novel called *Kabi* (Poet), the story of a *kabigān* champion from the Dom community, who, like the Kāhārs, were designated a "Criminal Tribe" by the colonial government. As Deepak Biswas points out, *kabigān* is privileged in that novel over *jhumur*, another widely popular song form perceived as plainly sexual, despite a substantial subgenre on the Radha-Krishna theme, without the social engagement of *kabi* (D. Biswas 2004, 29). This perception is due to *jhumur*'s association with performance by professional women dancers. The songs on the Kāhārs' *ong* in *Hāṁsuli* have affinities with *jhumur*. In *Hāṁsuli*, however, *ghēṅṭu*, *chaṛā-pāñcāli*, songs related to rituals, and *jhumur*-like love songs coexist without any apparent value judgment. We may note that the songs sung on festival occasions such as *nabānna* (the "new rice" or harvest festival), Bhanjo (Bhadu) *pūjā* and *gājon*, although "traditional" in form and language, are not divorced from the current context, whether there is a direct reference or simply a perceptive insertion of a particular "old" song at a given moment.

⁹⁸ If Bengali literary historians have seen dissociation from verse and mythology as the hallmarks of modern prose, Rosinka Chaudhuri, following Aniruddha Lahiri, suggests with reference to the short poems of Ishwar Gupta, designated as *chaṛā*, that the mark of modern poetry is a historicity that consists of an emphasis on

The multiple understandings of time running through the novel are closely tied to the question of agency. The *ghēntu* and *jhumur*-like songs suggest that the Kāhārs understand both the precarity of their community and its resilience in terms of play. The *ghēntu* songs' frequent mention of *kalikāl* (Kaliyuga, the dark age before the destruction and rebirth of the universe, understood as the present) places contemporary troubles in cyclical time, as part of the predicted "breakdown" of the world, though its disproportionate impact on the subaltern is keenly felt. They locate this cyclicity in the contemporary context of industry, represented by the workshop (*kārkhānā*) and its recycling function (*bhāṅgā-garā*, breaking and making): in the wake of the flood that destroys Kāhārpara, the itinerant "madman" Pāgol Kāhār retells Sucāñd's story of Hāmsuli Bend in song.

No need to cry, no need to cry
 Come see the Old Lord play, *rē bhāi!* (284) [...]
 He who makes also breaks, he who breaks also makes;—
 The workshop of making and breaking, come take a peek inside (286).

The *kārkhānā*, a word of Persian origin with connotations in colloquial Bengali of wondrous deeds and strange affairs (*kāṅḍo-kārkhānā*), connotes both to the industrial factory and the childlike play of the gods, here referred to as *khelā*, or play in the broadest sense; the more theological word *līlā* has a fatalistic, top-down connotation, positing humans as toys of the gods or human powers-that-be, while *khelā* is more inclusive, compared here to the tactile pleasure of a child making and smashing a sand-castle: *hātēr sukhē garlām, pāyēr sukhē bhāṅglām* "I made it in the joy of my hand, I broke it in the joy of my foot" (285). So, if the gods play with Kāhār lives, the Kāhārs are players in their own games too. In a passage on the conditions of possibility of moral life in Kāhārpara, the narrator posits *ong* as the only form of amusement available to the Kāhārs. The passage plays on the dialectal r-dropping as the narrator constructs the Kāhārs' cultivation of *bhadralōk* morality as thwarted by the environment. While the narrator's invocation of primordality suggests that he cannot quite shake the sense of transgression as something

the materiality of things in the present and a rejection of narrative (R. Chaudhuri, "Three Poets in Search of History: Calcutta, 1752-1859," in *Trans-colonial Modernities in South Asia*, ed. Michael S. Dodson and Brian A. Hatcher, New York: Routledge, 2012). While Chaudhuri is quick to point out the broad use of the word *charā*, associated with "children's rhymes," the "modern" features she discusses—materiality, historicity in the evocation of random, concrete presence, fragments of the past surfacing here and there—fit the "traditional" *charā* just as well. In fact, the choice of subjects for Gupta's poems may seem "random" and certainly everyday, but his approach is focused and sustained, isolating that particular object for the duration of the poem rather than letting various past and present things jostle together in the "nonsensical" flow of many folk rhymes; another *charā* poet, Sukumar Ray, pushed this nonsensicality to its highest point with the skillful imposition of a specious logic that is simultaneously a medium of humorous critique and a flow of pure sound, defying the project of reading for meaning. If the "traditional" *charā* is understood as scattered in both theme and delivery, but connected through generations, the *charā* Tarashankar puts in the mouth of Pagal Kāhār constructs a narrative that is fragmented, but has a subterranean continuity (*upakathā*, as Baer also points out in the introduction to his translation, can also mean "subnarrative"), not at all random or nonsensical but integrally connected to the Kāhārs' acute sense of the contemporary and continual reinterpretation of past narratives through oral intertextuality.

inherent and insurmountable in the Kāhārs, a Criminal Tribe whose self-reforms are never fully trusted, Sucāñd's quoted speech brings us promptly back to the cycle:

Sucāñd says—In those days people had such faith...[now]—that *ām* [Ram; with the dropped r, it can be read as “mango”] is no more, that Ayodhya is no more...*jemon kali temni cali* [loosely, ‘in Kaliyuga (the dark age preceding the destruction and rebirth of the universe), you do what you got to do’]... [Babathakur, the local deity] understands that other than the game of ‘*ong*’ the Kāhārs have nothing to amuse themselves with (181).

The play of *ong* is present, material, and ephemeral, but timeless by repetition, echoing again and again the love-play of Radha and Krishna in all its transgressive excess, recognized but never fully normalized. Thus, against the backdrop of the grand cycles of creation and destruction, the centrality of *ong* in Kāhār life and the ever-present story of Radha and Krishna highlight an intimately familiar cycle of love, separation, and reunion which is endlessly and irrepressibly fertile. But this mode of understanding does not simply translate social, economic, and historical realities into a comfortable fatalism. It is not for nothing that the last song in the novel is sung by the transgender Nasudidi and is an affirmation of the joy of dancing despite all inhibitions and prohibitions: new life shows itself not in the cry of a newborn, but in performance by the community's most liminal body; community is not spontaneously born out of an ideal domesticity, it is collectively enacted by diverse actors, including critics and misfits.

Chapter 3 Bhāṣābhāṣi, bāsābāsi: language and habitation in Bangla Dalit literature

The first chapter explored the streams of dialectal narrative crisscrossing the open fields and waters of the modernist canon. The present chapter approaches contested territory through a thicket of questions: in both Bengali and Tamil, “Literature” questions the premise and promise of “Dalit literature” and “Dalit literature” questions the hegemony of “Literary” aesthetics. The chapter explores the stakes and countours of language and habitation in Bangla Dalit literature, asserting the critical importance of place and community in the discourses of identity and representation.

Dalit literature in Bengal, though it claims at least a century-long history, took off as an organized movement under the Dalit label in response to the suicide of Chuni Kotal in 1992. Chuni Kotal was a young Lodha woman pursuing a degree in anthropology who faced relentless discrimination because of her ethnicity; the Lodhas are an indigenous people of western Bengal designated in colonial times as a “Criminal Tribe” (like the Kāhārs of Tarashankar’s novel). The Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha (Bengali Dalit Literary Association) initiated an ongoing series of Chuni Kotal memorial lectures and meetings in 1994.⁹⁹ They run a publishing house called Chaturtha Duniya or “The Fourth World.” In addition to literature, Dalit writers and researchers have been active in the fields of anthropology, where the received narrative of Bangla’s descent from Sanskrit language and Aryan culture faces a strong challenge from scholars of indigenous culture, primarily in West Bengal; and folklore, where the “folk” is tied a second, unsung Bengali “Renaissance” among the Scheduled Castes, primarily in East Bengal. The displacements of the Partition and the diffusion of caste politics into the dominant discourses of class and nation have deeply impacted the affects and structures of critique in Dalit literature.

Here we enter territory that demands considerable intimacy to approach, as the mapping of it from the point of view of the entity accepted as “Bangla” may not conform to older or more local mappings. The enormity of the difference Spivak senses between her own Bangla and that of the *ādibāsi* (indigenous) aspirants to literacy of whom she writes seems to have very much less to do with linguistic admixture, even in all its Glissantian resonance, than with social silencing, a problem at the heart of her own most celebrated work as well as of the indigenous and Dalit writing she has not explored, where regional dialect as well as indigenous languages have immense affective power and stake complex claims. This gap represents a missed opportunity for dialogue, as Spivak’s famous question “Can the Subaltern Speak?” has generated Dalit readings that, though they tend to miss the theoretical subtlety of the piece and the importance of her work in its own context, nonetheless offer food for thought: for example, Dalit critic Manohar Mouli Biswas objects “Yes, we do speak, and we speak in our own languages.” Leaving aside the two most obvious critiques of this position (regarding the equation of “Dalit” and “subaltern” and Spivak’s own rephrasing of her statement to emphasize the refusal to read, rather than the inability to speak), what are these languages? Following Spivak, Baer has designated as “creole” a literary representation of a socioregional dialect of Bangla, which raises another question: if we are to use the word “creole” at all, is not Bangla itself a creole? Linguists and

⁹⁹ Mahasweta Devi’s *Byadhkhanda* (*The Book of the Hunter*, 1994) centered on Chuni’s story.

folklorists, from Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay to Suhrid Kumar Bhoumik, have long pointed to the strong indigenous elements in the Bangla language generally, and as with most languages the origins and boundaries of “Bangla” are continually under construction.

The question of “experience,” almost unanimously invoked but little examined in discussions of Dalit literature, is closely entangled with that of representation. Some Dalit writers insist that they have a moral imperative to write as Dalits, about Dalits, and for Dalits, staging their literature of protest against the upper-caste literature of sympathy and/or advocacy represented, in the case of Bangla, by writers like Manik Bandopadhyay, Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, and Mahasweta Devi, even if many respect such writers as allies.¹⁰⁰ The mainstream Bengali literary establishment which accepted Advaita Mallabarman and other talented writers from marginalized communities into its fold on the basis of merit, without much acknowledgment of the barriers such writers may have overcome to realize their potential, remains hostile to the Dalit literature movement that claims them as predecessors, challenging its claim that literature can be divided on caste lines. In the case of Tamil, Dalit writing has gained ground more quickly, but initially faced a similar response, dismissed by established writers as “nothing but lamentations”—a comment that reveals ignorance not only of the diversity of Dalit writing, but also of the complexity of lamentation—and Dalit writers continue to be accused of masking their literary flaws behind their political stance. Allies of Dalit literature, on the other hand, often seem content with the mere presence of writers and characters from marginalized groups formerly un-, under-, or misrepresented in literature, and unwilling to push this literature to its fullest potential as a space of experimentation. In the interstices of this ideological contest, many questions remain to be asked about the forms, textures, and intertextual layers that articulate the relationship between language, subjectivity, and community in Dalit literature.

“Dalit” in Bengal names a coalition of regionally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse groups and cannot therefore simply be called “the majority;” nor is it simply a lot of “minorities” banding together.¹⁰¹ The discourse of Dalit consciousness in Bengal is irreducible to a pan-Indian or even pan-Bengali language of resistance to “caste oppression;” it is deeply entangled with regionally inflected discourses of the folk (*lōk*), the indigenous (*ādibāsī*), the refugee (*udbāstu* or *bāstuhārā*), and the common or working-class people (*gān*). The relationships between these discourses are complicated: the broad categories of “folk” and “common people” have space for multiple, overlapping and conflicting systems of value which Dalit writers work within and against; the distinction between “low-caste” and indigenous communities is often blurred, but the figures of the Dalit and the *ādibāsī* in literature are far from isomorphic; the figures of the indigenous and the refugee are diametrically opposed, and the intervening space between them is filled with many types of migrants: voluntary, forced, economic, ecological, and developmental.

¹⁰⁰ See for example Achintya Biswas, “Dalit sāhitya: śilpōpkaran ō nandantattva (Dalit literature: artistic development and aesthetics),” *Śatabarṣēr bānglā dalit sāhitya (100 years of Bangla dalit literature)*, ed. Manohar Mouli Biswas and Shyamal Pramanik, 44.

¹⁰¹ In the introduction to an anthology of Bangla Dalit short stories in English translation, the editors state that as “Dalit” is an umbrella term, “most of the minorities in the country are also Dalits” (Sankar Prasad Singha and Indranil Acharya, *Survival and Other Stories: Bangla Dalit Fiction in Translation*, Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2012, xxi).

These entanglements point ultimately to the inadequacy of caste as an analytical category despite its continued relevance as a frame of reference in political discourse. Most scholars have seen caste as an Indian social system of some antiquity, the modern form of which a) both British and Indian actors participated in shaping or b) the colonial administration drastically recast when it adopted anthropological knowledge as a tool of governance. Padmanabh Samarendra has argued that the category called “caste” is an invention of the colonial census, shaped by heterogeneous administrative and anthropological interests, which conflates and codifies in a linear hierarchy two independent indigenous concepts: *varṇa* (theoretically elaborated in the scriptures, but not empirically verifiable) and *jāti* (observable in social practice, but not at all congruent with the four-*varṇa* schema). *Jāti*, from a root meaning “birth,” can refer to many kinds of ethnic, social, religious/sectarian, regional, and gender groups as well as to “nation.”¹⁰² The most productive translation of *jāti* is thus not “caste” but “community,” although using this more positive-sounding alternative risks glossing over the history and present reality of *jāt-pāt* (discrimination, exploitation, and oppression based on *jāti*). The Dalit movement, despite being catalyzed by the colonial discourse of caste and often articulated with reference to both *varṇa* theory and the practice of *jāt-pāt*, actually resists reduction to a “caste”-based movement, as it has the potential to address *jāti* in the full range of its meaning—to confront the institutionalized oppression of communities defined heterogeneously on the basis of intersecting ethnic, social, religious/sectarian, gender, regional, and last but not least, national identities, and to cultivate these communities’ cultural and critical resources and coalition-building among them.

With this understanding in mind, the chapter tries to attune itself to the ideas of the folk, indigenous, refugee, and working-class constructed through dialect in Dalit texts. While some scholars have argued that the geographic concentration of all the major Scheduled Caste groups in Bengal, such as the Rajbanshis (North Bengal), Namashudras (southeast Bengal), and Poundras (South Bengal), indicates indigenous background, the discourse of indigeneity emerges most strongly in the western Rarh region of West Bengal, particularly regarding the Bauris, Santhals, and Mundas. Dalit and non-Dalit scholars have claimed the Rarh dialect as no less than the foundation of the Bengali language.¹⁰³ The figure of the East Bengali refugee emerges most clearly in Dalit prose, in which the *bāṅgāl* dialects bring it into sharp relief. The discourse of the “folk,” shared by all regions of undivided Bengal, takes on a special valence in the Dalit context in the southern border regions of East Bengal, which produced the Namashudra and Matua movements. The Matua movement, now represented by a political party, began as a social and religious movement spread through a body of oral and written “folk” literature known as *matuā sāhitya*. This literature, profoundly disrupted by the Partition, nevertheless continued to serve as a medium of education and progressive politics in rural areas. Yet “folk” literature is not simply a rural phenomenon but has complex ties with literature “of the people,” or the urban proletariat. As East-West constructions dominate discourses of Bengali cultural identity, it is important not to overlook the North and South: in North Bengal, the Rajbanshi

¹⁰² “Anthropological Knowledge and Statistical Frame: Caste in the Census in Colonial India,” in *Caste in Modern India: A Reader*, eds. Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2014, 255-296.

¹⁰³ See Sunil Kumar Das, *Rarh bhasha utsa sandhane (In search of the source of Rarh language)*, Kolkata: Chaturtha Duniya, 2004; Bhoumik 1999.

movement began as a *jāti*-based movement before Partition, then turned into a culture-based separatist movement after Partition due to the dominance of refugees from East Bengal; this involved consolidating multiple *jāti* on the one hand, and on the other, establishing Kamtapuri as a separate language with its own literary history.¹⁰⁴ And finally, the micro-region of South 24 Parganas has the distinction of supplying the Kolkata domestic servant pipeline; the language of servitude invoked by writers from this region as well as other regions of West and East Bengal provides a platform for critique of the nation through the question of intelligibility. Women's voices play a key role throughout these discourses, often figuring as givers of language and as storytellers.

This chapter attempts to understand the role of regional language in approaching the intersections of these discourses through Dalit texts using dialect, including Bauri poetry of western Rarh and prose fiction centered on East Bengali refugees. In these texts, a sense of the performativity of language is linked to dwelling and local ecologies in terms of indigeneity, migrancy, and refugee resettlement. Regional language and forms of verbal art offer resources for critique of *jāti* on the levels of "caste," class, and nation thanks to the double-edged sword of intelligibility, much-disparaged carnivalesque elements (*khisti-khēur*), and highly-valued, if contested, legacies of *bhakti*-inflected and class-based progressive politics, as evident in the case of *kabigān* (poet's songs). I contend that, in place of the highly reductive and content-based category of "experience," a theory of intimacy—to begin with, in Bangla, the discourse of *āpon-por* (one's own and the other)—and an exploration of its forms could be a more productive beginning to thinking through the problems and possibilities of Dalit literature.

Lōkkaṅṭho (the voice of the folk)

From the standpoint of standard Bengali literary history, the rural "folk" has held sway over the Bengali literary and cultural imagination practically from birth. According to the received narrative, the Sanskrit poet Jayadeva paved the way for Bangla poetry by setting the minor narrative of Radha and Krishna squarely in rural Bengal and drawing on Bengali folk meters to make a new poetic idiom in the *Gītāgobinda*. The 17th century poet Ray Shekhar (Daibakinandan Sinha), educated in Sanskrit but known for Bengali lyric and narrative poems (*kāhini-kābya*) on Krishnalila, wrote of his own poem: *laukik boliyā nā kariha upahāse/ laukik mantrē ki sāpēr biṣ nāsē//* (Don't laugh at this folk [language]/ Don't folk mantras kill snake venom?).¹⁰⁵ From the 15th century to the 18th, poets in the Vaishnava *padābali*, *maṅgalkābya*, and Shakta *padābali/śyāmāsaṅgīt* genres, as well as countless oral performance genres, localized scriptural narratives and deities in the lifeworld of the Bengali "folk" through the use of idiomatic language, imagery drawn from the material cultures of rural Bengal, and embedding of the narratives and characteristics of deities, both Vedic and local (Radha-Krishna, Shiva-Parvati, Dharma, Kali, Chandi, Manasa), in the familiar context of household and community politics. These precolonial poets freely incorporated regionalisms into a permeable pan-Bengali conventional idiom in which both written and oral compositions circulated. With the emergence of Calcutta in the

¹⁰⁴ See Rup Kumar Barman, *Partition of India and Its Impact on Scheduled Castes of Bengal*, New Delhi: Abhijeet Publications, 2012.

¹⁰⁵ Gupta 1992, 118.

19th century, the scene shifted, with the city now taking center stage; but even here, the seemingly successful project of Sanskritizing of the Bengali literary language had to contend with countercurrents in both “high” and especially popular literatures, the boundaries between which are often more blurred than critics like to admit, that drew on the dialogic relationship between the new urban “folk” and *bābu* cultures through representations of local “spoken” language and performance genres such as *kabigān*. The dialogue between “high” and “folk” literatures continued in modern, modernist, and contemporary literature: the grand old man of modern Bengali letters, Rabindranath Tagore, drew deeply on *bāul* songs and the regional culture of Rarh in formulating his humanist vision; as we have seen, the modernists found regional dialect and oral forms of expression indispensable to their project; and, while such forms have been remarkably absent in much of contemporary writing, they have resurfaced in recent experimental works. All this would suggest that the language of the “folk” has played a constitutive role in Bengali literature.

Yet according to this same narrative, the self-fashioning of Bengali as a literary language has subjected it to a perpetual ambivalence between authenticity and refinement, “living” and “cultivated” language. In the so-called premodern period, the source of anxiety would seem to be Sanskrit, the language of scripture and of classical literature; but one suspects that back-projection of colonial (and postcolonial) anxieties may play a significant role in the current understanding of that dynamic. There is a constant tension in Bengali literary histories between appreciation of the vibrancy of a literary language that taps into the living (*prāṇbanta*) language of the folk, shaking off the sluggishness (*jaṛatā*) and artificiality (*kritrimatā*) of overly Sanskritic Bangla (or conversely, Perso-Arabic Bangla, having an association with the courts, both royal and legal, of the days of Muslim dominance—a stance that disregards the presence of Perso-Arabic vocabulary in regional dialects and the everyday language of Bengali Muslims), and insistence on the value of a refined (*mārjita*, *śiṣṭa*, *sādhu*) literary language, free of *grāmyatā-dōṣ* (the fault of rusticity) and *aślīlatā* (obscenity).¹⁰⁶ This ambivalence towards a regional culture seen as rich and essentially Bengali on the one hand, and coarse and easily corrupted on the other, imposes an uneasy and deeply problematic distinction between *lōk* and *chōṭolōk*—the authentic Bengali folk, whose words ring with universal human truth in quaint regional attire, and the backward, small-minded good-for-nothings who fail to be modern but are quick to hop on colonial, postcolonial, and globalized bandwagons. This kind of othering is of course well-known on the native-colonial scale from studies of Orientalism. As we have seen, the modernists (not a homogeneous group, but an eclectic one) attempted in different ways to

¹⁰⁶ Sumanta Banerjee contests this postcolonial obsession with obscenity by proposing an alternative understanding of “bawdy” 19th century performance genres like *kabigān* and *kheur* in terms of folk sensuality (“Bogey of the Bawdy: Changing Concept of ‘Obscenity’ in 19th Century Bengali Culture,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 22, No. 29, July 18, 1987, 1197-1206). He characterizes the domestication of deities discussed above as “secularization,” but these seemingly down-to-earth narratives never ceased to have religious significance, continuing to serve both ritual and entertainment functions. The participants, presumably, do not see this as a problem—it appears so only to the critic who wants neatly defined categories. But two things emerge here: the power of “folk” language, bafflingly indisputable despite all efforts to dismiss and suppress it, and the element of the carnivalesque that the “folk” brings into both oral and written narratives.

question these constructions of *lōk* and *chōṭolōk*, even if they could not escape complicity entirely. A close examination of the language of the folk (*lōkbhāṣā*), keeping in mind both the positive and the negative stereotypes of its speakers, reveals two primary emphases: on a performativity closely linked to place and dwelling, and on a heritage of critique drawn from variously *bhakti*-, *jāti*-, and class-inflected progressive movements, the valuing of which is inextricable from the colonial discourses of *lōk*, *bhadralōk*, and *chōṭolōk*.

I have used the term *lōkbhāṣā* here to designate, not a specific field of linguistic study, but an object of cultural and literary value. This term gained currency in Bangla linguistic and folklore studies in the 1990s, around the same time as the Dalit literature movement. The editors of a volume of articles on the topic admit that it is a direct translation from English and that Bengali studies often follow European ones “like tailoring your body to fit the clothes.”¹⁰⁷ Among the contributors, there is no consensus on the meaning and extent of the term. Some argue that *lōkbhāṣā* is the language of *lōksāhitya* (folklore), which is not very helpful since Bengali folklore exists in countless language varieties, including local and regional dialects as well as the pan-Bengali oral-literary idiom mentioned above. For some, the primary distinction remains one of “cultivation,” between *lōkbhāṣā* and *śiṣṭa bhāṣā*, sometimes with a middle term of *janabhāṣā* (common language). Some extend *lōkbhāṣā* to rural and urban varieties, while others insist that only the rural and the oral can be considered under this heading—another problematic position, as the oral and the literary cannot be neatly separated in the Bengali context, nor is the rural/urban binary ever a neat one. For some, *lōkbhāṣā* names local dialects while the technical term *upabhāṣā* (dialect) applies to regional dialect families. But for our purposes, the definition of *lōkbhāṣā* is not as important as the value attached to it. Folklore studies in Bangla continue to search for origins and prize authenticity, as they did in the West also up until the recent trend of self-reflexivity and disciplinary autobiographies.¹⁰⁸ Many such studies are still burdened with the colonial discourse of obscenity, thus feeling compelled to redeem “authentic” folk forms from this label and assert their “good taste” and progressive potential. This is particularly true of urban folk forms such as *kabigān*, but also of rural forms such as *jhumur* associated with professional women dancers. The notion of obscenity and academic indifference to “popular” and “tasteless” works have been effectively problematized by historians like Sumanta Banerjee in the context of *kabigān* and Sripantha in the context of early print culture in Bengal. Yet folklore studies by Dalit researchers often participate in the sanitizing project, since reclaiming the art forms of the “*chōṭolōk*” comes with a need to assert their cultural value even more urgently felt than by researchers for whom these arts represent their native region or the Bengali people generally, but not their own community. For example, in a volume commemorating *kabi* Bijoy Sarkar, Dalit writers Kapilkrishna Thakur and Gopal Biswas make an impassioned case the spiritual and progressive value of authentic rural *kabigān*, particularly the Matua-influenced school of the southern border regions of East Bengal, in opposition to the distorted, superficial, obscene urban form patronized by the decadent *bābus*.¹⁰⁹ I return to

¹⁰⁷ Ashishkumar De and Sanatkumar Mitra, eds., *Lōkbhāṣā*, Kolkata: Pustak Bipani, 1993.

¹⁰⁸ See Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

¹⁰⁹ (*Bāṅglār kabigān o lōkkabi Bijoy Sarkar (Kabigān of Bengal and folk poet Bijoy Sarkar)*, Kolkata: Chaturtha Duniya, 2002)

kabigān later in the chapter. But before taking a closer look at this “folk” literary/performance genre, I want to explore the performative value attached to the language of the “folk.”

Bhāṣābhāṣī, bāsābāsī (speakers and dwellers)—discourses of dwelling and performativity

Let me return to Ray Shekhar’s statement: *laukik boliyā nā kariha upahāse/ laukik mantrē ki sāpēr biṣ nāsē//* (Don’t laugh at this folk [language]/ Don’t folk mantras kill snake venom?) “Folk” language here is valuable not for what it is (pure, true, etc.), but what it does—note that it already shares a form, the *mantra*, with the Sanskrit of ritual.¹¹⁰ Its claim to literary value lies in the performative power of sound that inheres in it, as it does in the Vedas—specifically it performs a ritual function of fending off agents of harm (*amaṅgal*) or, to state it positively, promoting *maṅgal* (well-being). This function is inextricably tied to place, not necessarily a native place but any place of dwelling. For instance, in Tarashankar’s *Hāṁsuli* the Kāhārs are not the *ādi bāsindā* or original inhabitants of their present village, but were transplanted there from some unknown place by their colonial employers; nevertheless, they have an air of *ādimatā* (primordality) attached to them, which constitutes an intimate knowledge of the local ecology of animals, plants, and deities, and how to act on it for the *maṅgal* of the village.¹¹¹ If we want to take the *mantra* figure further, as the agents of *maṅgal* and *amaṅgal* are localized in their manifestation, so too is folk language localized and particular regardless of the question of indigeneity; the folk mantras are known only to those who have the terrain “in the mirrors of their fingernails” (*nakhdarpanē*), even if their roots there do not go deep. This sense of the practical and esoteric powers of local knowledge permeates the works of Manoj Basu (1901-79). His novels set in the *bādāban*, or the wild, marshy forest lands of the Sundarbans, draw deeply on the *kimbadanti* or tall tale: they are full of misfits and down-and-out people (mostly lower-caste, judging by surnames and interactions with the few Brahmin characters), pushed farther and farther into the deltaic frontier in search of livelihood; by learning the unwritten laws of the forest and the tactics of living under the eyes of its guardians (human, animal, and supernatural), they become *ostād* (masters of arts such as theft or “*baṛo bidyā* (the great art)” in the settlements and poaching in the forests) or *gunin* (men of occult powers).¹¹²

The notion of *ādimatā* (primordality) is frequently associated with Dalit and indigenous communities in *bhadralōk* literature and often passed over without comment or even adopted by Dalit writers and critics. As opposed to *ādi bās* (indigeneity), a hereditary connection with the land, *ādimatā* designates an intimacy with nature proper to the subsistence producer. This *ādimatā* is a source of literary fascination and ambivalence,

¹¹⁰ The literary “folk,” like the theoretical “subaltern,” is of course a shifting signifier: if Ray Shekhar’s “folk” equates with “Bengali,” the “folk” in modern Bengali literature is closely associated with subalternity, whether the text’s primary frame of reference is caste, ethnicity, or class; but any and all of these frameworks are founded in the ecology of a particular place.

¹¹¹ See Baer 2011 on “primitive modernism.”

¹¹² In a *bhāwāiyā* folk song from northern Bangladesh, the woman says to her lover, “*Ōki tui nā mōr bukor sindhiyā curi korlu prāṇ* (Oh, you dug a tunnel through my chest and stole my heart).” The phrase “stole my heart” which sounds cliché in English gets its force from the concrete image of the tunnel, a common technique of thieves in rural Bengal where homes had earthen walls and floors.

carrying a range of meanings. Of course, the word is used dismissively or patronizingly to mean primitiveness or, to borrow the language of official denotation, “backwardness.” But this same word often seeks to characterize a kind of active and intimate participation in the local ecology that is, on the one hand, basic, and takes, on the other, an array of forms. In other words, it is performative—the primordial human is one who acts on the land, not only with bare hands, but also with language. This figure enables both *bhadralōk* othering of the *ādibāsī* and Dalit expression of the potential power of intimacy with land and language.

The mystique of *ādimatā* stemming from its association with ritual power has been challenged in some Dalit writings. For example, in Shyamal Kumar Pramanik’s story “Ekhono ādim (Still Primitive),” the protagonist, a migrant from Bihar, enters a fight to the death with a venomous snake over a stash of grain in a rat hole, defying his wife’s superstitious fear of killing the sacred animal—a kind of fear often perceived as *ādim*—on the authority of an *ādimatā* that is pure struggle for survival, bared of any belief.¹¹³ Eradicating harmful superstitions in and around Dalit communities is one of the stated goals of the Bangla Dalit Literary Association, and this is illustrated stories like Anil Gharai’s “Punaśca Parasurām (Parasuram Reincarnated),”¹¹⁴ in which an indigenous woman loses her son, husband, and mother-in-law in a bloodbath instigated by the *gunin* hired to cure the son’s illness, and Nalini Bera’s “Baṛā-bhājā, kaṭā-cokh, ā Bankim Badhukēr galpa (lit. “The story of fried dumplings, light eyes, and Bankim Badhuk),” in which a village woman is accused of witchcraft by a man she has brought up from childhood.¹¹⁵ In many of these works, (false) ritual power is yet another form of exploitation and oppression working within Dalit communities, compounding their deprivation. Yet here we enter a difficult terrain. While the harmfulness of some “superstitions,” particularly to women, is evident, there is a vast gray area of local systems of thought and practice often delegitimized by the dominant religious sects, whether Hindu or Muslim. The risk involved in writing against “harmful superstitions” is that of erasing the intricacies of local systems at a stroke, of ignoring the complexities of practice to target an elusive “belief”; from this perspective, Gharai’s bloody story has more shock value than genuine engagement, while Bera’s takes a more thoughtful approach, reflecting not only on the plight of “witches” but also on the contemporary, urban, educated Dalit’s relationship with problems in his or her home community. Notably, Bera’s story begins with ruminations on how his speech betrays his regional origin and about his penchant for telling stories of his home region. Dialects, narrative, and other verbal art forms offer a kind of key to systems that, on the ground, are local and self-sufficient, even if, from the researcher’s bird’s-eye view, a composite, pan-regional tradition seems to emerge. The *mantra* is only one out of many such forms—*chaṛā*, etc.—that share a place-specific performative power, which is also gender-specific, and can be valued and critiqued on many levels from within the community as well as by those who leave the community. For instance, just as one does not utter the words “tiger” or “death” in the *bādāban*, using instead a euphemism like “big fox” or “to become good,” so does a woman in *Titās* not utter

¹¹³ Translated by Amrit Sen as “Survival,” 2012, in Sankar Prasad Singha and Inranil Acharya, eds., *Survival and Other Stories*, Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 142-146.

¹¹⁴ Translated by Sankar Prasad Singha as “Reincarnation of Parashuram,” *ibid.*, 41-54

¹¹⁵ Translated by Tapan Jyoti Banerjee as “The Story of the Grey-Eyed Oil-fry Seller,” *ibid.* 127-141

the name of her (especially deceased) husband or father-in-law, using instead a similar-sounding word; women in Mālōpārā are addressed and referred to by relationship with husbands and sons, and men too by relationship with sons and daughters. This practice can be and is implicitly critiqued in the novel from the perspective of gender but is also one of many indicators of vital and intricate community relationships that the novel highly values. At the same time, such verbal forms are not bound to their place of origin, but are carried around, retold and translated into new linguistic and literary forms, media, and contexts of meaning.

A poem by Nandalal Bauri in Rarh dialect offers an alternative understanding of the ambiguous notion of *ādīmatā*, shifting the focus from the fraught subject of beliefs and practices to be condemned or exposed by contrast with the “real” fight for survival, to the peculiarly human relationship between survival and language. The poem, addressed to the goddess Kali—not a minor local deity but one with pride of place in the regional pantheon—, nevertheless has little to do with belief:

Ma Kali,
 you are so good,
 you seem very much my own.
 Durga Ma, Lakshmi Ma,
 or whatever Ma you might mention,
 they seem very much like strangers.
 Bauri lists the reasons for this: he does not have the book-learning to approach Saraswati,
 or the wealth to approach Lakshmi. But, he concludes, Kali is like him:
 [...] Just like I don't have a shirt
 so you don't either.
 Just like my burning hunger
 makes me eat whatever I get
 so you, *mā gō*,
 eat whatever you get.

Here, the local dialect is intimately linked to the deity through the figure of subsistence, and intertextually to a translocal body of writing: the Shakta *padābali* or *shyāmāsaṅgīt* of Ramprasad Sen, known for his use of colloquial language and quotidian imagery in his songs, cast as the praises and reproaches of the son to the mother.¹¹⁶ Ramprasad's lyrics disavowed the ritual use of language: “*āmi mantra-tantra kichui jāninē mā* (Ma, I don't know any charms or incantations),” *tantra* being partly an echo-word but referring also to Shakta and Buddhist esoteric rituals. Nandalal Bauri's poem does not specifically invoke the ritual power of the dialect; rather, it invokes the power of an intimacy based not on belief (which is not accessible or particularly relevant here), but on a reclamation of *ādīmatā*: the speaker, like Kali, has nothing but his body and its hunger, and yet we can

¹¹⁶ Ramprasad was born in Halishahar, just north of Kolkata in what is now North 24 Parganas; he was a Vaidya by *jāti* and educated in Sanskrit, Persian, and other languages. Ramprasad's use of colloquial language has less to do with regionality or class than with the intimacy of *bhakti* (devotion). Bauri's intimacy is, by contrast, fiercely physical.

infer that, like her, he possesses power (*śakti*).¹¹⁷ By using the Rarh dialect, the poem is also implicated in reclamation of indigenous culture.

Ādibās (indigeneity)—redefining the Bengali *jāti*

Indigenous communities and their arts have been a source of fascination in modern, modernist, avant-garde, and contemporary literature and cinema, featuring significantly in the work of Rabindranath Tagore, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, Satinath Bhaduri Ritwik Ghatak, Subodh Ghosh, Sunil Gangopadhyay, and Mahasweta Devi, to name a few. Despite the sensitivity and empathy of these authors, they have not been able to adequately confront the romanticization of indigenous communities, who, while disadvantaged, dispossessed, displaced, and subjected to violence, have often been seen as a kind of archaic, othered self of the Bengali *bhadralōk*, a vital, vulnerable human truth that is a part of “us” but existing in a state of perpetual precarity, so easily sullied and confused—this has to do with their *ādimatā*, their ambiguously elevated connection to nature and ecology in a pristine sense, for instance in Bibhutibhushan’s *Aranyak*.¹¹⁸ This image of the exotic, pristine *ādibāsī* contrasts sharply with the general perception of the *antyaja* (“low-born,” untouchable), who is by definition polluted and whom the *bhadralōk* would not readily see as their own truth, except in a self-abjectifying mode. In Dalit writings, the assertion of indigeneity simultaneously undermines this *bhadralōk* pretense of difference and counters the divisive colonial strategies of mobility adopted by the Scheduled Castes.

In Bengali literature, the question of indigeneity is closely tied to the discourse of regionality. As explored in chapter 1, dialect novelists writing about several regions of undivided Bengal laid claim to a rich heritage of oral-literary narrative and poetic forms.¹¹⁹ In these writings, where there is any suggestion of indigenous roots, it is shrouded in mystery: in *Hāṃsuli*, the Kāhārs are a colonial “Criminal Tribe” but their tribal origin is not explored beyond the air of *ādimatā* that links them, as discussed above, not to their place of origin but to subsistence in their current dwelling place; in *Titās*, by contrast, Kiśōr’s admiration for the black skin and independent life of the Malos of the north gives a glimpse of the role indigeneity comes to play in Dalit consciousness. However, it is in poetry where the regional, the *ādibāsī*, and the Dalit most clearly converge.

¹¹⁷ Contrast this with Ramprasad’s song to Kali, “*basan paro mā* (Wear some clothes, Ma)”!

¹¹⁸ See Ritwik Ghatak’s comments on the Oraon. As Benjamin Baer notes (2011), the tension between this fascination with the tribal and recognition of the complex negotiations indigenous and Dalit communities make with the colonial legacy, *bhadralōk* modernity, and the challenges and promises of independence is what drives Tarashankar’s narrative of the Kāhārs. This narrative gives considerable agency to the Kāhārs while simultaneously emphasizing the illegibility of their actions, attributing this in turn to their lack of access to literacy. It is no surprise that Mahasweta Devi wrote a biography of Tarashankar. However, her praise of his accuracy in portraying the Kāhār dialect as compared to contemporary writers such as Manik becomes questionable considering the strategic stereotyping I have noted in chapter 1 (Devi, *Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay*, Kolkata: Ananda, 1975). It is not accuracy at stake so much as an emphasis on the question of legibility that makes Tarashankar’s work valuable in this context.

¹¹⁹ See Mahitosh Biswas, *Bāṅglā upanyās—prasaṅga: āñcalikatā* (*Regionalism in the Bengali novel*), Kolkata: Annapurna Pustak Mandir, 1984.

The majority of the “regional poetry” (*āñcalik kabitā*) which emerged in West Bengal in the 1970s comes from the region of Paschim Rarh.¹²⁰ This region is home to a long, diverse, and illustrious written and oral literary history, from prominent poets of the *dharmamaṅgal* (narratives of the folk deity Dharma, in which the Dom community plays an important role), *manasāmaṅgal* (narratives of the folk deity Manasa), and *padābali* (Vaishnava poetry, which in its early stage localized the Krishna-Radha narrative and in its later stage embraced Chaitanya’s *bhakti* movement, which opposed *jat-pat*—though some Dalit critics consider this merely a strategic move to include Dalits in the Hindu fold while continuing to oppress them), to *bāul* singers (members of a syncretic philosophical and musical community who reject *jāt-pāt* and Hindu-Muslim divisions) and the legacy of Shantiniketan, to modernist and contemporary writers experimenting with dialect and voice such as Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, whose use of Birbhum Kāhār dialect I explored in chapter 1, and Hasan Azizul Haque, who wrote the novel *Āgunpākhi* entirely in Bardhaman dialect in the voice of a Muslim woman who remains in her hometown after Partition.¹²¹ Linguistically, the Rarh dialects preserve features and words found in the Charyapada, *maṅgalkābya* and *padābali* literature. The language of Rarh, then, uniquely resonates with the interplay of oral and written bodies of verbal art and of traditions of critique of *jāti* discrimination and religious ideologies articulated on both the elite and grassroots levels. According to Sunil Kumar Das, the *āñcalik* or “Rarh language poetry” of the 1970s-80s is a precursor to Dalit literature, as many of the writers and most of their subjects were Dalits, although the term had not gained currency at the time (S.K. Das 2004).¹²²

How does the indigenous enter this regional, pre-Dalit poetry? In his research studies published by Chaturtha Duniya, Das attempts to demystify the *bhadralōk* othering of the *ādibāsī* by suggesting that indigenous languages and cultures are in fact the basis of mainstream Bengali language and culture and thus not exotic at all, but suppressed, oppressed (thus *dalit*), and disowned in favor of myths of Aryan origin and “degeneration.” According to Das, the language of the Rarh region is the mother tongue of the Bauris, the largest indigenous group in the region, who along with the Santals, Mundas, and other peoples are descendants of its original Austric inhabitants; the Bauris adopted Buddhism in the time of the Buddha and never fully adopted Hinduism even though they became designated by Hindus as an *antyaaja* group, i.e. Dalit (S. K. Das, Rarher aadim bauri

¹²⁰ See Uttam Das and Mrityunjay Sen, *Āñcalik bhāṣār kabitā (Regional language poetry)*, Baruipur, South 24 Parganas: Mahadiganta, 1994.

¹²¹ Interestingly, the landscape of Paschim Rarh also dominates the films of Ritwik Ghatak, such as *Ajāntrik* (based on a short story by Subodh Ghosh, who was born in Giridhi, Bihar and wrote extensively on indigenous communities and folk narratives of Western Rarh), *Subarṇarēkhā* (after the river in Western Rarh), *Jukti takko ār gappo* (featuring the *chou* dance of Purulia), documentaries on *chou* and the Oraon people, and an unfinished documentary on sculptor Ramkinkar Baij.

¹²² Das lists eleven little magazines, all coming out of the Rarh region, which carried poems and short stories in the Rarh language: *Āhata saṅgbād*, *Monhora*, *Cittarañjan*, *Rārḥ khaṇḍa*, *Rārḥbhūm*, *Puruliyā*, *Bāñkuṛā*, *Kalla grām*, *Chatna*, *Sarbari*, and *Domahani*. The writers include Sunil Kumar Das, Nandalal Bauri, Pradip Bauri, Sharatchandra Bauri, Lakkhan Bauri, Purnachandra Bauri, Madhusudan Bauri, Hajari Prasad Rajowar, Nandadulal Acharya, Gourchandra Foujdar, Shaktipada Sen, and Hulukkhetra Pal. Other Rarh writers whom Das does not mention include Debabrata Sinha (Bankura), Debasis Danda (Purulia), Dasharathi Mājhi (Purulia), Pashupati Prasad Mahato (Purulia), and Kumar Rana (Paschim Medinipur); the latter two identify themselves as Dalit writers.

janagoshthi ebong tader prachin bouddhatantra dharma (The aboriginal Bauri people of Rarh and their ancient Buddhist tantric religion) 2000). This Buddhist heritage links the region with the oldest extant Bengali literary texts, the Charyapada (Buddhist Tantric songs) as well as with Dalit communities in other parts of India that embraced Buddhism in modern times as an alternative to the oppressive structures of Hinduism.¹²³ While the Santals, Mundas etc. maintain their own distinct, but closely related languages, they can also speak the Bauri language, and so Das designates it as Rarh language; he argues that this Pali-inflected Austric language, not Sanskrit, is the basis of the Bengali language.¹²⁴ Thus, a so-called “*āñcalik* (regional)” language is not *āñcalik* at all, in the sense of being limited to a particular region or to the margins of Bengali culture, but is itself the very foundation of Bengali culture. The discourses of regionality, indigeneity, and Dalit consciousness are inextricable here.

A poem by Pradip Bauri of Bardaman, published in *Rarhbhum*, 2003, entwines this sense of indigenous Bengaliness (that is, a sense that indigenous and Bengali are not in opposition or hierarchy, but one and the same) with the performative power discussed earlier.

“This is my mother’s language”
 Hey *bābu*,
 When you hear our Rarhi words,
 don’t laugh,
 showing your teeth like grains of *ātap cāl* [sun-dried rice, fine varieties used in festive dishes and sweets],
 we are not just folks from Damora or Madanpur—
 we are the primordial, original inhabitants [*ādi kāler mūl nibāsi*],—that is,
 indigenous people [*ādibāsi*], to you.
 During the Tusu festival in the month of *poush* and
 Bhadu in the month of *bhādro*,
 when our girls
 sway their bodies and say in a singsong—
 ‘we’re telling you, Bhadu—
 we’ll bring you honey from the palm-flower’
 then I think, it’s no lie—
 there is genuine magic in language
 this is my mother’s language
 this is the Bangla language.
 (quoted in Das, 59)

The language in question here is not the “mother-tongue” (*mātribhāṣā*) that is the basis of state-formation in post-Independence South Asia, a unifying abstraction for which many

¹²³ And with modern texts like Tagore’s *Chandalika* and Subodh Ghosh’s *Sujata*, made into a well-known Hindi film by Bimal Roy.

¹²⁴ Das’s broader conclusion that Bangla is founded on indigenous languages rather than *apabhramsa* (corrupted Sanskrit) is supported by other researchers in the field, as discussed earlier.

have died.¹²⁵ This is a particular, intimate, stateless language, “my mother’s language” (*āmār māyēr bhāṣā*), which gives life but has been overlooked like a poor relation; the poet asserts, “this [too] is the Bangla language.” The mother invoked is a human mother, not the mother-goddess, but the poem invokes local ritual, specifically the Tusu and Bhadu festivals of Rarh, both of which center on a female deity with whom the villagers have an intimate, familial relationship—not a mother so much as a daughter.¹²⁶ The rituals follow the generic pattern common to Durga puja, Manasa puja, Ratha, etc. modeled on the young married woman’s visit to her father’s house—*āgaman* (arrival), some number of days’ stay, and *bisarjani, gaman* or *bhāsān* (return to the father-in-law’s house, often symbolized by immersing in the river)—but with a wealth of highly localized details.¹²⁷ In a study of Tusu songs, Shibprasad Chattopadhyay notes, echoing Nandalal Bauri’s poem, the participants’ intense feeling of intimacy with the goddess: “*tusu rārḥ ramaṇīr baṛoi āpnār, baṛoi snēhēr* (to the women of Rarh, Tusu seems very much their own, very much beloved)” (*Lōkāyatā paścim rārḥ (Folkways of Western Rarh)*, Kolkata: Loksamskriti o Adibasi Samskriti Kendra, 2007, 71).

If we look back to *Titās* with these Bauri poems in mind, the social, cultural, and political implications of intimacy begin to unfold. The desire for intimacy which reaches melodramatic intensity in Jamila’s inexplicable attraction to Udaytārā, Anantar Mā’s longing to rest her head on the breasts of the village women and her madman-husband, the desperate fight led by Bāsantī to save the Malo songs which, the narrator feels compelled to insist at length, have a unique power accessible only to the Malos, and not least of all the Malos’ emotional attachment to the Titash—all these point to the figure of intimacy as one that holds together the strands of physical, community, and cultural survival. Intimacy may be *ādim*, basic and instinctual, but its theory is expressed in an astonishing array of forms, each with a deep, unwritten history; it is not only the survival of the body, but the survival of these forms and the thought they embody for which the Dalit writer fights. After all, Ananta’s story offers a kind of reply to Nandalal Bauri’s dismissal of Saraswati: it is Ananta’s ability to sing old songs with feeling that qualifies him for modern education (there is nothing contradictory in this being represented by Saraswati in Bauri’s poem, in light of the basis and persistence of “*manubādi*” institutional discrimination)—it is not for nothing that some “folk” songs are referred to as *tattva* (philosophy, theory), and the divide between oral and literate cognition and knowledge is undoubtedly wide, but not insurmountable.

This brings us back to the role of form in defining the performative power of dialect. The relatively set rhythmic and vocative patterns of the different “folk” forms, including work-songs, festival songs like Tusu, Bhadu, and *ghēṅṭu gān*, and competitive-format songs like *kabigān*, go hand-in-hand with immense versatility in handling diverse contemporary subjects in a deeply intertextual but infinitely adaptable manner. A poem by Sonalisa Das (Bauri, Bardhaman district) takes the rhythmic form of a road-song—as if a group of people are walking and singing together in time with their steps, not only to pass the time but also to gather strength and courage for the journey ahead.

¹²⁵ See Lisa Mitchell, *Language, Emotion, and Politics in South India: The Making of a Mother Tongue*, Indiana University Press, 2009. See also Spivak 2013 on “mother-tongue” and nationalism.

¹²⁶ For more on Tusu, see Shanti Sinha, *Tusu*, Kolkata: Loksamskriti o Adibasi Samskriti Kendra, 1998.

¹²⁷ Regional *gītikā* or ballads often center on a young woman’s sad fate; see Hosen 2012.

“The road”

We will find the right road, o...
 However dark it is ahead!
 We know this crooked road, o...
 And we know
 It's covered in darkness.
 There's only a little time left before dawn
 We'll touch the roof for sure, o.
 You play at changing names
 We'll break that game one day, o.¹²⁸

Spivak has written on the potential of the oral-formulaic as a model for comparativist practice, highlighting the property of “inventive equivalence” that allows indigenous men and women to use towering figures as type-words and interchange historically and politically heterogeneous place-names in their oral compositions: the king of Kolkata, the king of the *tathyakendra* (Information Center), etc. She describes this as a “thinking without a nation,” suggesting that such thinking could help us work against what she terms “reproductive heteronormativity” or the nationalist conflation of language, mother, and nation. But it might be worth dwelling on the way that this perceived resistance to nationalist discourse works through alternative “typing”—a multiple, sometimes subversive understanding of *jāti* (type) in which “nation,” if present, is just one option. The poems discussed here illustrate how the discourse of indigeneity challenges the existing conception of the (Aryan) Bengali *jāti*, a macro-regional/racial identity constructed and perpetuated by the handful of dominant *jāti* (“caste” communities), through the language of a micro-regional, marginalized (non-Aryan) *jāti*. The language of the refugee works to unsettle *jātiyatā* (nationalism) through its acute sense of the severed land as both *āpon* (one's own) and *por* (other, alien).

Bāstuhārā (the refugee)—unsettling *jātiyatā* (nationalism) through inflections of *desh* (country)

Those who have lost their homes, those who have lost everything,
 They have only splendid thoughts of hunger.
 Some of them are in the jungle, some of them living in tents
 Some have ended up in Nainital.
 Some are in Dandakaranya, scrounging for a mouthful
 Who is left to honor poets? Their life-breath is on their lips
 Some have gone to the Andamans without committing any crime
 Who is left to listen to the poet's song?
 (*kabi* Bijoy Sarkar)

¹²⁸ Biswas and Pramanik 2011, 139.

If the *ādibāsī* undermines *bhadralōk* cultural hegemony by laying claim to Bengali language and culture as *āpon* (one's own), exposing the insecurity of *bhadralōk* self-understanding in terms of *jāti* as race, the Dalit refugee and their language pose a problem to the nation-under-construction by being, by definition, *por* (other, alien).¹²⁹ If poetry in the Rarhi dialects resonates with rediscovery, the *bāṅgāl* dialects, virtually absent in poetry but prominent in prose, are saturated with loss and discord—the land that was *āpon* has now become *por*, and the land that was *por* has yet to become *āpon*. But on the one hand, the very foreignness of the refugee's language has its own power, and on the other, the refugee shares with many other kinds of migrants the need to dwell in the performative—to make a home (*bāsā bāñdhā*).

The song above, by *kabi* (poet) Bijoy Sarkar, enumerates the far-flung and inhospitable places to which his Dalit listeners have been forced to migrate: jungles, refugee camps, the hill station Nainital, the Dandakaranya, and the Andaman Islands. The Dandakaranya is a region now officially known as Bastar in the present state of Chattisgarh, formerly part of Madhya Pradesh, but the name Dandakaranya goes back to the Ramayana, where it is the forest abode of the demon Dandaka, a colony of Ravana's Lanka, and the site of Sita's banishment; this makes it a particularly loaded choice. On a practical level, Rup Kumar Barman points out that in addition to the severely inadequate infrastructure provided for the Dalits resettled there after Partition and the justifiable disapproval of the indigenous people, the refugees, primarily Namashudra agriculturalists from lush, green, riverine East Bengal, were utterly unprepared for the hostile climate (Barman 2012). A group of refugees left Dandakaranya to settle on the island of Marichjhampi in the Sundarbans, from which the state police forcibly evicted them.¹³⁰ The Andaman Islands were used as a penal colony for primarily political prisoners during the colonial period, often referred to as *kālapāni* or "black water." Dalit refugees also settled in North Bengal and Assam; Barman draws attention to the problems that arose between the nebulously "tribal"/Dalit/local-royalty Rajbanshi community in North Bengal and settlers from East Bengal/Bangladesh, which transformed a movement for social advancement of the Rajbanshi *jāti* into an ethnic separatist movement, involving the consolidation of multiple *jāti* under the name Rajbanshi and the establishment of Kamtapuri, formerly considered a Bengali dialect, as an independent language with its own literature. Sumanta Banerjee, Manoranjan Byapari, and others have argued that this fragmentation of Dalit communities, along with the diffusion of "caste"-based resistance into the dominant discourses of class and nation, led to an actual silence, a gap in the literary and intellectual production retrospectively termed Dalit by the movement that sprung up only in the 1990s: hence the genuine middle-class ignorance behind the question "Is there Dalit writing in Bangla?" Yet what appears to be a great silence on paper continued orally despite all odds, as seen in the history of *kabigān* I will explore in the next section. Written poetry in West Bengal using East Bengali dialects is still conspicuously absent, possibly for the simple reason that these

¹²⁹ Historically too, tensions have arisen between native and resettled Dalit communities, for example, between East Bengali refugees and the Rajbanshi community in North Bengal or the indigenous people in Dandakaranya (Barman 2012).

¹³⁰ See Annu Jalais, "Dwelling on Morichjhanpi When Tigers Became 'Citizens', Refugees 'Tiger-Food,'" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 40, No. 17 (Apr. 23-29, 2005), pp. 1757-1762. See also Nakul Mallik's novel *Kkhamā nei* (No Forgiveness) and Shaktipada Rajguru's *Dandakaranya theke Marichjhapi* (From Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi).

dialects have not been able to thrive as a poetic medium uprooted from their soundscapes;¹³¹ such dialects, perhaps naturally, feature more prominently in the poetry of Bangladesh, but the one-way publishing traffic between West Bengal and Bangladesh has made this poetry inaccessible to poets in West Bengal. However, due to the same dissonance that might have discouraged poets, the East Bengali dialects play a key role in contemporary Dalit prose in West Bengal as it continues to revisit the refugee experience, which, as Basabi Fraser and others have argued, is not a closed chapter but an ongoing reality of lives lived around and across the “porous” and, in some places, watery border between India and Bangladesh.¹³²

Kapilkrishna Thakur’s story “Ko’nekar ki da” captures the linguistic predicament of the refugee, who despite living many years in independent India remains alien and isolated (K. Thakur 2005). An elderly *bāṅgāl* passenger on a local train confronts the unwelcoming stares of passenger *bābus*, which seem to ask, in standard Bangla, “*Kōthākār kē hē tumi?*”—an utterance untranslatable into English, of which a literal rendering would be something like “Belonging to which place and who are you?” He finds himself eager to exchange a few words with fellow *bāṅgāl* passengers, asking the typical question, “Where are you from?” (Literally, “Where is your home country (*dēś*, pronounced *dash*)?” When he defends an old woman who is being harassed by some young West Bengali men, they taunt him for his accent: “He’s still *jongule* (wild). Even his language hasn’t improved.” The old man bursts out, “*Ko’nēkār ki dā tumi!*”—a dialectal equivalent of the earlier, unspoken question given by the narrator in standard Bangla (*kōthākār kē hē tumi*), but with a yet more untranslatable objectifying nuance: the “*kē hē* (who + vocative particle) becomes “*ki dā* (what + definite article, what thing).” What becomes clear here is that dialect and standard language are translatable (or “mutually intelligible”) only on a minimal, structural level; lifeworlds and lifetimes of meaning are lost even in a sentence like this, which seems superficially to have almost exact equivalence. This is a question of not only signification but also the materiality of sound: the old man continues, “You want to take away the words my mother taught me from my mouth (*mukhir bōlḍā*, the spoken words of my mouth)? My homeland (*dash*) is gone, my homestead (*bhītā*) is gone. I’m not giving up my spoken language (*mukhir bhāṣāḍā*) just because of that.” The repetition of *mukh* (mouth) along with the definite article draws attention to the physicality of the loss: as if the young man could snatch the words out of the old man’s mouth, just as he has been physically displaced from his house and the land on which it stood. The refugee, or indeed generally colloquial, usage of *dēś* (homeland) also stubbornly returns the abstraction of the nation (also *dēś*) to its physicality, as land with a soil type, flora and fauna, crops and tools of local trades, on which people have built their homes, communities, and cultures. As in Pradip Bauri’s poem written in “my mother’s language,” here we have another literalization of the mother-tongue: “the speech my mother taught me.” This is a tongue physically learned in the mother’s lap, a real mother, not, in Spivak’s words, “woman metonymized as the birth canal” in the service of the nation.

¹³¹ Jibananda Das expressed precisely this fear in his essay “The Future of Bengali Language. See Fayzul Latif Choudhuri, ed. *Jībanānanda Dāśēr agranthita prabandhābalī* (*Uncollected essays of Jibananda Das*), Dhaka: Maola Brothers, 1999, 91-95.

¹³² This is complemented by Bangladeshi works using West Bengali dialects, such as Hasan Azizul Haque’s novel *Agunpakhi* in the dialect of Bardhaman.

Another form of the question “where is your homeland?” is “*āpnār bāri kōthāy?*” or “where is your home?” often with reference to the lost ancestral home (*bāri* or *bhiṭā*) on the other side of the border, as opposed to the current place of residence this side (*bāsā*). Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Habitations of Modernity* has made much of the distinction between *bāri* and *bāsā* in the post-Partition context in his reading of nostalgic refugee narratives. The distinction does basically refer to home owning vs. renting, regardless of on which side of the border the property falls. Thus, a person of East Bengali origin may speak of a property belonging to the family located in West Bengal, including the refugee “colony” areas, as “*bāri*” while a rented house in East Bengal will be “*bāsā*.” While the word *bāsā* is strongly associated with East Bengali refugees, West Bengali authors earlier referred to a rented house, now more commonly “*bhārābāri*,” as “*bāsābāri*.” Yet in East Bengali usage, *bāsā* also carries a sense of intimacy, such that one might say welcomingly “*āmār bāsāy āsben* (come visit me)” — *bāsā* here is not a place of residual alienness but one of warmth, a home. In the Dalit context, the picture is even more complicated, as the concept of property ownership may be an informal one: this comes out clearly in *Titās*, where we see that the Malos have a strong sense of ownership of their neighborhood even if the property there may legally belong to someone else; they have an unwritten right to the waters of the Titash, but not to the land that emerges when the river silts up—that goes to the landed farmers. The old man in Kapilkrishna Thakur’s story is likewise a Dalit, we can infer from the surname Mondol and his account of how his family has scattered across Bengal and other states in search of meager livelihoods; unlike the writers of Chakrabarty’s narratives, he is not likely to have had much if any property to speak of in his hometown in Jessore, but he nevertheless shares a deep attachment to the place which is accentuated all the more by his family’s inability to put down new roots in one place, as middle-class refugees were better able to do. It is for this reason that I want to emphasize the performative aspect of *bāsā*, which carries the sense of habitation much more than *bāri*: a *bāri* is inherited, a *bāsā* must be made. That the word *bāsā* is shared with animals’ dwellings (e.g. *pākhir bāsā*, a bird’s nest, *sāpēr bāsā*, a snake’s lair) also takes us back to the notion of *ādimatā*, but in a way that brings home yet again the importance of language: stripped of practically everything, the refugee has to make a place of their own in a hostile, alien habitat, but this basic need is bound up with the seemingly hopeless, but strangely persistent need to speak in and hear one’s own language. The editor of a little volume of women’s narratives of their childhood and married homes in the dialects of several regions of East Bengal, remarks that the dialects “have a completely different tune (*sur-i ālādā*)” which is “sweet to the ears (*kānē miḍā lāgē*)” of their speakers.¹³³ Before returning to the question of the independent nation, for Dalit writers pregnant with silence and lack of understanding, it seems necessary to take a detour through the sound-texts of the nation’s formative period.

Interlude: *Kabikaṇṭha* (the voice of the poet)

The history of *kabigān* takes us back to the early colonial period. Kankar Sinha has argued that the 19th century Bengali “Renaissance,” known in Bangla most commonly as *nabajāgaran* (new awakening) and by some critics as *punarujjīban* (regeneration or revitalization, conveying the sense that this was not the birth of something new but the

¹³³ Shobha Ghosh, *Jeno bhule na jai (Lest I forget)*, Kolkata: Barisal Seba Samiti, 1983

infusion of new life in a dying tradition) ultimately failed because it slipped back into reformation and revivalism and remained confined among the dominant communities (Brahmin, Baidya, and Kayastha)—it never touched the *antyaja* (“low-born” or untouchable) or the *śūdra* (fourth *varṇa*) and alienated the Muslims, leading to communalism.¹³⁴ The 19th century Matua movement, Sinha and others have argued, has equal claim to the name of “Renaissance,” but has been completely overlooked in scholarship of this period.¹³⁵ While the “Renaissance” came out of the colonial city of Kolkata, the Matua movement came out of an obscure village called Orakandi in Faridpur district, then East Bengal; but while the “Renaissance” never traveled to Orakandi, after Partition the Matua movement resettled near Kolkata, in North 24 Parganas, and has become a key player in West Bengal politics.¹³⁶ In any case, *kabigān*, which thrived in 19th century Calcutta but became seen the epitome of poor taste and backwardness, served as a medium of spiritual, material, and intellectual progress in Faridpur of the same time and later on in several regions of West Bengal.

Studies of *kabigān* undertaken by the Center for Folk and Indigenous Culture as well as those by Dalit authors out of Chaturtha Duniya and other presses fervently uphold a distinction between the “coarse,” “uncultivated,” “obscene” *kabiwallahs*—an Anglicization of *kabiyāl* suggesting the “selling” of songs like petty goods—of “the ‘Kolketa’ of *bābu* culture” and the authentic, tasteful rural *kabi*, deserving of the unsuffixed title of “poet.”¹³⁷ The need for this distinction comes out of the strong prejudice against *kabigān* in Bengali literary history and criticism, which denounces the form not only for obscenity and poor taste but also for its perceived failure to be modern. According to such criticism, the markers of literary modernity are to abandon song and performance for text to be read alone and silently, and mythological/religious themes for worldly ones—for example, to drop the façade of Radha-Krishna spirituality and write directly on human love. Yet eroticism, tellingly designated *ādiras* (the original *rasa*), is nevertheless disparaged as both un-modern and belonging to the *chōṭolōk*, even in the case of a narrative like *Bidyāsundar*, written by the eminent if controversial court poet Bharatchandra and widely circulated from Battala. Notably, even in the course of problematizing the notion of obscenity by proposing a reevaluation of *khēur* (a festive genre of literal and verbal mud-slinging, often lumped together with *kabigān* in the Kolkata context) on its own terms, Sumanta Banerjee does not hesitate to ascribe primitiveness (our old friend *ādimatā*) to the culture that produced it. By contrast, the Matua school of *kabigān*, defended vigorously as “healthy,” is a

¹³⁴ Sinha pursues this argument through case studies of the prominent “Renaissance” figures. See Sinha, *Bāmlār renaissance: antyaja ār śūdra*, Kolkata: Radical, 2005.

¹³⁵ This is indeed the case in both Indian and Western scholarship. For example, Andrew Sartori’s *Bengal in Global Concept History* excuses its focus on the usual “Renaissance” figures on the grounds that they were the ones who shaped the dominant discourses of the period, but even if we accept this dubious argument, Harichand Thakur does not enter the discussion despite his extensive and continued influence. Sinha also acknowledges a “second Renaissance” among the Muslims of 20th century Dhaka, known as “*buddhir mukti*” or “intellectual liberation.”

¹³⁶ While the political implications of the literary developments discussed here are important to keep in mind, the complex role of the Matua Mahasangha and other Dalit organizations in West Bengal party politics is beyond the scope of this chapter; my main concern here is the role of an oral musical form in shaping the discourse of Dalit consciousness in literature.

¹³⁷ See, for example, D. Biswas 2004. For a recent study of *kabigān* in the Rarh region, see Swapan Kumar Thakur, *Rarh banglar kobigan (Kobigan of Rarh region of Bengal)*, Kolkata: Birasat Art Publication, 2018.

vehicle of “modern” knowledge, promoting literacy and education for all, social reforms, public health, etc. Matua founders Harichand and Guruchand Thakur and their followers tirelessly promoted education, exhorting the Namashudras to educate their children at all costs— “send your children to school even if you have to starve” and “even if you have to beg” were two of their slogans. Matua or not, composers and performers of *kabigān*, variously termed *svabhābkabi* (poet by nature), *lōkkabi* (folk poet), or *cārankabi* (wandering poet), are equally identified by their role as *lōkśikkhak* (folk educator).¹³⁸ This assignment of value renders the carnivalesque aspects of Calcutta *kabigān* unavailable to Dalit literature—not to mention *khēur* or *gāli* (curse words).

Regardless of the terms we assign to the Matua literature, what remains outside of all these discussions is its orality, its musicality, and the way that its regional particularity and specific *jāti* origin did not detract from the potential of *kabigān* as a medium of political awakening across Bengal. While the Matua movement remains almost exclusively Namashudra, practitioners of *kabigān* come from many different communities and regions. *Kabigān* illustrates how dialect is recognizable not only in legible linguistic markers but in words bearing dense understandings of practice and in contours of sound impossible to write down; it also shows how a dialectal form can transcend its own specificity without losing it.

The language of *kabigān*, not unlike the oral-literary language of precolonial Bengal, generally follows conventional and sometimes archaic verb-forms and grammatical patterns, but freely incorporates regional vocabulary; when written, it sometimes includes orthographies reflecting local pronunciation. But as its life is primarily in oral performance, the resonances of the written poetry can perhaps be fully appreciated only by those who have heard it sung. Just as the particularity of *bhāṭiyāli*, *bhāwāiyā* and other (fully dialectal) forms of folksong lies not in the figures with which they are most often associated (the boatman or cart-driver), but in the regional soundscapes that produce their melodic forms, so to *kabigān* (despite its seemingly conventional language) has its various locally-inflected schools with their own melodies, styles, and related practices (dress, etc.); among these, the southern East Bengali Matua-influenced school has the most prestige. But while the pan-Bengali popularity of a form like *bhāṭiyāli* (a favorite of studio recording artists) or, in a different way, *jātrā* (integral to the history of urban theater, radio, and cinema in Bengal) arguably has much to do with commercialization, the life of *kabigān* in multiple regions has to do with its versatility, its availability as a space for debate on any contemporary issue in a deeply intertextual framework, bringing diverse bodies of oral and literate knowledge

¹³⁸ Many “folk” forms, languishing due to the disappearance of their former contexts of patronage, have been repurposed in this way as a medium of rural education on social and public health issues: for example, the *patua* scroll-singing of West Bengal, or Bengali *jātrā* and North Indian *nauṭankī* (both forms of musical theater). However, the success of these efforts is uneven; while the *paṭuā* community has benefitted from its reinvention in this new context, in particular by empowering women to make an independent livelihood and express themselves creatively, *jātrā* and *nauṭankī*, though each has its own trajectory, are both heavily burdened with commercialization and sexualization—*jātrā* in rural Bangladesh now includes strip-tease and the form is also associated with “B” movies, while *nauṭankī* has long been appropriated by the Hindi film industry for “item numbers.” Here as with *kabigān*, entrenched notions about sexuality render two aspects or schools of a given form mutually unavailable: a folkloristic valuation cannot afford to condone the sexual aspect, while an unabashed appreciation of the latter cannot really address the philosophical and/or educational aspect.

into play, and its accommodation of different strains of regional folk music within its basic format.

Kabi Bijoy Sarkar, who composed the song quoted above on the scattering of his Dalit audience as refugees, offers a good example of the intermixture of regionally specific elements in the *kabigān* format and of its two aspects, the extroverted or competitive (demanding the poet to have several bodies of poetic, musical, religious and political knowledge at their fingertips) and the introspective or lyrical (being the ability to make an essence or mood blossom, *bhāb phuṭiyē tōlā*). Born in a Namashudra family in the district of Narail (near Jessore in East Bengal) as Bijoy Adhikari—*adhikāri* (“owner” or “right-holder”) being a Vaishnava surname and also a title of the proprietor of a *jātrā* troupe, and *sarkār* (“master”) being a *kabi* title and surname—Bijoy Sarkar began his musical career in *jātrā* and became a disciple of *kabi* So-and-so. He migrated to West Bengal after Partition and was part of an effort to revive *kabigān*—details. Bijoy Sarkar is remembered for introducing the use of *bhāṭiyāli* melodies and *bāul* themes in the opening section of his *kabigān* compositions. He is known mostly for *bhāb* but held his own in competition (Thakur and Biswas 2002).

In a commemorative volume on Matua leader Krishnachandra Thakur or “Keshto Sadhu,” an acquaintance calls him *bhābpāglā ār kājpāglā mānuṣ*, a person crazy for *bhāb* (here, loosely spiritual-philosophical thought) and crazy for work (here, both livelihood and social activism).¹³⁹ This is an interesting play on one of the best-known slogans of the Matua movement, “*hātē kām, mukhē nām* (work in the hand and (God’s) name on the lips).” While the pairing of *kām* (= *kāj*, work) and *nām* ((holy) name) has an almost Puritanical ring, the pairing of *kāj* with *bhāb* brings us closer to a sense of “work and play” as equally essential components of lived philosophy. The word “Matua” means “drunk” or “crazy,” in line with the idea of losing oneself in *bhakti* (devotion) or love, a common notion in religious and artistic traditions across South Asia; likewise, *kāj/bhābpāglā* (crazy for work/*bhāb*) indicates losing oneself in work or thought/feeling. Practitioners of *kabigān* are often referred to as *Pāgol sarkār* (“crazy master”) and the epithet may be included in the “signature” of a composition (mention of the poet’s name in the last stanza), for instance, “Pāgol Bijoy” (Crazy Bijoy). This notion of madness-as-loss-of-self-awareness goes hand in hand with the notion of *līlā-khelā* (divine play). Several writers in the volume on Krishnachandra Thakur’s deep love of *kabigān* and other forms of folk song, to the point that he refused to participate in ostracizing a notorious *kabi*, claiming in his poetry “*āmār ṭhākur khelā korē* (my Lord plays).” The loss of self is what frees the mind to make space for this play.

Introducing a volume on *śramsāṅgīt* or work-songs, Shaktinath Jha makes a case for celebrating work (*śram*) based on the concept of the ashram—literally, a place of work, but a utopian one “outside of the authority of the state, [where] people produced the materials they needed to live in a well-ordered way, and engaged in the highest form of creativity, art, culture, and philosophy.” Citing Kabir, Rabidas, Tukaram, Dadu, Lalon, and other *sādhak*

¹³⁹ *Kriṣṇacandra Ṭhākur (Keshto Sādhū): smritisambhār*, Kolkata: Chaturtha Duniya, 1999. The volume is compiled by two Dalit writers, Manohar Mouli Biswas and Keshto Sadhu’s daughter Kalyani Thakur, who writes under the name of Kalyani Thakur Charal, boldly appending the former, pejorative name (Charal) for the community now known as Namashudra. This is an interesting move considering the middle term in another well-known Matua slogan, “*jībē dayā nāmē ruci mānuṣētē niṣṭhā* (compassion for all living beings, taste in naming, and devotion to humankind).”

(loosely “ascetic”) poets of Vaishnava, Shakta, and other schools, including Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, founders of the Matua *dharma*, he contrasts their idea of *śram* as *sādhana* (mode of spiritual attainment) with what he perceives as the laziness and simulation behind the mask of *bhābbādi sanyās*—the path of meditation and ecstasy, which involves giving up worldly efforts entirely. Jha seems to be missing two things here. One is that the Matuas’ “householder *dharma*,” which is against the abdication of family responsibility, does not simply extoll the spiritual value of work but comes out of a particular context, the Namashudra community’s struggle for self-respect; the place of work and worship is not the ashram, a sanctuary outside the social order, but any ordinary household and its householder struggling to make ends meet and live with dignity in that very social order which has marginalized them. The other is that even work-songs are a form of play: they help people work by making work into play, and, in a way, the work, by necessitating rhythm, creates an opportunity for play—but this play is always in excess of work, and, in the context of work-forms that do not have the cultural value or the element of choice inherent in *sanyās*, must with equal necessity become a medium of critique of work in the context of social, economic, and political structures.¹⁴⁰ Respect for the worker and the work-as-*āpon*, and critique of the alienation of work-as-*porer kāj* both have to be built through play.

Nirbakization and *swādhīn dās*: silence and servitude after “Independence”

We have seen how the discourse of indigeneity in West Bengali Dalit writing challenges *bhadralōk* othering of the “tribal.” On the home front, this discourse also departs from earlier, limited efforts to uplift Dalit communities and from the homogenizing effect of much Dalit rhetoric. As the earlier movements involved claiming Kshatriya, Vaishya, or rarely Brahmin caste origin and status, remaining localized and bound to one caste or, in many cases, only the better-off section of a caste. Thus, they failed to bring diverse groups together and to critically examine the intersections of caste and class or the myth of Aryan origin. For example, the Namashudra community, formerly known as Chandals, fought for respect by going on strike, refusing to perform work of any kind for the uppercaste communities; but ultimately their goal was to change their name in the official registry and adopt the *poite* (sacred thread) on the basis of a much-contested claim that they were descended from non-Bengali Brahmins. It was the Matua movement coming out of this same community that invested its challenge to the social order with broader significance.¹⁴¹ By contrast to individual *jāti*-based movements, the Dalit movement seeks to unite all oppressed groups against the caste oppression that remains unaddressed by the dominant discourse of class; yet this decenters the diverse identities of these groups even if diversity is acknowledged. The discourse of indigeneity complicates both strategies by redirecting the search for origins and reasserting the cultural diversity unaddressed by the dominant Dalit discourse of caste oppression. Dalit anthropologist Pashupati Prasad

¹⁴⁰ The *bhābbādi sanyāsi* too critiques work by refusing to do anything but think and sing. In the extreme case, a *bāul* like Gour Khepa refuses even to “perform” his songs, as many well-known *bāul* artists have done; he contends that singing cannot be contained in the framework of a “performance,” as singing is a way of life—or to put it the other way, life is a 24-7 performance.

¹⁴¹ If the Namashudras fought for the respect of others by refusing to work, the Matuas built self-respect through play (song and friendly contest).

Mahato recasts the common notion of “Sanskritization” as “nirbakization” or “cultural silence,” which has divided and isolated indigenous and Dalit communities for centuries; for him, it is not an undifferentiated unity but one rooted in a deep knowledge of diverse identities that is the strength of the Dalit movement (Mahato 1995).

The term “nirbakization” highlights the problem of intelligibility. In the 1980s, in response partly to remarks by continental theorists and partly to the Subaltern Studies Collective’s attempts to recover the voices of peasant rebels, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asked the famous question, “Can the subaltern speak?” Her answer: briefly, No, by which she meant that subaltern signification is not intelligible or legible. The novel by Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay explored in chapter 1 approaches this problem on a linguistic level, challenging with its emphatically illegible, if strategically stereotyped, Kāhār speech the assumption that the subaltern’s language is intelligible and transparent; this language, the text suggests, is not only a marker of difference but also dense with meanings not immediately accessible to the standard reader. This runs almost directly counter to the common theme in criticism of Tamil dialect literature, which I will discuss in the next chapter: the average reader accustomed to standard literary Tamil cannot make head or tail of the subaltern’s language, which is perceived as utterly illegible and unintelligible, and therefore does not bother to read such literature—or, in some cases, makes a heroic effort to penetrate the impenetrable.

Dalit writer and critic Manohar Mouli Biswas invokes Spivak’s question and answers: Yes, we can, and we do so in our own language(s) (Biswas and Pramanik 2011). This response involves a misreading of Spivak and a conflation of the “subaltern” and the “Dalit.” While the basic frame of reference for both terms is lack of access to social mobility, “subaltern,” in Spivak’s understanding, names a position, as opposed to “Dalit” which names a collective identity constructed on the basis of shared experience. Biswas’ statement represents a fight for visibility on the part of writing from the margins—which, he points out, are wider than the accepted body of text—, but leaves the problem of legibility/intelligibility unaddressed. However, Biswas’ misreading provides a point of departure for exploring a different question: What are the stakes and implications of the figure of the Dalit “speaking” in his/her “own language”? How does the problem of intelligibility inform Dalit poetics?

Silence and lack of understanding, not surprisingly, figure prominently in Dalit poetry. Chuni Kotal’s long poem “Protest,” written in memory of the 1982 massacre in her home district of Jhargram, demands an explanation for the silence around and misrepresentation of Lodha and, by extension, Dalit suffering:¹⁴²

...The happening happened, everything became quiet,
A day went by, nobody protested.
The Lodhas leave their homes and take refuge in the forest
With a faint hope of assistance, many sit in at offices.
The next day the police recover from the forest

¹⁴² The concluding section of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” hinged on the suicide of Bhubaneshwari Bhaduri, persistently misread as the result of illicit love despite her strategic timing of the act during menstruation. The suicide of Chuni Kotal was likewise misread as having to do with some love affair. This kind of misreading is what Spivak means by the “unintelligibility” of subaltern speech/acts.

six dead bodies, and write it down in their diaries.

The newspapers mention:8TH JULY

SIX DACOITS KILLED

FOR RAPING 60-YEAR OLD WOMAN.

Is there no court in this country?

Does no justice apply to them?...¹⁴³]

A story by Kapilkrishna Thakur similarly uses the device of the newspaper report, which reduces a tragedy that speaks volumes of the refugee experience, exploitation of women, and Dalit suffering to a simple and digestible equation of a minority community with criminality. In both cases, the writers call out a criminal misreading perpetrated by the authorities, the media, and the public.

Another common technique in Dalit writing plays on the trope of feigned stupidity or ignorance familiar from folklore. Beyond the specific figure of indigeneity explored earlier, the act of using dialect in a Dalit text involves reclaiming it, as the dialect speaker in Bengali texts is interpellated variously as *chōṭolōk* (lower classes, small-minded people), *chōṭo jāt* (lower castes), *cāṣabhuṣā* (uneducated farmers, rustics), *śramik-majur* (laborers), *jhi-cākor* (servants) etc. The dialect speaker in a Dalit text reclaims these various low-caste and working-class identities, asserting, Yes, I am a farmer, a laborer, a domestic worker; but at the same time, this allows him or her to play on the associated stereotypes. For example, a poem in Bardhaman dialect by Apurba Bauri:

“Hired hand”

That’s right.

Babu, this is also right:

The twice-discovered, bountiful mine

Is a trap to kill human beings. [...]

I’m a laborer

I have only my labor

When will I ever recognize my share?

You be the judge

Am I a hired hand

or a human?¹⁴⁴

The dialect allows the speaker to feign ignorance, imposing on the *bābu* the responsibility to answer. This strategy has been deployed in a particularly potent way in poems critiquing contemporary nationalist discourse. Much has been written in postcolonial criticism on the formation of nationalist discourse from various perspectives, but the focus has been on elite writers such as Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay or, in some cases, uppercaste women writers and social reformers.¹⁴⁵ Spivak has discussed the topic in self-designated “scattered notes” from the perspective of her engagements with indigenous communities and in her

¹⁴³ Chuni Kotal, “Pratibad (Protest),” in Biswas and Pramanik 2011, 111-112. My translation.

¹⁴⁴ Biswas and Pramanik 2011, 142.

¹⁴⁵ See Chatterjee, Kaviraj, Sartori, Sinha, Spivak, etc.

writings on Mahasweta Devi, a fierce feminist and indigenous rights activist but also an elite writer. However, very little has been written about Dalit, indigenous, or other marginal literatures in this context.

Rarhi poets Pradip Bauri and Lakkhan Bauri take the occasion of Independence Day as a prime opportunity to get to the heart of the problem of intelligibility and how it is entangled with cultures of servitude. In a poem entitled “*I-to ājādī loy* (Purulia dialect, “This is not freedom”),” Pradip Bauri writes,

The babus’ older boy told me,
 Hey Haran, tomorrow’s Independence Day—
 A day of freedom, you don’t have to come to work.
 What can I say, sir,
 I couldn’t sleep all night
 It started bothering me,
 I have to see what it’s like,
 this day of freedom!
 As soon as I woke up—rubbing my eyes
 I went off to that big market crossing,
 At that crossing everyone’s supposed to meet
 and celebrate the day of freedom.
 I’m telling you faithfully, babu—
 I was stunned when I saw it,
 At the tip of a shiny bamboo pole
 a flapping tricolored cloth
 This is supposed to be our national flag (*jātiya patākā*).
 Covering the sun with the palm of my hand,
 I kept staring upwards for a long time,
 My head spun and struck
 the earth—I too starting striking up
 clods of earth.
 My stomach started rumbling a little¹⁴⁶

Here, the seeming naïveté of Haran, who wants to “see” what independence is like, belies a sharp critique of the nation’s symbolism through its visual impact—shiny, colorful, dazzling, too close to the sun—and the impact of the man’s head on the earth, a painful reminder again of that “*dēś*” underfoot, giver of food, which is appropriated by the nation—here not *dēś* but “*jāti*.”

Lakkhan Bauri writes in Bardhaman dialect,

“That Independence, eh”
 A dark night
 Oh, such a hard and sad night
 And still the day dawned with the cock’s crow
 I have to run

¹⁴⁶ Biswas and Pramanik 2011, 119.

with a big basket
 I have to fight the fight of two men.
 The other day I didn't go out with the basket,
 Now even if I cut two *cuyā* of earth,
 I don't get two *sers* of rice.
 The upshot is, both bodies are clean gone
 Our chests are like stone roofs
 and our bodies like black, *hundhuindyā* harrows.
 How many more days will go by like this, tell me?
 What did you say?
 Tomorrow's Independence Day?
 Are you going?
 Huh, so what do you think you're going for—
 Well, if you go, bugger,
 starch your shirt and go.
 And get up your nerve and ask the babu,
 Excuse me sir, what is independence like?
 Do they swallow it?
 Or smear it on their skin?¹⁴⁷

If the works of Bankim Chattopadhyay, father of the Bengali novel and key player in the formation of nationalist discourse, are “difficult” due to the preponderance of “big words,” i.e., long, Sanskritic compounds (In Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* (titled in English *The Lonely Wife*), the Bankim-loving Charu comments: “I have to keep looking things up in the dictionary”), the difficulty of dialect literature lies in the little words—in a poem that, aside from the unstandardized peculiarities of dialect orthography, might seem clear as water, one word will stand out like a rock in the stream. An onomatopoeic expression like “*hundhuindyā*,” for example, is impossible to translate without an instinctive sense of what that sound evokes. This problem is dialectal in both linguistic and practical senses: for someone who has not spent much time with a harrow, like me, an onomatopoeic metaphor involving one is senseless. In what is, seen from this perspective, an ironic reversal, the speaker feigns ignorance of whether the grand phrase “*swādhīnatā dibas*,” “Independence Day,” refers to a foodstuff or a cosmetic—insinuating further that its champions are ostentatious ideologues (the expressions *guilyā khāoyā*, lit. to dissolve something in water and drink it, or to imbibe, and *gāyē mākhā*, to rub something on the skin, to display it or be oversensitive about it, cf. “to wear on one's sleeve.”) For someone who has spent their whole life in bonded labor, “*swādhīnatā dibas*” might as well be an onomatopoeia for some unknown object—but unlike the standard-speaking reader who can simply skip over “*hundhuindyā*” and congratulate themselves on having read a Dalit and/or dialect poem, the speaker, despite his bluster, cannot really afford to skip over the social and political constructs within and against which he wields his harrow and the poet his pen. It is necessary to starch one's shirt and go speak to the *babu*—or, as in the first poem, to go stare up at that flag struck into the soil.

¹⁴⁷ Biswas and Pramanik 2011, 124.

This deep contradiction in the building of the nation, between independence and servitude, is the subject of Kapilkrishna Thakur's somewhat heavy-handed story "Swadhin Das." The eponymous protagonist, whose name literally means "Independent Slave," gets in trouble for speaking his mind at an Independence Day rally and escapes violence by getting recruited by the local union leader. But even here, he has to "pass" as uppercaste: the surname Das, spelled with the letter "dante-sa" and meaning "slave/servant," is common among certain Dalit communities, but he has long been in the habit of writing his name with the letter "tālabya-śa" in the manner of his favorite poet Jibanananda Das—the Brahmo form of the Baidya caste surname Dasgupta. This exposes the fallacy of such name-changing exercises, as the caste distinction between the two Das-es is no longer audible, but it is still legible.

However, servitude in Dalit writing is not only a general, but also a specific condition. Upen Biswas' poem "Jhi-special (Maid-special)" focuses attention on the domestic servant pipeline that brings low-caste women from South 24 Parganas to work in middle-class households in Kolkata, on a local train routed through Sealdah station.

Upen Biswas's "*Jhi-special (Maid-special)*":

Sealdah station
 a desperate struggle
 to live.
 South
 and North.
 Maids come
 on the Maid-special
 at Sealdah South.
 Who are they?
 Who bothers to ask.
 The *bhadralōk*
 leaders
 smoking cheroots
 cigarettes
 don't have time
 to listen
 to the Maid-special's
 sad story.
 The young man has seen them
 from very close up
 the young man, their son.
 The maid
 is a farmer's daughter.
 Why should the pandits,
 the *bhadralōk*
 pay her any mind?
 Those who come
 on the Maid-special

they're all
 low-caste women.
 They are Dalit
 exploited
 saddened
 still
 they are needed.
 If the Maid-special
 doesn't come
 who will clean
 the *bhadralōk's*
 floors?
 Why should the *bhadralōk*
 wash the dishes?
 [...]

Biswas's poem states that the domestic servants are "all low-caste women." In fact, historically, due to entrenched notions of pollution around food and water, domestic servants have often been Brahmins; but the position is such that this makes little difference in the way they are perceived by the employers. A scene in Jibanananda Das' novel *Mālyabān* taps into this: the mistress of a lower-middle-class Vaidya household complains to her husband that flirtations between the cook and the maid are preventing them from completing their work in a timely manner; when he expresses astonishment, she says, "This kind of things happens all the time among the lower castes." He objects, "But [the maid] is a Brahmin's daughter." The wife: "The cook is also Brahmin." To the husband, this contradictory set of remarks seems "like a Chinese proverb, simple yet difficult, difficult yet simple."¹⁴⁸ The poem concludes,

Kolkata
 the heart of research activities
 Crores are expended here.
 From history to the dustbin.
 The Maid-Special comes
 at Sealdah South.¹⁴⁹

Questions or stories about the maid's life, her home and family, are of little interest, the poem suggests, to the other passengers on the train, to her employers, or to those engaged in well-funded "research activities." A counter-example to the latter is Raka Ray and

¹⁴⁸ It is his observation of another maid, who claims to be the daughter of a "Kayet" or Kayastha bearing the surname Sarkar (a title without specific caste designation but commonly used by some Dalit communities, including the poets of *kabigān*), and her interactions with a Brahmin cook and a Kurmi (a Dalit/indigenous community of the Bihar/West Bengal border region) along with his petulant desire for his wife to clean his room which precipitates the protagonist's descent into feverish meditations on empathy: the ruthless nonsensicality of caste, gender, and other social constructs take on truly frightening proportions when he contemplates his complicity with them.

¹⁴⁹ Biswas and Pramanik 2011, 113.

Seemin Qayum's *Cultures of Servitude*, which examines the residual attitudes at work in relations between employers and domestic workers in present-day Kolkata, despite changes in nomenclature—the *cākor* or “servant” is now *kājēr lōk*, “person who works” or “useful person” (though *cākor* is itself the root of *cākori*, job)—and an actual shift to contract-based rather than live-in type employment.¹⁵⁰ But the question of language here goes beyond naming—though there is something in a name, as the many Scheduled Caste name-change movements show. Biswas' poem is written in standard Bangla, but the untold, unheard story of the maid on the train at Sealdah South is a dialectal one. That story has not been told often even in Dalit literature, where the southern dialect is little represented, and the maid is most often shown at work or on the train, rarely at home.

In conclusion, in the Dalit context as in the other texts discussed above, a power inheres in the utterance: “our” language does not only express “ourselves,” but acts on the society that oppresses us; it is not only a representation of identity, but a performance of power. On the one hand, Dalit criticism in Bangla tends to pitch authenticity as an unquestioned good. The Dalit writers write “in their own language;” their language is direct and plain, it has the ring of truth. This is asserted with much conviction despite the actual range of linguistic varieties and literary styles found in Dalit writing, and the different values placed on speech styles in regional dialects. But the conviction behind the simplistic assertion of the truth of Dalit language has to do with the investment of performative power in it, which is inextricable from the speaker's dwelling place. In native West Bengali communities, this is closely linked to the discourse of indigeneity, entangled with those of *jati* and region; for East Bengali refugees and their descendants, it is deeply tied to displacement, continuing to haunt the nation-building project; for workers of all communities, it is a space of play in which social and political change can be imagined and enacted.

¹⁵⁰ Ray and Qayyum, *Cultures of servitude: modernity, domesticity, and class in India*, Stanford University Press, 2009.

Chapter 4

Dialect in Tamil literature: an overview

The volume *Streams of Language: Dialects in Tamil*, edited by M. Kannan, provides an excellent handbook of literary-historical as well as writers' perspectives on dialect. I draw primarily on the essays in that volume here to give a brief trajectory of dialect usage in Tamil literature, supplemented by my own analysis of a few key texts in this trajectory.

Dialect in premodern Tamil

Dialectal variation has been a feature of Tamil literature from the first extant corpus of texts. S.V. Shanmugam notes variations based on region, age difference, gender, and socioeconomic status in the poetry of the Caṅkam period.¹⁵¹ He distinguishes “dramatic” dialects, such as those in the *Kamparāmāyaṇam*, which “fictionalize” gender-specific verb forms, and “eye” dialects, orthographies used to represent folk speech. From early on up through the modern period, he notes, creative writers have practiced a “folk” or “literary” dialectology based on their intuitive sense of others' dialects. R. Kothandaraman calls these creative representations of dialect “textual dialects.”¹⁵² Jean-Luc Chevillard traces the concept of *ticaī-c-col*, “directional” or regional words in Tamil grammatical literature and traditional lexicons. This category, associated with twelve geographical regions, is defined in opposition to *iyaṛ-col*, “plain” words in common usage irrespective of education and region, and *tiri-col*, rare or literary words, as well as *vaṭṭa-col*, Sanskrit or Prakrit loanwords.¹⁵³

Dialect in Tamil modernism

As in Bangla, from the early stages of modern Tamil literature, the conventional pattern permitted colloquial or dialectal forms of language in dialogue, framed by narration in literary Tamil. The Tamil modernists of the *Maṇikkoṭi* group took the colloquial somewhat further, including the best-known figure of this movement, Pudumaippittan.¹⁵⁴ The novel *Nākammāl* (1941) by R. Canmukacuntaram, also affiliated with the *Maṇikkoṭi* group, is seen as the seminal text of *vaṭṭāra (vaḷakku) ilakkiyam* or “regional (custom) literature” for its intensive use of the language and material culture of the Koṅku region.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ “Historical dialectology: with special reference to old and late middle Tamil,” *Streams of Language: Dialects in Tamil*, Kannan M., ed., Pondicherry: IFP, 2008, 141-150.

¹⁵² “Remarks on Tamil dialects,” *Streams of Language* 151-166.

¹⁵³ “The concept of *ticaī-c-col* in Tamil grammatical literature and the regional diversity of Tamil classical literature,” *Streams of Language* 21-52.

¹⁵⁴ For a discussion of dialectal and colloquial language in Pudumaippittan and his historical context, see “Pudumaippittan—The Historical Perspective,” Zuzana Vihanová, *Aspects of Linguistic Variability in Tamil Short Fiction*, Prague: Univerzita Karlova v Praze, 2012, 30-51.

¹⁵⁵ Elisabeth Sethupathy notes that the Koṅku dialect as represented in R. Canmukacuntaram's work differs only slightly from the standard non-Brahmin dialect (“A variety of Tamil writings: scope and limitations of translating modern Tamil prose into French,” *Streams of Tamil* 82). However, what is most relevant here is perhaps not the degree of difference but the way in which regional identity and difference is handled—not as a touch of authenticity or experiment here or there, but integral to the text. Present-day dialect writer Perumal Murugan, from the same region, has written extensively on R. Canmukacuntaram's contributions.

R. Canmukacuntaram (1917-1977) was born in the village of Kīranūr in Tārāpuram municipality, Īrōṭu district in the Koṅku region of western Tamil Nadu. He began his literary career publishing short stories in the journal *Maṅikkōṭi* and produced more than twenty novels as well as translations of more than 100 novels into Tamil, including Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's Bengali novel *Pather Pāñcāli*. His own *Nākammāl* is widely seen as the first *vattāra* or "regional" novel. Ambai suggests that the eponymous protagonist *Nākammāl* is not only a daughter of the soil of Koṅku Nāṭu, but has the power to expand the world that springs from that soil—and yet the novel is so rooted in that soil that it resists translation.¹⁵⁶ The novel is acclaimed for its realism: Ambai stresses the poetic force of the portrayal of *Nākammāl*, which the writer achieves in a few strokes "like a line-drawing," so that the woman seems independent even of his authorial intent.¹⁵⁷

This effect, however, is not the result of letting the characters speak for themselves—on the contrary, the authorial voice routinely addresses the reader with comments about them—but of a measured distance from the heroine and identification with the townsfolk. The narrator intervenes frequently to forestall the reader's questions and account for his own narrative methods with remarks like the following: "Well, if I go on telling you about *Nākammāl* the events will unfold beyond their limits, so let us direct our gaze to other parts as well" (16). This self-conscious reticence around the figure of *Nākammāl* is responsible for much of the force of the portrayal. While the omniscient narrator moves in and out of the minds of Rāmāyi, Cinnappan, and other characters, he reserves this power in the case of *Nākammāl* until a pivotal scene in the seventh chapter. Even in this scene, we are given a glimpse of the resentment that has built up in *Nākammāl*'s mind about her unacknowledged claim to her dead husband's land, but we are not granted access to the thought-process that leads her to take the decisive step into an illicit relationship with Keṭṭiyappan in the next chapter. This impression of aloofness is reinforced by the unattributed doubts and questions that frequently accompany the appearances of these two characters. *Nākammāl* makes her first entrance as an unidentified voice "like the stroke of a bell" that silences everyone returning from the weekly market:

"Who spoke in this ringing voice? Don't be wonderstruck that Brahma bestowed this kind of glorious voice on a woman. Since you will find out more about this *Nākammāl* later, I'm not going to give you even a brief account of her now. But it's enough for now if I specify that she's been acting like a 'queen' since ten years before she lost her husband, and that she doesn't know how to behave before others with docility, modesty, or fear" (12).

Similarly, Keṭṭiyappan first appears as an unnamed drunk with "An authoritative voice" correcting the Paraiyar drummers in a festival; his identity and the source of his drinking money are revealed partly in the dialogue, when the leader of the town landowners asks, "'Who's that, Cinnu, ordering people around?' ... 'That's our Keṭṭipan, sir'" and then "'Wonder where he got the money to drink!'", which is answered after several more rhetorical questions by the narrator (19). Again, the eighth chapter opens with an unnamed man

¹⁵⁶ "Maṅṅācai" ("Desire for earth/land"), introduction to *Nākammāl*, Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu, 2007.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

walking by the river, identified as Keṭṭiyappan only from the “unhuman voice” that is the echo of his own voice ringing out like a bell; the narrator suggests that “It would never occur to Keṭṭiyappan that this sudden-born ‘authority’ would hold up many others’ work” (38). As he tries to light a match, an unidentified someone surprises him with a question, and he wonders if “this strange voice is a human voice or some ghost or demon,” but the voice—a woman’s—asks again softly, “It’s you, Keṭṭiyappan?” This, of course, is Nākammāl. Their conversation gives us a hint that they are up to something, but over the next few chapters, we hear of their doings only through rumor. The narrator thus implicitly aligns himself with the townspeople, almost seeming to participate in their gossip.

The dialect represented in the novel does not appear to vary greatly from standard non-Brahmin spoken Tamil in terms of its verb forms. In fact, the verb forms in the dialogue are irregular: the first person singular and plural endings are sometimes represented as *-en* and *-om* and sometimes as *-an* and *-am*; the second and third person plural endings are usually represented as *-āṅka*, *-īṅka* but occasionally the written forms *-ārkaḷ*, *īrkaḷ* are retained; in the conversations between Nākammāl and Rāmāyi, sometimes the former speaks almost entirely in the written form¹⁵⁸ and the latter answers in spoken, while at other times both use the spoken form consistently. The variation does not seem to be systematic, although the written form is more consistently retained for the characters’ thoughts than in their speech, where the spoken form, standard or not, dominates.¹⁵⁹ However, as Perumāḷ Murukan notes in an essay on dialect in his own fiction, one dialectal difference that may often go unnoticed or give rise to misinterpretation is the use of nouns: one thing may be given a different name in every region on the basis of its different qualities, the same name may be used for different things, or a word may only exist in a particular dialect (261).¹⁶⁰ While the dialect in *Nākammāl* is represented only in the dialogue, the narration in standard literary Tamil is nevertheless infiltrated by others’ speech in the form of proverbs and other fragments in what Bakhtin would call the “character zones.” Idiomatic expressions in the text, as well as onomatopoeic expressions and English loanwords, are frequently set off with single quotes: ‘from salt to camphor,’ the household items available in the weekly market; ‘before me, before you,’ expressing the market-goers’ hurry to head home; *viṭucūlai*, a word used for Keṭṭiyappan by way of saying he is “not afraid of anyone” (11, 19). This applies not only to unusual words but also to usage: the standard word *kārru* (‘air, wind’) is set off in this way when it is used for the “oil-filled” gas in a ‘gaslight’ (“*eṇṇey niraiya iruntum ‘kārru’ kuraintuviṭṭatāl ‘keslaiṭ’...*” 21). Whether or not such expressions are linguistically marked as dialectal, they clearly belong to the community in the story.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ In the same passage on page 29, for instance, Nākammāl says “*ukkantukontirukkiray*” (a hybrid of standard spoken and written forms) in one line and “*kattikittu poren*” (spoken form) in another.

¹⁵⁹ We do not have, for example, a passage analogous to the one in Manik Bandyopadhyay’s *Padmā nadīr mājhi* where the narrator comments on the mixture of literary and spoken forms in the dialogues of a *jātrā* (folk theater) performance. I have heard an anecdote about one such performance where one actor replied to the other’s high-flown line with a rebuke in dialect for not having given him a *beedi* backstage!

¹⁶⁰ “Dialect as creative language: some notes.” *Streams of Language* 259-266.

¹⁶¹ *Nākammāl* centers on the Kavunṭar agricultural landowning caste. Paṛaiyars, Cakkilis, and other non-Kavunṭar characters come and go like extras on the scene, serving at most an instrumental purpose, such as the Cakkili who encounters Nākammāl on the road and informs her of the family emergency that calls her brother-in-law’s visiting mother-in-law back home, averting temporarily the impending disaster of the sale of the land (70). Nākammāl’s fixation on the land has much to do with her precarious status as a widow with a

Karical ilakkiyam (Literature of the black-earth region)

In the decades following the modernist movement, writer and folklorist Ki. Rajanarayanan's audacious use of the Karical dialect sparked a short movement of writings from the Karical region with the slogan "write as you speak!"¹⁶² Ki. Ra. (1923-), as he is popularly known, was born in Itaiçeval village near Kōvilpaṭṭi in Tūttukuti district, southeast Tamil Nadu, in a family with Telugu roots. *Kōpalla Kirāmam* (1976) was his first novel. As a folklorist, he collected many volumes of tales from his own "Karical" or "Black Soil" microregion, where his fiction writing is also set.

The boldness of Ki. Ra.'s writing lies not only in its frank approach to sexuality and, arguably, his unapologetic bias towards his own community, but also in his free intermixing of standard literary Tamil with colloquial and dialectal forms. While some found this mixed language sloppy or transgressive (perhaps especially in conjunction with the perceived bawdiness of Ki. Ra.'s prose), others have been delighted by its vividness and intimacy: Yuvan Chandrashekhara writes in the preface to the Kalachuvadu edition, "A writing that speaks naturally [*iyalpāna*], as if placing a hand on the reader's shoulder. A writing that slowly effaces the gap between spoken and written language [*pēccuvalakkum eḷuttuvalakkum*]. By telling the story simply and directly, Ki. Ra. has made the beauty and facility of language partake of the same essence [my literal gloss of *camaracam*, which can be translated as "compromise," but as this comment has none of the negative connotation attached to that word in English it is better understood in the senses of "accord," "rapport," etc.] ("Munnurai (Introduction), *Kōpalla Kirāmam (Gopalla Village)*, Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu, 2006, 9-10). Throughout the novel, Chandrashekhara continues, it is difficult to tell when the author is speaking, when the narrator, and when the characters; the story seems to move of its own accord "out of the author's hands," and does not belong to any one character (12).

Again, however, this highly praised effect does not come from any radical rejection of narrative structure, but from a close engagement with traditional narrative. What strikes the reader as unconventional, then, is the anonymous yet personal feel of a folkloric corpus of tales rather than a tightly woven plot centered on individuals, like that of *Nākammāl*, for example. From the first sentence of the novel, the narrator adopts a storyteller's style, stretching words out for emphasis. The narrative moves progressively back in time, the chapters linked by associative memory, until the ancient Maṅkatayāru Ammāl takes over the narrative and turns it around: Aracappa Nāyakkar's ability as a judge goes back to his grandpa's grandpa's time, during the transition between the reigns of the chieftains and the "Company"; one day during that time, there was a murder and robbery near the village; Kiriṣṇappa Nāyakkar catches the murderer; he reports to his older brother Kōvintappa

young daughter, but also with the ingrained attachment to and sense of ownership of land which comes with her community's privilege. Perumāḷ Murukan's *Kūḷa Mātāri* (2000, translated as *Seasons of the Palm* by V. Geetha) takes place in the neighboring district of Nāmakkal in the Koṅku region and centers on child agricultural laborers of the Cakkili caste—a subgroup of the Dalit Aruntāyars—who work on Kavunṭar farms. The novel consistently uses dialect in the dialogue and the narration, although it grammatically conforms to written Tamil, is thick with dialect nouns and details of material culture. The children, landless by birth, do not have the same possessive attachment to the land but have an intimate knowledge of its Natural and human-made features and cycles.

¹⁶² For a critique of this movement, see Kannan M., Introduction to *Streams of Language*, xvi.

Nāyakkar, who declares that the evil days of Kali Yuga are upon them and cries thinking of the family's better days; back in those days, the seven brothers lived together, each with his own tasks, and their great-grandma Maṅkatayāru Ammāl tells them tales of the family's migration from Andhra country. Here we soon start moving forward: we learn how the Kammavars came to be and got their name, then on Kōvintappa Nāyakkar's request we hear how the family came to Tamil Nadu: great-grandma's older sister Cennādevi, a fairy-tale creature whose beauty made people cry and pray and murderers give up violence, attracted the eye of a "Turkish" king, and fled on the eve of their wedding with kith and kin, helped by a miraculous tree, and the story is done for the day. After this interlude, we move closer to the present of the seven brothers with a more realistic sketch of their relative and employee Akkaiyyā's life. But by now we sense that Maṅkatayāru Ammāl has not temporarily appropriated the narrative: the narrator has modeled his style on hers from the start. The narrative is punctuated with "one day..."s and "in those days..."s, words extended with ellipsis, elaborate and sometimes dramatic descriptions of the house, village, and family members, and also, curiously, with numbered lists of events and characters, which give it an almost script-like feel at times.

As in *Nākammāl*, the setting off of words in single quotes seems to indicate particular usage more often than rarity or nonstandard pronunciation: for instance, the trees that once stood around the house have been 'eaten up' (21). Dialect words that appear in the text are, in this edition at least, asterisked and footnoted: for instance, the word 'irucuru' for 'karppini' (pregnant) (29). The dialogue is in dialect and the narration—both that of the narrator and that of Maṅkatayāru Ammāl, which is not set off with quotes—in a standard written style, but one that keeps its guard down, so to speak, letting spoken and nonstandard words and forms creep in here and there. When, within Maṅkatayāru's story, Cennādevi starts telling the story of the flies' wedding, her narration slips into a mixed style that loosely replicates the distinction between written and spoken style, using standard verb endings with spoken orthographies (*poṇṇu ī...poṭṭukonṭiruntatu*) and spoken forms in standard orthography for the flies' thoughts (*māppiḷlai iyin mukattai orutaram pārkkānumnu poṇṇu iḱku rom...ba ācai*) (49). As Chandrashekar's comment suggests, this casually shifting style seems to take the reader into confidence and conflate her with the specified and unspecified listeners to the many stories within the story.¹⁶³

Like *Nākammāl*, the characters in *Kōpalla Kirāmam* are poor but privileged, retaining a certain grandeur even in hard times; while Nākammāl's fixation on her lost land has more to do with personal respect and practical necessity than with nostalgia, the story of the Koṭṭaiyār household is one of lost jewels and other kinds of plenitude, attributed ultimately to the aggression of past "Turkish" (Muslim) rulers of Andhra Pradesh. In both novels, the tangential references to other castes and religions matter-of-factly register prejudice without implying any critique or detailing the interdependence of the various local communities, but the folktale framework of *Kōpalla Kirāmam* makes this omission

¹⁶³ The old woman Sucāṅḍ, Kāhār village storyteller and mourner in Tārāsaṅkar Bandyopādhyāy's *Hāṁsuli Bāṅker Upakatha*, plays something of an analogous role, but, by contrast, as discussed above, the layers of narrative are maintained in tension and dialect words incorporated into the narrator's language are subject to an internal translation, pointing insistently to the different languages of folk memory and history, or their different readings of events and transitions, and preempting the assumption of intelligibility. I have called this writing "ethnographic," a label which I would hesitate to apply to *Kōpalla Kirāmam* despite its rich description, as its mode is primarily one of identification rather than othering.

more noticeable than *Nākammāl'*s realism. Before offering help, for example, Kiruṣṇappa Nāyakkar asks the man searching for the murder victim “*varṇam enna?* (What is your caste?)” (29). Kannan M.'s criticism of Ki. Ra.'s work as “promoting” caste- and micro-regional identities undoubtedly comes from the missed (ignored?) opportunities for social critique glossed over by the rollicking folktale style.¹⁶⁴ However, the tale-teller's relish with which the narrative lingers on descriptions of the village, surrounding landscape, house, attire, habits, customs, and practices gives it a level of intimate detail that is not possible in the tight, psychologically driven realist narrative.

Despite the controversy around Ki. Ra. himself, creative writing in folkloric, ethnographic, and auto-ethnographic modes using dialect continues to thrive in Tamil writing to the present day. Two other dialect writers from the Karical region, but not affiliated with Ki. Ra.'s movement, are Pumani and Konanki. Pumani (1947-) was born in Antipaṭṭi village near Kōvilpaṭṭi. His novel *Piraku* (1979) is considered groundbreaking in its portrayal of a cobbler. His massive historical novel *Agnāti* (2012) deals with caste conflict in the Karical region over a 200-year period and represents not only the language of the region that of his own community, the Pallar farmers, but a wide spectrum of dialectal difference within the region.¹⁶⁵ Many of Pumani's short stories follow the conventional division of labor between dialect and standard language. However, the story “*Piñcupaḷam* (Unripe fruit)” is narrated entirely in dialect by a young boy and at least three stories, “*Aṭi* (A blow/beating)”, “*Āttiram* (Anger/frustration)”, and “*Kuṭai* (Umbrella),” consist entirely of dialectal dialogue. While these strategies do not directly challenge the dominance of standard written Tamil as the appropriate language of the implied author, it does demonstrate the possibility and effectiveness of a more sustained and autonomous artistic expression in dialect. Konanki (1957-) grew up in Nākalapuram, Virutunagar district. His experimental, fragmented prose still maintains the standard of written narration and dialectal speech but subsumes both in a reverie-like narrative without a conventional beginning or end and full of vocatives and ellipsis, so that the distinction seems perhaps to mark different states of mind, or perhaps simply to come from an aesthetic that sees each form of language as a potent and evocative mode of expression.

Dialect dictionaries

An interesting feature of the Tamil literary scene post Ki. Ra. is the production of dialect dictionaries by creative writers, mostly untrained in lexicography. Inspired by the example of Ki. Rājanārāyaṇan's dictionary of Karical dialect, writers Perumal Murugan, A.K. Perumal, Nanjil Nadan, and Kanmani Gunasekaran have all undertaken the compilation of regional dialect dictionaries. Perumal Murugan argues that a writer cannot escape dialect, which as living language will find its way into his work, but that a creative engagement with dialect requires research and should be supported by paratext such as footnotes (as in the work of Thoppil Muhammad Miran), glossaries (as in some recent editions of Sundara Ramaswamy's work), or by dialect dictionaries.¹⁶⁶ Amateur lexicography may have its limitations; exploring the relationship between the use of dialect in Perumal Murugan's

¹⁶⁴ See Kannan M., Introduction to *Streams of Language*, xviii.

¹⁶⁵ See Kalyan Raman, “Clashing By Night,” *The Caravan*, 1 February 2012, online.

¹⁶⁶ “Dialect as creative language” (262, 264)

novel *Ēruveyil* and the author's lexicographic work, Pa. Madhukesvaran finds a long list of nonstandard words found in the novel have not been listed in the dictionary, raising the question of whether these are indeed Koṅku dialect words or not, and notes several discrepancies in usage and orthography between the novel and the dictionary.¹⁶⁷ This suggests that the project of rendering difference transparent is incomplete and fraught with difficulties. However, the advantage of intimacy with local language and communities is not to be underestimated—after all, these words need to be compiled precisely because they are absent in lexicographical works intended for academic purposes or general use.

Dialect, region, and caste

While the term *vaṭṭāra vaḷakku ilakkiyam*, understood as synonymous with “dialect literature,” indicates the conceptual privilege of regional dialect, Brahmin and Dalit dialects have a strong presence in artistic practice. Along with Madras Tamil, Brahmin Tamil has featured prominently in modern literature; the non-Brahmin writer Jeyakāntan used both dialects so effectively that he has been widely mistaken for a Brahmin. Dialect has had a heightened political importance in Dalit literature, as linguistic diversity is seen as deeply implicated in social hierarchy. Dalit writers who use dialect extensively include Bama, Alakiya Periyavan, N.T. Rajkumar, and Imaiya. The use of dialect also features prominently in the work of writers from minority religious and ethnic communities, such as Thoppil Muhammad Miran, Salma, Hepzibah Jesudasan, and others. Finally, the role of gender in dialect usage is underexplored, a question I turn to in chapter 4.

From kate to kavanam: narrative and attention in Tamil dialect writing

Contemporary Tamil Dalit writer Imaiya's recent novel *Eṅ kate* (*My Story*, orthographically representing colloquial pronunciation) has been hailed as a bold experiment in “spoken” Tamil writing.¹⁶⁸ However, it is not a “dialect” text. There is a difference in perspective and function between “spoken” Tamil (*pēccuttamiḷ*) and “dialectal” language (*vaṭṭāra vaḷakku*) in writing.¹⁶⁹ In my understanding, what this implies is not merely that the language represented orthographically in the text is not marked by heavy regional usage. The title itself gives away the novel's project: *eṅ kate*, my story—this “spoken” Tamil text aspires to a seamless performance of first-person narrative, in which the simulation, in this case not so much of speech but of the orality of thought, takes us into the narrator's mental landscape. The distinction between the “spoken” and the “dialectal” is not a binary but a spectrum, across which the degree of particularity of language is linked to the text's relation to narrative and performance via psychology, “experience narrative,” folklore, or community life and to its correlated understanding of place in the form of

¹⁶⁷ “A dialect novel and a dialect dictionary,” *Streams of Language*, 217-220.

¹⁶⁸ Imaiya, *Eṅ Kate (My Story)*, Chennai: Cre-A, 2015. While Imaiya's novel is by no means the first work to be written entirely in “spoken” Tamil—other Dalit writers such as Bama and Puhall have consistently written this way, and dialect writers such as Pumani, Perumal Murugan, and Kanmani Gunasekaran have done so selectively or in their early work—it is a departure from Imaiya's earlier writing, in which he adhered to the conventional separation of “written” and “spoken” varieties.

¹⁶⁹ Note that these are distinct, but not mutually incompatible approaches but can coexist, conflictingly or complementarily, in varying proportions in a single text or body of work.

habitations, migrations, and circulations. At one end of the spectrum, the author plays the role of performer; at the other, the role of listener.

Eñ kate's novelty in the context of Imaiyam's work and the implications of the shift in his language use have to do with the question of individual agency, which in turn is linked to that of locality. The language of Imaiyam's earlier work on explicitly Dalit themes is highly aural but maintains the conventional separation of "written" authorial narration from dialectal character speech, except in lyrical passages where the emotional and political charge of the character's voice strips it bare; in these passages, the dialect's expressive power and vulnerability temporarily silence authorial commentary. In the novel *Kōvēru kaḷutaikaḷ* (*Beasts of Burden*, 1994), for instance, the protagonist Arokkiyam's characteristic vocatives and the quotation of lyrics and onomatopoeic evocation of song and drama forms make unmarked entrances and exits, taking up extended sections of the text in which the author is absent. The exclusive use of "spoken" Tamil in *Eñ kate*, while by no means unprecedented in Tamil literature, thus marks a departure from Imaiyam's earlier practice; and the correspondingly complete absence of a distinctive authorial voice in this text raises the question of whether this absence is qualitatively different from the earlier ones, or only quantitatively. I am tempted to argue the former. While the force at work in yielding to character voices in *Kōvēru kaḷutaikaḷ* is affect (and perhaps, in some places, the sheer pleasure of sound), with the author elsewhere performing the usual narrative-analytical role, in *Eñ kate* the character-narrator is taken to be a self-sufficient analyst of his own experience. In a review of the novel, linguist E. Annamalai claims:

Imaiyam has shown the virility [*vīryam*] and actuality [*nijatanmaī*] of spoken Tamil without admixture in this short novel. This is a big victory for Tamil writers and Tamil writing.¹⁷⁰

What is at stake here? Most evidently, the conditions and limits of agency. In contrast to Imaiyam's dialectal Tamil, which belongs to representatives of specific communities whose lives are firmly located in a small circuit of villages and perpetually circumscribed by changing, but deep-seated forms of marginalization (the caste-class-gender complex), Imaiyam's "spoken" Tamil belongs to individuals produced by, but not bound to their social background; gender and sexuality can thus take center stage, while other factors are muted. The protagonists of *Eñ kate* are individuals of indeterminate caste, though living in a predominately agricultural area (the Kadalur region). Annamalai notes:

The characters' caste names are not in the story, except that we know Kamalā's caste is a hair higher than Vināyakam's. This is not the result of the cautious avoidance of caste that comes from the experience of recent writers who talk about caste in their writing. This is an indication that Vināyakam and Kamalā could be of any caste.

And that, therefore, there is no predetermined disinclination to listen to their speech. Here a line can be tentatively drawn between the dialectal and the spoken: dialect is the

¹⁷⁰ "En vacippu (My reading)," *Kanaiyāli*, September 2015. My translation. "Virility" seems to be an appropriate translation of this "veeryam," as opposed to "potency," "effectiveness," etc., as *Eñ kate* is a story of sexuality told from the male perspective.

language of those who cannot speak (in Spivak's sense), "spoken" the language of those who speak their minds—and we are willing to listen, at some length and without forcing this speech immediately into preconceived social categories other than gender—or to put it differently, the recognition of this speech as individual and detachable rather than local-community-based inclines us to accept the isolation of gender from its entanglements with caste, class, and other matters that take locally specific shapes. This difference in the potential of the character-narrator's speech for recognition enables the author to disappear; the absence of authorial voice, notably, is common to most exclusively spoken/dialectal Tamil (and Bengali) writing, and I will return later to the question of whether this disappearing act necessarily always has the same implications. But let us take a step backwards. Accepting that the character-narrator of a "spoken" text shares a kind of common ground with the author, why then is the "spoken" language more suited to this task than the "written" language? Annamalai argues:

Because the strength of the story lies in its being the story of individuals, this is reflected in the whole story being in spoken language. Only when the authorial voice narrates does the need for written language arise. For the characters, spoken language is enough; to ruminate within themselves on what has happened to them, the spoken language is appropriate.¹⁷¹

What I would like to point out here is, again, that Vināyakam has taken over some of the function of the "authorial voice," by being cast as a complex individual not determined by social factors. Interestingly, the novel's "spoken" language suited to "individual" expression is not exactly a zero-dialect; despite the unspecified social background of the characters, Annamalai points out that the novel contains an astonishing profusion of idioms (specifically, similes and proverbs) associated with "the mindset of farmers," but identifies Vināyakam's mental unrest rather than a meaningful sense of belonging as a possible reason for his returning to these phrases time and again. This language may come from but is nevertheless not deeply attached to a place or community. *Eṅ kate* takes the form of a confession: its seamless "spoken" language is a performance by the author in which his success is measured by the degree to which he disappears, letting the individual "speak" his mind and unburden himself. This mode is far from local and so it is not surprising that it occasions a "spoken" rather than heavily "dialectal" language; the act of translation of the local blends into a globalized notion of individual psychology; in a moment of detachment, the narrator finds himself pondering the name of the provincial city where he goes to meet his lover: "*kaṭālūr. kaṭal-ūr* (Katalur [Cuddalore], City of the Sea)"—the city is abstracted into a trigger for a mental state giving itself up for analysis.

Returning to the question of the implications of the absence of an authorial voice, this absence takes several forms but is often associated with the dramatic elements of fiction. One of Pumaṇi's fully dialectal short stories, "Piñcupaḷam (Unripe fruit),"¹⁷² performs a monologue that seems to give access to the child narrator's experience; here the "spoken" mode together with dialectal language creates an illusion of raw, unmediated authenticity that is aided by an impressionistic sense of locality; yet despite the feeling of interiority, the

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² In *Pūmaṇi cīrukataikaḷ* (*Short Stories by Pumaṇi*), Chennai: Natrinai Pathippagam, 2013, 26-37.

immaturity of the narrator prevents him from taking on the semi-authorial/analytical role, limiting him to speaking from experience. Another Pumani story, “Āttiram (Rage),” stages the relation of an anecdote through dialogue, as if the stage directions have been omitted from the text of a play; the anecdote gives a geography of the incident, but the site of action for us is the teashop where it is related; all places in the story function more as type-places than as particular localities. In both stories, the author does a vanishing act, but the second story gets its flavor from the grain of salt the listener’s presence adds to the anecdote.¹⁷³ This too is different from *En kate* in that the speakers, though expressing their own critiques of others’ behavior, remain unaware of our presence; in both stories, the authorial voice simply refrains from commenting altogether, giving the semblance of allowing us to eavesdrop on the characters. The other common source of speaking-listening structure is oral storytelling or folklore. Dalit writer Puhali or Puhalenti writes exclusively in a full-blown, unapologetically dialectal language, for which, as Zuzana Vihanová reports, he has fought editors tooth and nail, in an oral-storytelling mode, referred to somewhat disparagingly as *pāṭṭi katai* or “grandma stories” (Vihanová 2012, 148).¹⁷⁴ This mode embeds his work firmly in the local community. However, the folkloristic mode does not necessarily demand exclusive use of dialect. As discussed above, writer-folklorist Ki. Rajanarayanan uses a permeable dialectal-colloquial-written language, radical in its time for breaking down the boundaries between these varieties, and draws on folklore and family lore, notably in *Kōpalla Kirāmam (Gopalla Village)* through the figure of the great-grandmother. Another interesting example of folkloric narrative structure is *Kavalai (Worry/Sadness, 1998)* by Azhakiya Nayaki Ammal, encouraged to take up the pen and record her oral stories by her son, dialect writer Ponneelan; the novel recounts a family’s origin in the celestial realm and descends through their earthly generations to their present predicament, but the language of narration is quite formal not only in spelling, etc. but also in its elevated style.

These dramatic or performance-oriented approaches contrast with the rather unique style of Dalit writer Bama, who has consistently written in a colloquial/dialectal language that is permeable to “written” usages; she asserts that this language makes her feel happy and close to her characters,¹⁷⁵ but in effect, it is the opposite of naturalistic as she does not project any other identity than her own intersectional one as an educated Dalit woman writer, former Catholic nun, and educator. Rather than performance-oriented, her writing is performative—effecting a bond between writer, reader, and character that has both intimate and political dimensions. Bama’s pioneering autobiography *Karukku* opens with a mapping of the village that registers intimacy with both its beauty and its social injustice.¹⁷⁶

Kanmani Gunasekaran’s work, by contrast to all the above modes of storytelling, approaches the community’s physical, social, and emotional landscapes in a mode of

¹⁷³ In *Pūmaṇi cirukataikal (Short Stories by Pumani)*, 397-405. The story “Āttiram” has been translated as “Ire” by Subhashree Krishnaswamy in Dilip Kumar, ed. *The Tamil Short Story: Through the Times, Through the Tides*, Chennai: Tranquebar Press, 2016.

¹⁷⁴ Vihanová notes the use of particles indicating second-hand information in Puhali’s stories and deems them a transposition into written form of “grandma stories” (148).

¹⁷⁵ Bama, “*Dalit ilakkiyam: enatu anupavam (Dalit literature: my experience)*,” in Kannan M., ed., “*Dalit ilakkiyam: enatu anupavam (Dalit literature: my experience)*,” Pondicherry: IFP, 2004, 99.

¹⁷⁶ *Karukku* (1992) has been translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom (first edition 2002, second revised edition Oxford University Press, 2014). I take up critical attitudes to language mixing below.

attentive listening and observation, piecing together fragmented forms and untold stories. In this, there are affinities between Gunasekaran's work and that of other dialect writers, including Tamilselvi, Imaiyam (in earlier work), Perumal Murugan, and many others, but each writer's work has its own texture which comes out of their different ways of attending to language, lore, and locality. Though Gunasekaran's work has been labeled by the publisher as "*iyalbuvaṭi* (naturalist)" and draws on a variety of folk forms, it is neither prone to the kind of naturalist performance discussed above nor attached to folkloristic narrative modes. Gunasekaran characterizes the writer's task by analogy to a crow, which may be sitting on a branch looking at nothing in particular; but when it notices something good, it tilts its head and gazes keenly at it.¹⁷⁷ This is not an expansive, top-down "bird's eye view," but the attentive, zoom-in look of a bricoleur.

Tamiḷ tāne! (It's Tamil after all!): reading dialect

What makes *En Kate*'s "spoken" writing seem bold is the attempt at seamless colloquiality in telling a story without strong ties to either Dalit politics or folklore: it is neither in the vein of "Dalit experience narrative" nor of "grandma stories" but constructs the interiority of the narrating individual without foregrounding identity or community. Does this point to contested possibility of a more colloquial literary standard? While the need for proximity to the spoken language began to be felt in the modernist period and led to experimentation with colloquial and dialectal language by Pudumaippittan and others, these developments were limited and slow-paced, so that while today's literary Tamil is considerably different from that of early modern works in terms of vocabulary and syntax, it retains the grammatical markers of diglossia, most noticeably the endings of noun and verb forms and certain orthographical conventions (for instance, the linking convention of doubling, at the end of a word ending in a vowel, the consonant that begins the next word, colloquially known as "*yiks* and *yips*"). Those comfortably ensconced in this system argue that it has served writers perfectly well all this time, so why change it? But the desire to write in "spoken" Tamil does surface, as we have seen, in conjunction with several narrative strategies. The primary stumbling block to such projects is the anxiety of representation. *En kate*, for example, both constitutes a challenge to the literary establishment and is an easy target for criticism for one and the same reason: the colloquial standard, though it presents no difficulty in comprehension, has not yet been fully conventionalized as a literary medium and is thus subject to the specious problem of representational accuracy.¹⁷⁸ The Tamil now marked as "spoken" in writing can become a standard written form, should this be sufficiently widely desired, only if it frees itself of the burden of accurate representation of speech and is allowed to perform any and every literary function.

Writing in dialect, by definition non-standard and without conventions of writing, is of course not free from the problem of representation; the reliance of dialect orthography on

¹⁷⁷ Akila Kannadasan, "Writing the Unwritten Tales," interview with Kanmani Gunasekaran, *The Hindu*, Coimbatore, September 11, 2012 18:02 IST, <https://www.thehindu.com/books/writing-the-unwritten-tales/article3885074.ece>

¹⁷⁸ Researcher and editor Kannan M.'s first impulse on introducing me to this novel was to point out the inaccuracies that mar the intended "spoken" quality of this language. Personal communication.

the individual writer's intuition and sense of necessity can make it seem arbitrary. Not surprisingly, the response of readers and critics to seeing dialect in print ranges from gratified recognition to estrangement to an uncomprehending desire to correct or reject. The discourse of comprehension of Tamil dialect writing frequently reaches the point of absurdity. Dialectal texts are subject to editorial impositions and mis-"correction," readers giving up on them, and even allegations of torture—a review of Kanmani Gunasekaran's *Añcalai* expressed relief that in this book he is not "tormenting" readers by writing only in dialect.¹⁷⁹ Writers have responded to such complaints, calmly or fiercely, defending their choice on the basis of necessity, intimacy, or joy, and trusting that some readers will make the effort to understand. Gunasekaran recounts how a reader from Putuvai, a region to the south of his native Natunatu, patiently worked through his short story collection *Uyir Tannīr*, written entirely in dialect, and said, "I understood as I went along."¹⁸⁰ One determined reader of *Añcalai* reported giving up on it several times before finally getting through it—and enjoying it—fortified by the knowledge that "*tamiḷ tāne!* (It's Tamil, after all!)"¹⁸¹ But beyond general questions of reception, close reading of dialect writing reveals that it brings the interrelated questions of performance, literary function, and reading even more sharply into focus than experiments with the "spoken."

The decision to write entirely or partially in dialect is a twin question of voice and linguistic division of labor. Convention dictates that the authorial voice use "written" Tamil for narration and the characters use in dialogue a "spoken" or dialectal Tamil perceived as appropriate to their identity; this neat division is considered good style and deviation from it often seen as a faux pas inviting disdainful or patronizing commentary and well-meaning "correction." Quibbles over code-switching implicitly hinge on which types of words may be mixed together: crossover of lexical items (nouns and verbal roots) from dialect to written may be accepted as a meaningful choice, but not from written to dialect, which appears "inauthentic;" verb forms, grammatical endings, and orthography (the most obvious and pervasive marker of spoken language is the contraction or dropping-off of verb endings, and some variations are commonly recognized as dialectal) may not cross over either way, as this appears sloppy in narration and inaccurate in dialogue. These conventions come out of notions of linguistic and literary mastery and attributions of "rawness" and "confusion" embroiled in the politics of identity and representation of marginalized communities.

This critical prescription brings to light several deep-seated problems which dog even scholarly attempts to engage dialect writing substantively—these are few and far between in both English and Tamil. Take Vihanová's thesis, a rare work on the use of dialect in Tamil short fiction. One of the chapters engages two Dalit writers, Bama and Puhai; Puhai has fought hard with editors to resist changes to his fully dialectal language. Vihanová argues that Puhai's language use is not really as radical as it seems for two reasons: one, it is a transposition of "grandma stories," and two, following E. Annamalai, there are still noticeable differences in syntax between the narration and the dialogue.¹⁸² This detective-

¹⁷⁹ Tamil Makan, review of Kanmani Gunasekaran's novel *Vantarankuti* (Chennai: Tamizhini, 2013). <http://thamizhstudio.com/Koodu/index.htm>, accessed May 12, 2015.

¹⁸⁰ "Why I write" 350.

¹⁸¹ "Kaṇmaṇi Kuṇacēkaraniṉ 'Añcalai' (Kanmani Gunasekaran's *Anjalai*)," book review on solvanam.com. The page appears to be no longer accessible. Accessed May 12, 2015.

¹⁸² Vihanová 2012, 136.

style attempt to unmask experimental writing as essentially traditional seems completely unconcerned about questions of voice and form: why assume that the writing of “grandma stories” is either simple or unpolitical? And why assume that the use of different syntactical patterns for different compositional functions somehow indicates an inauthentic use of language implicitly justifying a re-privileging of convention? For one thing, Puhall writes folklore-inflected fiction, not scholarly editions of folklore; secondly, scholars of folklore have done excellent work to decenter and problematize the notion of “authenticity” of oral lore and critically examine the politics of written folklore texts;¹⁸³ and finally, even if we provisionally accept the existence of “authentic” orality, one has only to look at a narrative poem or drama performed orally to see that different meters, and sometimes different language varieties, are used for narration, song, dialogue, and asides. So regardless of any value judgement of one author’s work, we must read the project of writing fiction fully in dialect with conventional markers of oral storytelling as an extremely complex one that questions the conventional relationship between form and language in both oral and written literature. Whose voice do we hear in such a text? Author, narrator, grandma, the community indicated by the suffix *-ām* (“they say”)? If several kinds of voices speak in the same language, does this challenge how we think about what a pigeonholed language variety can do?

To turn to the second example, Bama, as noted earlier, has been unruffled by comments on the colloquial-dialectal language she has used consistently in her work, simply saying that it makes her feel close to her characters and gives her joy (Bama 2004). Researcher and editor M. Kannan, a strong advocate of dialect writing who has helped many budding writers get published and provided invaluable support for my project, reported saying to Bama in conversation that one can’t just mix up dialect, spoken, and written Tamil in the same sentence—to which she replied, “Why not?” I found this story quite funny (and sided with Bama, with all due respect to Kannan). However, the consequences can be more sobering when the critic’s perspective is purely academic and not that of an editor, whose work entails advising writers based on stylistic preferences and awareness of the publishing market. Vihanová finds a “classical” metaphor in Bama’s groundbreaking autobiography *Karukku* ill-suited to the harsh reality of Dalit life, citing this as a counter-example to Imaiyan’s “successful” use of curse-words, which she claims are “the true poetic metaphors” of Dalit writing. This statement, though intended to defend Imaiyan’s artistic use of words mainstream readers and critics find “vulgar,” is a telling example of critical discourses reify language choice into preconceived identity categories at the expense of substantive engagement even with the theory of identity, not to mention voice and form. Vihanová finds the metaphor ill-suited not to the form (autobiography) but to the monolithic “Dalit” identity of both author and subject which the choice of colloquial language signals to her, ignoring the fact that Bama is writing in her own voice as a person with a complex intersectional identity, an educated Dalit woman, former Catholic nun, and educator with deep ties to her community and locality. If one voice speaks in several languages, does this challenge how we think about what a(n equally pigeonholed) voice can do?

The work of Puhall and Bama, like all Dalit and feminist writing, is thus caught between the rock of identity politics and the hard place of intentionality and “literary merit;” the

¹⁸³ See for example, Bauman and Briggs 2003.

only way out of this dead end, as I have tried to suggest in chapter 2, is to place received categories and values on hiatus and attend to the discourses entangled in forms. Moving beyond micro-editorial politics and measures of “success,” I want to argue that what a theory of dialect writing may begin to challenge is a fundamental assumption about the division of intellectual labor between language varieties, as distinct from the kind of literary or compositional function we find in both written and oral texts.

The adventures and misadventures of spoken and dialectal language in contemporary Tamil literature, as in Bengali literature, are not really about the ultimately arbitrary distinctions between orality and Literature but about the places, spaces, and routes where language germinates, flourishes, withers, travels, and cross-pollinates: towns, regions, roads, and states on the one hand, and presses and libraries on the other. In the body of the chapter, I give close reading of two of Kanmani Gunasekaran’s novels with a focus on the relationship between language and place through forms of work and play.

The work of Kanmani Gunasekaran, deeply rooted in Virudhachalam district, traces with dedication and intimacy the habitations and migrations of working-class women and men in the “Naṭunāṭu” or “Middle country” that lies between the Ketilam and Pennai rivers, or roughly south of Chennai and north of Pondicherry, in the Southern Arcots region of Tamil Nadu. Gunasekaran, also a mechanic with the State Transport Corporation and a peanut and cashew farmer, began writing poetry in 1993, after he was struck by the sight of a medicinal plant growing by the side of the road as he was cycling to the Industrial Training Institute in Ulundurpettai.¹⁸⁴ His first novel, *Añcalai* (*Añcalai*, 1999) came out of an encounter with a woman in his hometown Maṅakkollai, who, having heard that he wrote poetry, jokingly asked him to write her story. Impressed by her strength, he did.¹⁸⁵ Encouraged by the example of Perumal Murugan and Ki Rajanarayanan, writers who produced dictionaries of their regional dialects, Gunasekaran painstakingly gathered material for a *Naṭunāṭtu collakarāti* (*Dictionary of Natunatu dialect*).¹⁸⁶ Despite his deep distrust of the “doctors” of Tamil and the limitations of the lexicographic process, he feels that this work is extremely important.

I said [to researchers on dialectology] ‘Every day many words are dying. Whether they belong in the ‘t’ section or the ‘r’ section, first attend to the work of collecting.’...when I thought about the many words that had not yet been collected, I felt like they were lying there pathetically, out of sight, with life in their eyes... it gives me comfort to imprint on the pages of linguistics the dialect words of this ‘peanut land’ lying at the edge of knowledge.¹⁸⁷

Gunasekaran is also a vocal advocate of dialect writing and engagement with local communities, their language, and their collective memory. He has spoken at book fairs and on television, participated in conferences on dialectology, and done published interviews

¹⁸⁴ “Ēn eḷutukirēn (Why I write),” *Natunattu collakarati (Dictionary of Natunatu Dialect)*, Chennai: Tamizhini, 2007, 348.

¹⁸⁵ Kannadasan 2012.

¹⁸⁶ 2007 and 2017, Chennai: Tamizhini.

¹⁸⁷ “Maḷḷāṭṭai manitarkaḷ (Peanut People),” in *Streams of Language* 275-292, 286.

with *Kanaiyāli* magazine (2002), *The Hindu* newspaper, etc.¹⁸⁸ However, except for a few short stories, his work has not been translated.¹⁸⁹

Gunasekaran writes short stories, novels, and poetry and is committed to regional language in all three forms.¹⁹⁰ He wrote his short story collection *Uyirtannīr* (Water of Life, year) entirely in dialect, out of a sense of necessity.¹⁹¹ In later works, he moved toward a combination of styles; in the preface to *Añcalai*, he describes this choice as *cankatamāna*, difficult, troubling: “I have shifted somewhat from my old style of language. This is difficult for me. The standard style of language that may be in the narration contrasts with the language of my people’s lowland life voice.”¹⁹² The choice gained him critical acclaim from those who consider dialect-only texts a form of “torture” (*citravatai*).¹⁹³ Unlike some writers and critics, for whom the distinction between the language of narration and dialogue is key to good style, for Gunasekaran it is merely functional; his language of narration is not a trompe l’oeuil “spoken” and is no longer entirely dialectal but is one that can converse comfortably with his often unlettered characters in stories drawn directly from the communities he knows well. While it is increasingly common for authors to use dialect in their works in diverse ways and to diverse effects worth exploring, I have chosen to focus on Gunasekaran here for his deep ethical commitment to dialect, articulated with passion, clarity, inimitable humor, and sophistication in his literary work and in his writings on literature.

¹⁸⁸ For a recent interview, see “Naṭunāṭṭu makkaḷ kataiyai eḷuta āl illa (There is no one to write the story of the people of Natunatu),” *Vikaṭan taṭam* magazine, April 2018, 6-23.

¹⁸⁹ Gunasekaran’s story “Tāvamaṇi” has been translated as “Dhavamani” by Subashree Krishnaswamy in Dilip Kumar, ed. *The Tamil Short Story*, 508-516.

¹⁹⁰ “Why I write,” 351-354

¹⁹¹ “Why I write,” 350. Dialect writer Perumal Murugan reports a similar trajectory in “Dialect as creative language” (Murugan 2008), describing his “self-imposed” exclusive use of dialect in his early work and later transition to a combined style. Interestingly, Imaiyaṁ has had the opposite trajectory, using both varieties consistently throughout his earlier work and ending up with the exclusive colloquial of *Eṇ kate* (See “Vaṭṭāra vaḷakkum eḷuttāḷarkaḷum (Dialects and Writers),” *Streams of Language* 2008, 293-300.

¹⁹² “Īram kāyātu... (Compassion [lit. “moisture”] never dries out...),” preface to first (1999) edition of *Añcalai*, Chennai: Tamizhini, 2010.

¹⁹³ Tamil Makan 2015.

Chapter 5

Vaṭṭāra vaḷakku: verbal maps in the novels of Kanmani Gunasekaran

Gunasekaran's novels *Añcalai* (henceforth spelled as *Añcalai*) and *Neṭuncālai* map the belongings and journeys of working-class men and women through dialectal forms such as curses, gossip and anecdotes, lullabies, laments, and occupational terms that are far from dry, but full of the *ras* (humor and other aesthetic emotions) of the subcultures of the rice field, the cashew grove, and the bus depot, foregrounding the performativity of gendered, classed relationships to home and workplace. *Añcalai* traces a woman's life in three *ūr* or towns; *Neṭuncālai* ([Central] Highway, 2009) follows three "Casual Laborers (CLs)" at the State Transport Corporation as they make their rounds within Virutacalam district and then out on the highway on a perilous journey to Chennai, dividing its narrative into sections titled *Vīṭu* (House) and *Nāṭu* (Country).

Ūr: localities

A woman in Gunasekaran's village had heard that he wrote poetry, so she came up to him one day in the fields and said jokingly, "Why don't you write my story?" So, he wrote his first novel, *Añcalai*, which tells the story of a woman's struggle to survive near-abandonment by her community.¹⁹⁴ For the sake of clarity, a summary may be necessary: *Añcalai* is a young Dalit woman. When idle gossip and a ploy by *Añcalai*'s brother-in-law Cinnacāmi, the husband of her middle sister Taṅkamaṇi, to take *Añcalai* as a second wife pushes her mother Bākkiyam to marry her off in a hurry, *Añcalai* is tricked into marrying the disabled Mannānkattī (dialectal nickname, literally "clod"), thinking she is marrying his handsome brother. Unable to stand the torment of disappointment and betrayal, she sets out on her own and ends up at her eldest sister Kalyāṇi's house, where she is tricked a second time into marrying her sister's brother-in-law and lover and gives birth to a daughter. When she realizes this marriage is merely a cover-up for her sister's affair, she takes her baby daughter Nilā back home to her mother's house, but tensions force her to set out again, leaving Nilā behind. This time she ends up at the house of a friend from her first husband's village, who convinces her to go back to him. She has two more daughters with him, and then due to poor health decides to get a contraceptive operation despite his desire for a son; she continues to visit her firstborn daughter, but is unable to secure Nilā's marriage with her younger brother (Nilā's uncle) Maṇikantan, who instead marries Kalyāṇi's daughter (Nilā's half-sister); he claims it is because he helped raise Nilā like a little sister, but *Añcalai* is convinced it is because they offer a handsome dowry. Constant tensions at home and in the town and fear for Nilā's future drive *Añcalai* close to suicide, but her younger daughters pull her back from the edge and give her the strength to survive. Underlying this dramatic narrative of passion and betrayal is a subtle exploration of subjectivity, habitation, and community enabled by a deep sense of locality and local language.

Within a "regional" text like *Añcalai*, microregions understood as "*ūr* (town)" are sites of performance of gender and community through dialectal forms. *Añcalai* moves between three towns, her natal village of Kār kūṭal, her first husband's village of

¹⁹⁴ Kannadasan 2012.

Maṅakkollai, and her second husband's village of Toḷār; each of these towns is also a microregion, a community, and a node of relation. In her introduction to the novel, V. Geetha points out that the fields and groves around each town are "not merely backdrops to Añcalai's story [but] spaces (*vēḷi*) bearing the traces of human labor, desire, striving, and use...that red earth region becomes not just a place (*iṭam*) or a town (*ūr*), but gains its own robustness and richness." I argue that understanding Kārkūṭal, Maṅakkollai, and Toḷār as "*ūr*" is not reductive, but highly productive if we consider the many layers of meaning of this word, the conceptual centrality of which is evident in the formulation of the commonplace question, *unkaḷoṭu conta ūr enna?* (which is your own town?).¹⁹⁵ "*Ūr*" denotes the town itself, a place of habitation; the community, designated as "*ūr*" in a shorthand for "*ūr canaṅkaḷ* (the townspeople);" and the microregion, with its characteristic soil and vegetation, both a source of livelihood and an affective space. To understand it as a "locality," therefore, is to explore these sediments of meaning as they have piled up in a particular place, which by no means precludes recognition of movement and change. Furthermore, if the drama of the narrative hinges on the malfunction of the *ur*-as-community, which renders the *ur*-as-habitation a hostile environment for Añcalai and denies her the richness of the *ur*-as-affective space, the artistry of the novel and its ethics center on the concentration of these diverse elements in local words. In the following, I explore the play of three formulations in the novel that each give a different perspective on the dynamics of gender, power, and performance: *ūr ōmalu*, the town's evil eye; *ur teru*, the town streets; and two song forms, *tālāṭṭu* (lullaby) and *oppāri* (lament), in which the town is complexly entangled with memory.

Ūr ōmalu (the town's evil eye): *kata* (gossip), *kiṇṭal* (jokes), and performance

The townspeople's gossip and jokes, which Añcalai inevitably faces at every turn in the narrative, are inbuilt in the use of common spaces and at once bely the performativity of social relations and stage the performance of gendered virtue. Gossip is referred to in the text as *kata* (colloq. for *katai*, story), especially in the phrase "*kata vaḷakkiratu*," to grow stories.¹⁹⁶ A look at the most fertile sites for gossip help locate the sources of the intense pressures and pleasures of this performance in vulnerability and interdependence: the *tiṇṇai* or Tamil-style veranda of a house, where social expectations and consequences are literally brought home by those with claims to filial, marital, or affinal relation; the (*vayak*)*kāṭu* (fields or groves), where workers enact coded relationships with owners; and community resource sites such as the well or tank, grazing land, or cowshed, dependence on which to go about everyday life makes encounters unavoidable. Meanwhile, the performance is enacted through the idiomatic language of expectation (along a colloquial-

¹⁹⁵ These conventions may seem merely habitual, but they have a conceptual history. For example, to ask the same thing in Bangla one would say "*āpnār dēs/bāri/dēsēr bāri kothay?*" (where is your country/house/country house)?", questions now indelibly marked by the history of Partition. Tamil names often contain the name of the ancestral town, usually shortened to an initial.

¹⁹⁶ *Kata* here is the same word as the *kate* in Imaiyam's *Eñ kate*, the orthographic difference reflecting a slight variation in pronunciation or perhaps just the authors' sense of how this indeterminate vowel sound should be represented. The Tamil word *katai/kate/kate* naturalizes the Sanskrit *kathā*, retained orthographically as is in Bangla; however, the semantic range of the word is somewhat different in each language. Gossip can be aptly known as *ūrkatai*, "town stories," though this compound is not used in *Añcalai*.

dialectal continuum) and the localized language of practice (a dialectal lexicon of agricultural methods and tools, which also have their own aesthetics).¹⁹⁷ Right at the opening of the novel, Añcalai's mother Bākkiyam learns that her daughter has become "fodder for the gossip-chewers" (*verum vāyai menṛukoṅṭirunta canaṅkaḷ*, a colloquial expression that translates literally as "those who chew their empty mouths") when a neighbor passing by in the street, a known '*kinṭukāli*' or gossip (?dial., from *kinṭu*, to poke or dig, cf. *kinṭal*, joke; single quotes in original) invites herself to sit on the *tiṅṅai* of Bākkiyam's house and gives a show of false sympathy, lamenting the townspeople's insensitivity:

Ūru ōmalutāna tavura, mova ūrmela pona pātu illa ēkka. Ēntān inta canam, nākkula narampu illāma pecutō teriyila.

Your daughter shows no sign of [urmela pona, going on the town?] to avoid the town's evil eye [dial., *ūr ōmalu*], Akka (elder sister). I don't know why these people talk without nerves in their tongue. (17)

The incident that gets people talking is an exchange of banter between Añcalai and the landowner's son while transplanting a field of rice seedlings. The young man, who is ploughing the land ahead of the workers, forgets a ploughstaff in Añcalai's *menai* (dial., a unit of land suitable for one worker to transplant seedlings), so she jokingly challenges him according to the "age-old traditional game" of the fields, in which the owner has to give the worker something in exchange for his negligence; but when Añcalai demands that instead of giving her something, he admits he has "lost" to her, the others feel uncomfortable, "like the game is going the wrong way," and rumors spread that Añcalai is "laughing and talking" with a young man. This pressures her mother into finding a match for her, and when the boy next door comes to fields to tell Añcalai the groom's family have come to "see" her (to confirm the marriage), everyone from the *paṭācci* and his wife to the other Parayar workers feel compelled to comment. In both cases, the gossip swings between the stigma of Bākkiyam's widowhood and Añcalai's reputation as a good worker; it is worth remembering that the logic of the evil eye is that it falls on those who are too dearly loved or too admired, like Añcalai, whom her mother calls a *paccakkīli mātiri poṅṅu* (a girl like a green parrot). In the first scene, when they begin transplanting the field, the people ask "*parappukāri* (quick-fingered)" Añcalai to plant the first seedling, as it will grow well; but when her banter goes too far, they say, "The girl's been brought up by a widow. What will she do but laugh?" () In the second scene, the others are jealous and admiring of Añcalai's expertise in "*kōṭu maṭittal*" (dial., the trick of neatly tying a bundle of paddy stalks with a *pīri* or rope made of damp paddy-straws); people say, "Añcalai works like a man. The one who marries her is fortunate (*kuṭuttu vaiccavan*). She'll make him sit at home and cook the rice." At the same time, Kuṅṭu *paṭācci*, the landowner, brings Añcalai's vulnerability sharply into focus when he quips: "If you leave the work half done, you get half wages too." Another worker says "Yes...even if you don't get paid, the *unṭaccōru* (rice balls) will be enough for you." These two scenes out in the fields are pinned together by Bākkiyam's memory of her husband Kuṅṭāru, who had earned a name for himself as an expert at

¹⁹⁷ For an interesting discussion of this, see D. Senthil Babu, "Dialects in practice," *Streams of Language* 2008, 249-258.

vāṭṭappali and *kuttuppoti* (dial., two methods of winnowing grain, a high-flung circular movement for large amounts and holding the winnowing pan high and shaking it for smaller amounts) (26); the memory is linked to the present scenes not only by the talents Kuṭṭāru seems to have passed on to his daughter and by giving a glimpse of the experience of widowhood, but by the repeated colloquial phrase *vēṭikkai pārkkiratu*, to “watch the fun” or “enjoy the show” (27). Bākkiyam herself first set eyes on Kuṭṭāru when she went to watch him work (using this phrase). But the “fun” that the townspeople enjoy throughout the rest of the novel comes at Añcalai’s expense: the people of her natal village Kārkūṭal watch her leave for her first husband’s village Maṇakkollai, turning from *vayakkāṭṭu Añcalai* (Añcalai of the fields) into *muntirikkāṭṭu Añcalai* (Añcalai of the cashew groves, where gossip about her refusal to accept her husband renders her vulnerable to sexual harassment), and they watch her come back again with a fatherless baby after her second bad marriage in Toḷār; the people of Maṇakkollai watch her leave her first husband, only to come back, leaving her second husband in Toḷār and her firstborn daughter Nilā in Kārkūṭal; they watch Nilā come and go, her exotically semi-legitimate presence titillating the young boys, who write up her name on a wall; and they watch fight after fight with family and neighbors. But while the townspeople “enjoy” these “shows,” they are no longer willing to perform the usual courtesies with Añcalai, from everyday conversation to attending Nilā’s coming-of-age ceremony; one misstep—her refusal to perform the role of the dutiful wife to the one who deceived her, an unpardonably direct exercise of agency over her own sexuality—has turned the ritual performance that inscribes her in the community into a performance labeled as false, isolating her as spectacle.¹⁹⁸

Ūr teru (the town streets): *canta-cāti* (fights), *vācāṅku* (curses), and spectacle

Throughout the novel, built-up family tensions repeatedly erupt into fights (*canta-cāti*) which display considerable virtuosity in the deployment of a handful of common curse-words, registering deep-seated community anxieties in the process. Analysis and translation of terms of abuse presents a difficulty in recognizing active vs. latent semantic potential. For example, in attempting to defend the frequent use of curse-words in Imaiyan’s artistic practice by emphasizing how the everyday use of these words in Dalit communities lessens their impact and narrows their semantic range, Vihanová seems to miss the very creativity she seeks to acknowledge by describing curse-words as “poetic metaphors.” Indeed, if it did not matter at all what curse-words meant, why would Imaiyan feel compelled to argue with his translator Lakshmi Holmstrom over whether a certain word meant “menses” or “female urine”?¹⁹⁹ The creativity shown by the speakers lies in selective activation, juxtaposition, and elaboration of the possibilities—both semantic and sonorous—contained in these words; therefore they cannot be reduced to meaningless

¹⁹⁸ In a way, as Va. Geetha points out (“Kananṇum pukaiyum vārkkai: Añcalai: cila kuṛippuka! (A burning, smoking life: Añcalai: some comments), introduction to Gunasekaran 1999, 8), Añcalai’s older sister Kalyani, who tricks her sister into marrying her lover to cover up their illicit relationship, is nevertheless also brutally honest about her sexual life; but while Añcalai naively expects her choice to be accepted by at least the family if not the community and thus does not attempt to hide it, Kalyani’s cynicism leads her to perform the good wife even though she knows her affair is an open secret, challenging the community to call her out on it.

¹⁹⁹ Imaiyan reports this incident in his contribution to *Streams of Language* (Imaiyan 2008); Vihanová reports it slightly differently in her thesis (2012, 133).

expressions of anger or to merely casual speech. Furthermore, ignoring the possible meanings of curse-words introduces the problem of conflating the right of the author to use abusive language for realism with the abuse itself, which can be condoned and even celebrated just because it is “normal”—when the texts often show the serious and complex implications of this normalization of hurtful language. What must be accepted here is the coexistence of creativity with violence. The striking repetition of fights in *Añcalai*, in terms of content, form, and language, has a wearying effect which is not exactly desensitizing, but rather brings home *Añcalai*’s habituation to verbal and other forms of domestic violence, as explored below. However, this habituation is not at all unique to Dalit communities—this is a problematic assumption, as becomes clear when we look at non-Dalit texts in which other factors, primarily gender and class, create similar situations. Perundevi Srinivasan has given a fascinating analysis of the reification of terms of abuse in Lakshmi Holmstrom’s translation of Ashokamitran’s *Tannir* (Water).²⁰⁰ In a passage where an old woman curses her daughter-in-law with an astonishing string of variations on the theme of *munṭe* (“widow,” a word used in Brahmin Tamil with reference to the practice of shaving widowed women’s heads),²⁰¹ Srinivasan pointed out how this cultural referent is inactive in the old woman’s speech, as the daughter-in-law’s husband is still living (and in fact listening to this conversation), but becomes activated when the daughter-in-law turns it on the old woman, who is actually a widow; Holmstrom’s translational strategy, as evident in the body of the text as well as her introductory notes and glosses, reductively interprets several terms with a ritual connotation, including *munṭe*, along a purity|impurity binary (once the favored understanding of “India” generally in anthropology) which elides many factors in their deployment. Srinivasan stresses that one must attend to the activation of latent semantic potential in narrative contexts, so as to be aware of possible meanings without privileging one of them as original and defining, thus falling back into presupposed categories.

The attention to the spontaneous and repetitive elements of the form, content, and language of primarily women’s fights in *Añcalai* subtly highlight habitual linguistic violence alongside the devastating insight and creativity of the speakers, offering numerous examples of the activation and deactivation of latent meanings. The fight scenes in the novel cumulatively interrogate the conception of “*ūr*” as a place of kinship by pointing to the underlying anxiety around guardianship of female sexuality. The actual site of community conflict is most often the *cēri* or Dalit neighborhood, distinguished from the *ur* proper, which belongs to the *paṭāccis* and Reddys.²⁰² However, the habitual pattern of fighting involves the mutual exchange of insults invoking the *ūrteru* or town streets. This has a double edge, belying the insecurity built into the discourse of chastity by linking it with the stigma of theater as well as the too-real fear of abandonment. The terms of abuse most commonly used in the novel—*nāṭumāri* (dial., loose woman); *kaminēṭṭi* (dial., widow); (*pacca*) *tevuṭiyā* (colloq., [young] prostitute), and *nāyi* (colloq., dog), with

²⁰⁰ Perundevi Srinivasan, paper presented at a conference on Tamil translation held at the University of Texas at Austin, 2017.

²⁰¹ It was C.S. Lakshmi (pen name Ambai) who pointed out in the same conference that *munṭe* is a dialectal word, used in Brahmin families.

²⁰² In terms of residential segregation, the *cēri* is comparable to the Bengali *pārā* seen in all three novels in chapter 1; however, while the word *pārā* is used for the upper-caste neighborhoods as well, *cēri* refers only to the Dalit neighborhood of a village or to a city slum. This usage is not unique to Naṭunāṭu; for instance, the dialect of the urban poor of Madras, or “Madras *pācai*,” is also known as “*cēri tamil*” (slum Tamil).

variations and additions according to context—all invoke the figure of a woman or animal who wanders around without an owner/protector, which makes an impact whether or not the specific literal meaning is relevant in a given context. The invocation of the street has at least three implications: the vulnerability of an abandoned woman (the supposed slippery slope from widow to prostitute)²⁰³, which is linked with the deep-seated stigma of scavenging (the dog), making these popular curses for both women and men, separately or together (*kaminēṭṭi/nāyi/kaminēṭṭi nāyi*); and with the danger of spectacle (especially for women, given the longstanding association of women’s performing arts and prostitution), of making oneself a laughingstock for the whole town, who will sit back and “watch the fun” instead of providing the vital support without which an already disadvantaged woman would face extreme precarity.

When the trouble begins at the opening of the novel, Añcalai’s mother Bākkīyam supports her refusal to marry her brother-in-law, husband of her second sister Tañkamaṇi, both foreseeing that this situation is bound to devolve into constant fighting between the two sisters, summed up in the phrase “*nī nāyi, nān nāyi* (I’m a dog, you’re a dog);” when she ends up in just the situation she tried to avoid, this time with her eldest sister Kalyāṇi, the fights go just as expected:

[Neighbor, from whom the pregnant Añcalai has borrowed money to go to the hospital:] “If I’d told her not to come here for money, which dog would have come here and challenged me.”

[Kalyani:] “That’s what I’m asking too. This dog went and howled there, and that dog is calling everyone a dog,” etc. (145)

The repetition of these words in fight after fight begins to feel excessive and tiresome, as well it should, for Añcalai is worn down by a constant rubbing of salt in the same wound; she feels she is being targeted unfairly for a common problem (of how to handle female sexuality and sexual agency in an unequal society structured by patriarchy, “caste,” and class), and repeatedly asks rhetorically, “I’m a whore, and she’s a good wife sitting chastely at home?” The fights that erupt again and again take an almost ritual form, producing a kind of catharsis that enables everyone to somehow carry on with a situation that would be unbearable without an outlet. And yet the specter of the *teru*(street) continues to haunt Añcalai: unjust as she well knows it to be, the danger is real for her—the danger of no longer being counted a living, participating member of the community, deserving empathy and help through hardships, but existing for it only as a flat, negative type-character to be ridiculed and then forgotten.

The gendered dangers of performance emerge clearly in a scene featuring the *terukkūttu* or “street theater,” a musical drama form usually on mythological themes.²⁰⁴

²⁰³ The conceptual proximity of “widow” and “prostitute” is not unique to Tamil; cf. Bangla “(*kāñcā*) *rāñri*,” applied to Bāsantī in *Titās*, a pejorative for a woman widowed at an early age that assumes equivalence of this state and prostitution, like “(*pacca*) *tevuṭiyā*.” *Kaminēṭṭi* (widow) is a popular curse even among men, as seen in both *Añcalai* and *Neṭuncālai*.

²⁰⁴ In its basic structure and themes *terukkūttu* resembles the Bengali *jātrā*. Both terms relate to movement, *jātrā* denoting the commencement of a journey and *terukkūttu* referring to processional performance, thus distinguished from *kaṭṭaikkūttu* or theater performed in one designated place; the *terukkūttu* in the novel is

Añcalai's first husband's elder brother Tēvarācu, whom she had been tricked into thinking she was marrying, plays the *mattālam* (a two-headed drum) for *terukkūttu* performances.²⁰⁵ A handsome "*mīcaikkāran*" (man with a mustache, as Añcalai refers to him), he wears a *kaili* (sash) in addition to the usual *nīrccal* (dial., loincloth) (84). When an old woman in Manakollai dies, they put on a *terukkūttu* on the popular theme of *karṇamoṭcam*, or the *moksha* (deliverance) of Karna in the Mahabharata. A friend persuades Añcalai to come watch the performance; startled to see Tēvarācu playing the *mattālam* in a prelude to the main dialogue, "swinging his head and shaking his body...sliding, thumping, and flinging his fingers," she finds herself moving in time with the music (the word is *aṭavu*, here simply rhythmic movement, but used in dance for movements done to drumming as distinct from *abhinaya* or expressive gestures done to song). This spontaneous movement is cut short by a dirty look from her sister-in-law, who bursts out, "*tiruttu* (thieving) *nāṭumāri*, she stopped watching the *kuttu* to watch the drummer" (98). The word *nāṭumāri*, frequently used between women in the text, means literally "woman who changes countries," where *nāṭu* (country, region) stands for *āmbaṭaiyān* (man, husband) through the custom of patrilocality. After this comment, the *kaṭṭiyakkāran* or introducer/jester sings a song, "*mūvēntar āṇṭiṭṭa nāṭammā kavi pāṭi pukaṅṭiṭṭa viṭammā* (Amma [mother, respectful form of address for a woman], this is the country devoted to the three gods, this is the home celebrated in poet's songs)," but by this time Añcalai is already tired of the performance, which has little relevance for her, unwelcome and disrespected in her new home (*viṭu*) and "country" (*nāṭu*) as she has already been designated as *nāṭumāri* (ibid.). While any woman could be called *nāṭumāri* with the implication of promiscuity or simply as one of the repertoire of curses, Añcalai is accused of literalizing this expression in thought and action, first by desiring her brother-in-law, and then by leaving her first husband's town and taking a second husband in a different town.

Pent-up feelings are not always exhausted in fights; the unspent reserves of emotion sometimes have to be let out in *vācāṅku* (dial., curses).²⁰⁶ If *ūr ōmalu* is the curse of collective judgment on the basis of ideals of virtue, *vācāṅku* is a call for higher justice; though its putative basis is also virtue, in practice its strength seems fundamentally to come from suffering. The organ of justice is here no more than a mouth (*vay*) full of burning words or merely an empty hand (*veruṅkai*). Despite the obviously vengeful and divisive premise of *vācāṅku* and its cathartic function, and whether the speech-act of *vācāṅku* actually "does things" with its words, it can sow the seeds of reflection and critique—the post-*vācāṅku* ebb of emotional intensity seems rather to enable this:

Añcalai sometimes asked within herself, 'What does she have that I don't have? She doesn't have the means to grow a worm or bug in her belly. She's older than me.

stationary, but it is mentioned that Añcalai had not seen much *terukkūttu* before as '*drama*' *kūttu* and the rare *kaṭṭakkaṭṭi kūttu* (?dial., perhaps similar to *kaṭṭaikkūttu*) were more popular in her hometown.

²⁰⁵ Caste is not explicitly discussed much in the novel, but Bākkiam once refers to herself as "*kaminēṭṭi paracci*," a Parayar widow. The Parayar community is named after the *parai* drum traditionally played for rituals, especially those related to fertility—girls' coming of age or menstruation, childbirth, etc. However, this may not be relevant in the contemporary context, as it is never mentioned in the novel; the drum Tēvarācu plays is the *mattālam* used for *terukkūttu*.

²⁰⁶ Cf Sucāṅṅ, Noyānēr Mā in *Hāṅṅsuli*

Why does he leave the younger one and go for the older one. What mantra did she put on him, what powder did she put on him, how did she turn him to her. Who knows what mantra, what powder! A mantra that ruins families, a powder that ruins lives. Let that girl and boy go to ruin,” she would curse them.

After letting out this curse, she would laugh at herself. ‘What kind of ideal wife am I? What power will my curses have? I saw him, I married someone else, I came to this one and got myself pregnant. If I look up to see a man, he says my eyes are rotten. I’ve gone and seen so many places, how can I be a wife? How can my curses have any power?’

... ‘If everything’s ruined just by looking up at a man, which woman here has never looked at a man? If you look at it that way, all the women here are *avucāri* [prostitutes, derived from Sanskrit *abhisāra* or going out to meet a lover, as Radha goes to meet Krishna], which one of them is a wife? This is all just *kata* (*katai*, a story, tall tale). If you look at it this way, how can you live?’” (147).

The conventional forms of expression here should not obscure the difficult question Añcalai poses at the end: these “stories” have a didactic function, intended to show the listener how to live virtuously and to point out mistakes so that others can learn from them; yet if one takes these same stories seriously, Añcalai asks, how can one survive? Powerful or not, this curse pales in comparison to the litany of curses Añcalai flings at her sister-in-law Opuṭiyākkāri (lit., the one who yields nothing, i.e. childless?), who has cheated her out of government assistance after a disaster:

“She took money for rice when my wall fell down. Let that rice be placed in the mouth of her corpse!

“Let her become earth!

“Let her rot!

“Let her belly burn when she eats that rice!

“Let there be worms in it!

“The dog comes in here, she went and got [the rice] and now she’s talking down to me. Let her be left with nothing!

“Let the place where she lives become earth!

“I’m suffering here in the rain with my kids. She’s making up stories [*kata valakkira*, lit. growing stories]. Let her stand and suffer like me.”

She pelted [the house] in revenge. It rained mud all over the roof, the street, the fence. When there wasn’t mud handy she threw with her empty hand and let out belly-burning curses (*vācāṅku*). (223)

In the first instance, the very act of cursing her sister leads Añcalai to a kind of critique of the self-divisive society that represses and twists the two women’s essentially simple and natural desires for sexual and emotional fulfillment and dignity. From “you’re a dog, I’m a dog,” she has arrived at “you’re a human being, I’m a human being”—even though she cannot quite relinquish her desire for retribution. In the second instance, the stakes are very high, and Añcalai herself decides to break up the joint family and pressure her husband to build a house of their own. But in both instances, her language points to the disingenuous “growing of stories” that divide and choke people like pernicious weeds.

Nel, muntiri, karumbu (rice, cashew, sugarcane): *oppāri, tālāṭṭu*, and dissonance

The discourse of roots that Gunasekaran invokes in his 2015 speech at the Perambalur Book Fair, “*vērkaḷai tēṭi* (in search of roots)” may be a gendered discourse, as his language of grandfathers and great-grandfathers suggests.²⁰⁷ But in *Añcalai* it may also be taken literally, coming from someone who has spent considerable time with roots and can write with intimate attention about the transplantation of rice seedlings and the breeding, growing, harvesting, and selling of many local varieties of cashew and peanut plants.²⁰⁸ For women like *Añcalai*, transplanted themselves as a matter of course and engaged in cultivation, a more active understanding of roots might be productive. As V. Geetha points out in her introduction, the novel deftly entwines *Añcalai*’s subjectivity with the microregions around each town, both figuratively and through her skilled fingers. The newly transplanted rice fields of her native village *Kārkūṭal* are ripe with expectation at the opening, but after her failed marriage the pleasure of showing off her skills is gone as working in the fields along with men only gains her further disrepute; the cashew groves and red earth of her first husband’s village *Maṇakkollai* are rich and strange, the tops of the trees offering a new bird’s eye view of the region and giving her a sense of wonder and discovery as she learns new skills, but this excitement likewise turns to fear when gossip makes her vulnerable to sexual harrassment; in *Toḷār*, where *Añcalai* marries a second time and has her daughter, there are no rice fields or cashew groves, only sugarcane, but the sweetness of a new beginning in love quickly turns to the bitterness of a second disappointment, and she never has a chance to explore outside the confines of the house because, in the interest of preserving a façade of respectability, her sister forbids her to go out to work. In all three places, accordingly, *Añcalai*’s field of vision narrows to the house, the focal point of her remaining hopes, and the immediate *cēri* streets, a periphery she cannot avoid entering. The key role of skills here points in the direction of why we must attend not only to the broad strokes that paint *Añcalai* as one with her landscape but also to those frustrating little words that one is often tempted to skip over; but the intimacy *Añcalai* has with the land through her labor also produces play, from the banter that got her into trouble to the songs that get her thinking about her pleasures and troubles as something beyond herself and her fate, even if this nascent politics does not have the opportunity to develop.

In *Añcalai*, the intimacy with the land that comes from living and working in it, from knowing its habits and its potential, invests the landscape with desire and affect. The force of the two songs in the novel, one a *tālāṭṭu* (lullaby) and the other an *oppāri* (lament), comes from a sense of arbitrary disjuncture and incongruence, as the local ecology seems abruptly severed from these constructions of meaning and continues apparently unperturbed by a single human sorrow. At the same time, however, these songs and their very incongruence help to build an alternative sense of community that gives strength to

²⁰⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHJSzfHNEu0>

²⁰⁸ In the essay “*Maḷḷāṭṭai manitarkaḷ* (Peanut people)” (Gunasekaran 2007, 2008), an in-depth explanation of the etymology and yield of the different varieties of peanut grown in Virutacalam leads into an account of the process of compiling the dictionary.

Añcalai by binding her to others cut off from the hopes and joys of the townspeople; this is a matrilineal bond despite its own male-centered language. Feeling betrayed and abandoned in Toḷār, Añcalai thinks of her mother lying alone in Kārkūṭal, of her grief at what has happened to her daughters and the lament she used to sing for her father:

“all our coconut trees
 have borne plenty of fruit
 and you—oh my king
 only you left without bearing fruit!
 all our paddy seedlings
 have grown so tall
 and you—oh my king
 only you left without growing tall!” (127)

This lament for one life cut short while others grow is painfully worked out by taking stock of the crops that not only are thriving themselves but are the means of survival for those who remain alive after a death; the flourishing of the young trees and seedlings also recalls her daughters. But the sense of arbitrary singularity here is given a different ring when echoed in the question Añcalai asks repeatedly throughout the narrative: “Is this my fate? Is only my fate like this? Everything happens only to me?” This question is not merely petulant, though it may begin so; as Añcalai’s challenge to the other women suggests, these things do not happen only to her; it is isolation that makes it seem so, a lack of the community feeling at the heart of the *oppāri* form, which when sung by many women on the occasion of death gathers scattered personal griefs into a powerful performance of collective empathy.²⁰⁹ By contrast, when Añcalai, pregnant in Toḷār, takes up an itinerant fortune-teller on his offer of *kīḷi jociyam* (“parrot astrology,” in which a parrot chokes a slip with the customer’s horoscope), the fortune the parrot draws for her is only too apt: she hardly hears the detailed prediction (in formal Tamil) of trouble in the family because she can’t help laughing at the accompanying picture, of Murugan flanked by his two consorts, like her second husband with her sister and herself (154). This fortune, telling of trouble at home, is only too accurate and predictable, as it simply gives a veneer of fate to the dysfunctionality of family and community that has become clear in Añcalai’s eyes.

A different kind of incongruence strikes Añcalai when she remembers the lullaby her mother has sung to every baby in Kārkūṭal, and which she finds herself singing to her own baby girl in Toḷār:

“Rice on the stove—and our
 Little beauty in the cradle!
 Should I take off the rice
 Or pick up my little beauty?”

²⁰⁹ Anthropologist Anand Pandian gives an account of the form, performance, and feelings around the *oppāri* sung by Kallar women in Tamil Nadu (Pandian 2009), exploring the Kallar community’s understanding of their transition from being stigmatized as a “Criminal Tribe” to being settled agriculturalists. Pandian looks constructions of virtue circulating in the community through proverbs, maxims, filmsongs, and folk forms like *oppāri*.

Milk on the stove—and my
 Little boy in the cradle!
 Should I take off the milk
 Or pick up my little boy?" (158)

Añcalai wonders,

From whom did Amma learn this song? If any baby in the street screamed, she would pick it up, lay it in her lap, do “*ārāro* (typical lullaby syllables)” and sing this song. When her mother sang this song Añcalai would ask herself, ‘Has Amma ever thought about this song? How many times do we make rice here? In Kārkūṭal we have rice only at night. The rest of the time it’s just millet porridge. How does a baby who crawls on the cowdung floor get into a cradle? A stove without the means to scald milk. How did she sing this? Some song passed down from mouth to mouth, a comfort to a crying baby, that’s all she knows.’

Añcalai’s isolation has momentarily disabled her from fully embracing the song as a living thread binding her to generations of the community and, at the same time, has enabled her to separate the text of the song from practice and look at it analytically, perhaps also politically. Of course, its printed form on the page of the novel makes this kind of “reading” available for our participation—the power of sound and bodily presence, so intrinsic especially to songs of birth and death, to give a kind of significance that the eye may perceive differently on the page is not to be underestimated; but then we are working from opposite ends—while our imagination fills in the total performance from the level of the words, Añcalai’s thinking takes out the words from the total performance. What emerges from this is dissonance, not only between expectation and experience (what engenders the *oppāri*’s resonance) or ideal and reality (what gets Añcalai thinking) but between the twin desires of this writing, to record words and forms with their density and tension intact, and to orchestrate them on a different scale; or, in other words, to transpose and trans-form without translating. While *oppāri* is mostly a women’s form, Gunasekaran is himself an accomplished composer and singer of *oppāri*. He writes in “Why I write” that he brings out the same thoughts in his *oppāri* that he wishes to write about; however, the response of the listeners is tears, so along with singing *oppāri* he feels compelled also to write.²¹⁰ The point, I think, is not to privilege an analytical or political response over an emotional one, but that those are tears of resonance within the community; to this the dissonance in the writing-out of thoughts that leave no record even in the collective oral memory is a vital complement. The substance of Gunasekaran’s writing, however, is not in the telling of stories alone, but critically in the difficult transposition of local thought-worlds.

Discussing Gunasekaran’s avoidance of explicit political commentary in his fiction despite focusing on Dalit communities, V. Geetha suggests that “there are no characters in this novel who think about these conditions, think about changing them, or at least feel bad about them. There are not even people who talk about protest or freedom.”²¹¹ No one from outside the community, it must be added, since Añcalai is clearly thinking about them from

²¹⁰ Gunasekaran 2007, 363.

²¹¹ “A burning, smoking life” 9.

within the community, if on the margins—a kind of inside-outside position, not unlike Bāsanti’s in *Titāṣ*. V. Geetha identifies an “internal” and an “external” reason for this perceived silence—that it is a story of relationships portrayed as passionate rather than societal and that despite the presence of caste-based exploitation the interdependence of the Dalits and *paṭaiyāccis* sustains an intimacy that precludes protest—and she adds, “on top of this, the style of language and richness of words that drive the events in the novel do not allow us to examine the everyday life they portray or the truth they tell” (9-10). This position is somewhat surprising coming from V. Geetha, who is herself an accomplished translator of Perumal Murugan’s dialect fiction and a pioneer in artisan books for children and adults that bring the thought and creativity of indigenous and folk artists in various mediums (cloth, walls, performance) into play with cutting-edge graphic and book design. On the contrary, I argue, it is this style of language and richness of words that demand examination, that allow passion to throw oppression subtly into relief in a kind of protest that is not silent or unthinking, but little heard and rarely understood. The refusal of this language is not to be examined but to be translated, to be replaced by what we think is equivalent in what amounts to a refusal to read. V. Geetha rightly points to Gunasekaran’s politics of *avaciyam* (necessity), of responding to the sense that these words demand a place in his writing (10). It is not the standard language of Dalit politics but precisely Añcalai’s language and thinking about these conditions which needs to be here, in the hope that someone somewhere, someday will listen to them.

Connecting Kārkuṭal, Toḷār, and Maṇakkollai is the city of Virudhachalam, a site of crisscrossing bus lines, market, hospital, school, and toxic factory—for Añcalai, not a place of habitation but one to traverse, to home or for work. The 33 bus that takes Añcalai through Virudachalam city on her way here or there is one of many crisscrossing Virudhachalam district and carrying the three protagonists of Gunasekaran’s novel *Neṭuncālai* (*Highway*, Chennai: Tamizhini, 2009).

Cālai: routes

While *Añcalai* explores the overlapping meanings of the *ūr* following the limited movements of a Dalit woman between a few towns in Virudhachalam, pointing to the question of locality, *Neṭuncālai* posits two spheres of movement of working-class men in and beyond the district, conceived as *vītu* (home) and *nāṭu* (country) connected by the *cālai* (highway), pointing to the question of regionality. The narrative follows the bus lines that crisscross the district and bring the three protagonists, a conductor, a driver, and a mechanic, to and from the depot and their hometowns of red earth and cashew groves. Each of the protagonists is a young man from one of the district towns, working as “CL” (casual labor) with “Periyar” (the State Transport Corporation) and hoping for a less precarious future; each bus brings problems and surprises, bad roads and breakdowns, humiliations and excitements, love at first sight, and unsettling encounters with known people.

The division of the narrative into sections titled *vītu* (house) and *nāṭu* (country or region) highlights different spheres of movement tied to work and the close relation of home and workplace. We have seen in *Añcalai* that the *vītu* (house/home) is not to be understood as a completely private space; such a space exists in a minimal and patchworked way for women like Añcalai, whose lives are circumscribed by community

expectations but not sheltered by privilege. The *vītu* opens out onto community spaces in concentric circles, from the *tinnai* or stoop of the house to the *teru* or street, the *cēri* or Dalit neighborhood, the *ūr* proper, and the workplace (fields, etc.). *Neṭuncālai*'s designation of a journey to Chennai as *nāṭu* thus posits *vītu* as embracing most of Virutacalam district via the local bus routes. The *nāṭu* which women's curses in *Añcalai* mapped onto a man's body is, for the men in *Neṭuncālai*, uncharted territory into which they must eventually venture, almost like the heroes of folktale or classical poetry, to find their fortunes—no princess or kingdom but a minimum of security and self-worth.

Periyar

The language of *Neṭuncālai* highlights the interplay of registers, like multiple routes linking the local with the translocal, the *ūrteru* (town streets) with the *cālai* (highway), the *vītu* (home) with the *nāṭu* (country). When the aspiring mechanic Ayyanār is interviewed for the job after a technical examination, he responds to a question about “Periyar” with “Well, he was a great social thinker,” mistaking the abbreviated name of the Corporation for its namesake, the founder of the Self-Respect Movement and the Dravida Munnetta Kalakam (DMK). The language of the Periyar workers has a bewildering proliferation of English acronyms and technical terms of the trade, given in Tamil letters in the text but glossed in English at the back of the book; these terms appear in colloquialized form in conversation and in the examples we are given of test questions, official letters, memos, and intercom communications in formal Tamil. Layered with these deposits of English, formal Tamil, and technical Tamil is the regional language; the red earth of the cashew-growing land still sticks to the legs of the Periyar workers, and superiors are offered bribes of cashew fruits and sugarcane.²¹² The *Tirukkuraḷ* maxims painted on the sides of buses and the walls of the depot with the occupational jargon exhort the workers in classical Tamil, and the conventional poetics of film songs playing on the buses supply them with pick-up lines.²¹³

The *Tirukkuraḷ* quotations in the novel mark the boundaries of the everyday reality of the depot, layering the *kuraḷ*s' cryptic wisdom with a pithy commentary on labor, language, and relationships in the precarious lives of contract workers. Most of the quoted *kuraḷ*s come from the *Poruṭpāl* or section on wealth and polity (*poruḷ*); one comes from the *arattupāl* or section on virtue (*aram*). While none of the passages directly contradict the moral lessons of the *kuraḷ*s, they add considerable complexity through conflicts between different kinds of responsibilities and the unequal distribution of power and resources, illustrating the need for a more proximal ethics alongside universal moral principles. The first two instances underscore the survival tactics of the workers, whose labor is glorified in the first *kuraḷ* in contrast to what the higher-ups perceive as their indolence and irresponsibility:

²¹² C.S. Lakshmi (Ambai) pointed out at the UT Austin conference on Tamil translation (2017) the need to recognize that these layers of language should not be assumed to constitute a linear hierarchy. My intention is to highlight the sedimentation of different language varieties in a single place, towards an understanding of the “local” and “regional” that lets us see the overlapping of multiple histories and power structures rather than simply privileging earthiness.

²¹³ Cf. Pandian 2009.

*teyvattān ākātu eninum muyarçitan
mey varuttak kūli tarum*

Even if no gift comes from God,
you will be paid according to your labor

(*Poruṭpāl*, ‘alvinai utaimai [types of individual actions],’ 619; *Neṭuncālai*, 70)²¹⁴

The word *kuli*, used in the *kuṛaḷ* for the fruits of labor generally, stands out here as it is in present-day usage the term for wages in the context of casual and contract labor, indicating payment on completion of a task as opposed to *campalam* or salary, indicating a more stable rate. This *kuṛaḷ* is written on the wall directly facing Tambiturai as he is being grilled by the A.E. (Assistant Engineer) about no-shows on the night shift. Tambiturai refuses to account for other workers’ absence and just wants to go to sleep: “What, sir, why are you asking me all these questions, where is this one and where is that one...I’m here. If there’s work for me, give it, if not, leave it. I’m going to sleep...” There is a sudden blackout and Tambiturai does not know how to switch on the generator; the exasperated A.E. complains that he has not learned how to do anything except sleep on his feet. He also curses at the sleeping “washing boy” using the familiar *kaminēṭṭi*: “*dey kaminēṭṭi payale* [hey son of a whore] ...go wash the bus, *muṇṭam* [idiot]). The A.E.’s rough language thus contrasts with the formal language of the *kuṛaḷ* and hints at the abuses built into the power structure at the depot; the harsh conditions that make sleeping on the job a common theme are outlined at more length in the following chapter, prefaced by another *kuṛaḷ*:

*tūnkuka tūnkic ceyarpāla tūnkaṛka
tūnkātu ceyyum vinai*

One may delay what must be delayed,
but one should do some things quickly

(*Poruṭpāl*, ‘vinai ceyalvakai [ways of doing work],’ 672; *Neṭuncālai*, 100)

This *kuṛaḷ* is written up on the wall under the clock in the depot’s tiny changing room, with khaki uniforms hanging on one side and the colorful clothes of those who are working on the other. We are informed that there is no lounge for the workers to rest in, only this changing room, and nightly tea time is only for 15 minutes, added to a ¾ hour rest time to make a 1-hour break from 1 to 2 am; so some workers are experts at sleeping while standing or walking, while others just sit swatting at mosquitoes. The touted virtues and rewards of labor are now tempered by the actual conditions of work, playing on the word *tunkutal* (in current language, ‘to sleep;’ in the *kuṛaḷ*, ‘to delay’): the men should sleep quickly so they can get back to work. Similarly, the *kuṛaḷ* in the next chapter highlights the predicament of Tamilaracan, the son of a Ceṭṭiyār (merchant) who has left the family business to become a bus conductor and establish his independence from his domineering father:

²¹⁴ Citations are from popular writer Sujata’s volume of renderings of the couplets in modern Tamil, without extensive commentary (*Tirukkuraḷ: putiya urai*, Chennai: Uyirmai Pathippagam, 2005). I chose this rendition in the hope that it would provide a layman’s understanding of the basic meaning of the couplets, as the intricacies of expert commentary may or may not have any relevance in this context.

*periyāraip pēṇātu oḷukin periyārāl
pērā iṭumpai tarum*

If you don't respect your elders,
they will give you ceaseless misery

(*Poruṭpāl*, 'periyārai pilaiyāmai [on not wronging elders],’ 892; *Neṭuncālai*, 106)

This *kuṛaḷ* which Tamiḷaracan is sitting directly under, trying to complete the account of the fares collected, his thoughts straying to a girl he met on the bus, foreshadows the failure of his struggle for independence when he loses his job for an oversight due to pursuing this girl and has to return to the family store, forfeiting both love and self-respect. Here, he asks another C.L. (Casual Labor) to check the account for him and there is a shortage; the other C.L. says, “A Chettiyar won’t make mistakes in accounting...what’s up, were you struck by one of those lightning-bolt schoolgirls and mess up your account?” The honest labor praised in the first *kuṛaḷ* is not enough to liberate Tamiḷaracan from the stereotype attached to his birth or from what he sees as a life of silent drudgery; his surrender to human emotion on the job in fact taints him with dishonesty. The play on ‘*periyār*’ is not to be missed (here, elders; in the novel, also the Periyar State Transport Corporation, named after Periyar, the founder of the Self-Respect Movement—all three resonate here).

*iniya uḷavāka innāta kuṛaḷ
kaniyiruppak kāykavarn tarṛu*

Speaking cruelly when there are sweet words
is like selecting unripe fruits when there are ripe ones

(*Arattupāl*, 'iniyavai kuṛaḷ [speaking of sweetness],’ 100; *Neṭuncālai*, 130)

This *kuṛaḷ*, notably from the section on virtue, is written right above the B.M. (Branch Manager)’s head while he argues with the head of the trade union over worker shortage. There is no sharp contrast between this maxim and the dialogue between the B.M., union leader, and workers, which has rather a tone of helplessness if also mutual blame, the former marked by the frequent term of address “*appā*” (literally ‘father,’ colloquially indicating familiarity or entreaty). Here we get a sense of the difficulties encountered on all levels in trying to keep an entity as unwieldy as Periyar running. Finally, when driver Ēlai and conductor Tamiḷaracan are sent off to Chennai on a route they do not know in a bus that is threatening to fall apart, a drunken passenger tries to foist whiskey on Ēlai to boost his morale and help him drive faster:

“*Please leave me dear. Saar is driving too fearfully. If he drives like this, when are we going to reach home?*” He held out the bottle again. Ēlai was fuming. ‘*Saar, take it saar. Drink it while running, just like that, saar. Trust me, saar. You’ll be able to drive without fear. Faith is the most important thing, saar. We got on this bus trusting you only. Look up there. What an apt Tirukkuṛaḷ they’ve written there.*

*iṭukkaṇ varuṅkāl nakuka atanai
aṭuttūrvatu a:toppatu il*

There is no other way to conquer sorrow
than to laugh and push it away.

He read out the *kuraḷ* written in shining letters above the windshield.”
 (*Poruṭpāl*, ‘itukkan aliyamai [on the indestructibility of suffering],’ 621; *Neṭuncālai*, 331)

The passenger, who has lost his wife in a road accident, supplements this piece of secular wisdom with an appeal to religious faith; he had earlier burst into a song on Christ, who dispels all sorrows.²¹⁵ But in relation to Ēlai and Tamil’s stories, this last *kuraḷ* quotation rings true at the same time as it cannot provide an answer to the questions of social justice subtly raised throughout the novel. Like *Añcalai*, *Neṭuncālai* does not frame these questions in overtly political language, but suggests they are embedded in the interplay of languages in the workplace. The localized language of practices of work and play that carries with it their conditions of existence must make itself heard in dialogue with the standardized language of the state and the posited universal language of cultural canons; this is an ethical question in Gunasekaran’s work.

Pythagoras

On a much smaller scale, a bit of word-play on Pythagoras similarly raises questions about regimes of knowledge, economic precarity and social status, and the ethical lives of the contract workers through the figure of mathematics. Ēlai and his childhood sweetheart Kanaka are drawn to each other by an “attraction born of the Pythagorean theorem,” which both are sent out of the classroom for forgetting (211). Each of the three protagonists’ sub-narratives contains a love triangle which does not merely create dramatic interest but delineates the triangulation of precarity, responsibility, and desire through the interplay of local and translocal languages and social codes.

Scenes of homecoming in the *vīṭu* section demonstrate the entanglement of work life with family responsibility and individual desires—for love, but also for independence and the dignity associated with certain forms of work. For all three workers, the Periyar job carries considerable prestige relative to their previous occupations—in two cases, informal, “unskilled” manual labor, and in the third, small business, which is “skilled” but burdened with family obligation and social stereotype. The mechanic Ayyanār, named after the god of the temple where his mother prayed for a son, cannot marry until he is made “permanent” with Periyar; when he is fired for some oversight, he encounters a woman with whom he became involved while working as a mason and goes back to that profession temporarily, until he fails at that too due to the distraction of this relationship, now complicated by her having married and had children. The former tractor driver and now bus driver Ēlaimuttu has married a poor relation who is mistreated by his mother on account of her inability to carry a baby to term; on the job, he runs into his former boss’s daughter and school sweetheart Kanakā—the only person who calls him by the nickname Muttu (“pearl”) instead of Ēlai (which by itself means “simpleton” or “poor person”) (145)—and gets into a fight trying to defend her against her authoritarian husband; like Ayyanār, he temporarily returns to drive her father’s tractor after this incident. While the Pythagorean theorem that brings Ēlai and Kanakā together belongs to an abstract language

²¹⁵ “*kalvari malai eri ninravane en/kavalaiyellam pokka vanta atavane* (the one standing on top of Calvary Mountain/the sun come to drive away all sorrows)” (330)

that they do not find relevant, Ēlai finds himself ethically bound to both Kanakā and his wife Pārvati, taking their part against the family members that unfairly demean them. The conductor Tamiḷaracan has a complex relationship to his family, combining a certain pride in his social status as a Ceṭṭiyār (merchant) which leads him initially to hobnob with higher-ups rather than his fellow CLs, deep embarrassment at his own fear of his domineering father, and corresponding aversion to the shopkeeper life; he has tried to escape and assert his independence by leaving the family trade and taking up this Periyar job, but has to pay the price when his flirtation with a passenger on one of his routes leads to a confusion in accounts, as mentioned earlier; like the other two, he has to return to the shop temporarily. When Tamiḷaracan gets to know Kalaicelvi on the bus, he sings a film song to her:

Mālāiyil yārō manatōṭa pēca

mārkāli vāṭai itamāka vīca

mēkam puttatō! mōkam vantatō!

Someone speaks with my heart in the evening

The soothing cool breeze of Mazhkazhi blows

Clouds formed! I'm overcome with desire!

(221)²¹⁶

The language of the contemporary popular cinema, linguistically formal/standard but emotionally/sexually uninhibited, contrasts here with the time-honored morality of the Tirukkuraḷ and the burden of expected skill in “calculation,” as discussed earlier. It is in the *natu* section, on the perilous journey to Chennai in a broken-down bus, occasioned by a shortage of staff and buses during a festival, that the three prove themselves and regain their independence.

The languages in which the relationship between precarity, responsibility, and desire is formulated thus complicate the coupling of “self-respect” and linguistic nationalism associated with the name “Periyar.” While the notion of “self-respect” arguably remains relevant,²¹⁷ “Tamil” is here not a single “pure” being resisting the hegemony of others like “Sanskrit” or “Hindi” but an irreducibly multiple, changeable, permeable body of beings and becomings that quietly contests its own internal hegemonies, which operate, not as static linear hierarchy, but as centripetal forces in Bakhtin’s sense. The *vīṭu* here is also a *nāṭu*—Natunatu, home to intimately known earth-plants-people-machines-language, the *nāṭu* is not “Tamil Nadu” but a certain sense of the wider world.

²¹⁶ Film song, composed by Ilaiyaraja, sung by Swarnalatha, and “picturized” on Banupriya. Ilaiyaraja was a hugely popular and eclectic music director of the mid 1970s-1990s.

²¹⁷ Political scientist Matthew Baxter has suggested in a talk at the UT Austin conference (2017), based on the writings of Periyar and Gandhi, that the two terms often translated as “Self-Respect” are conceptually distinct, opening up possibilities for a more nuanced understanding of the movement, its charismatic leader, and its wider reach.

Chapter 6

Veḷayāṭṭu, vacikaram, vairākkiam:

the dialectal imagination in the novels of Su. Tamilselvi

“Here, Ammā, look how it keeps turning around, like ‘I’m gonna go inside,’” [Rācāmpāl] said.

“However you turn it around, a louse won’t go south or east. It’ll only go north,” she said, bending her head to make it easier [for Vaṭivāmpāl] to see the lice.

“Why won’t it go south or east, Ammā?” asked Añcammāl, who was lying down, worn out.

“The ocean’s there, no, that’s why it won’t go. It’s scared, like ‘if I go near the ocean I’ll fall in and drown,’ so they say.”

“How does a louse sitting on our head know where the ocean is?” she said, amazed.

“Who can tell how it knows? It knows all right, that’s why it refuses to go?”

Añcammāl took the louse and put it on her palm, setting it to the south and turning her hand to watch it run.

“Crush the louse, Ciṅṅankacci, don’t keep it and play with it,” said Cuntarāmpāl.

-Su. Tamilselvi, *Aḷam (Salt Flats)* 164-5

This scene from Su Tamilselvi’s second novel brings together several characteristic elements of her work: attention to the body in relation to the natural world, the affects of movement, and a sense of play that is an integral dimension of the lives of women—a source of community feeling and resilience in coping with the trials of birth, death, marriage, and work. After a long day of hard work in the salt flats (*aḷam*), Cuntarāmpāl’s three daughters still have an inexhaustible reserve of curiosity and imagination: as the eldest daughter Vaṭivāmpāl picks over her mother’s head for the lice that have been bothering her all day, the two younger daughters start playing with one, undaunted by the prospect of its escaping to torment them again and marveling instead at its persistent sense of direction. The novel is set in Vedaranyam, the southernmost municipality in Nagapattinam district of coastal Tamil Nadu. To the east of the district lies the Bay of Bengal and to the south lies the Palk Strait which separates India from Sri Lanka, hence the louse’s stubborn tendency to the north.

The settings of Tamilselvi’s novels span several districts on the east coast of Tamil Nadu: her home district of Tiruvarur and the adjacent districts of Thanjavur to the west and Nagapattinam to the east; and Kadalur district (directly north of Nagapattinam), where she now lives with her husband, also a writer, and children and works as an educator. Beyond this, her characters’ travels take them to the union territory of Puducherry north of Kadalur, to Tiruppur in the western part of Tamil Nadu, and across the sea to Singapore. The emphasis on movement and play in her work underscores the fluidity of language without losing sight of its locality. The characters’ physical movements, while giving shape to the novels’ narratives and weaving them into an intertextual fabric, bring them into contact with the languages and lores of multiple places, which in turn become a part of their subjectivity. This sense of intimacy with land and locality not as a birthright but as something gained through work, ritual, curiosity, and play—children’s play, creative forms performed in the interstices of work, and women’s sensuality and sexuality—is markedly

feminine in the context of her narratives of women's struggles or *peṅkaḷiṅ pōrāṭṭam*.²¹⁸ While the broad outlines of these narratives are highly translatable, I argue that their strength and beauty comes from the wealth of local language and practice, which enable a deeper understanding of women's work, play, subjectivities, and communities than a standardized or universalizing feminist language could ever yield. Tamilselvi stages her women's struggles through the play (*veḷayāṭṭu*, formal *viḷaiyāṭṭu*) of attraction (*vacikaram*) and detachment (*vairākkiam*), a constant push and pull that is not so much a tug-of-war (despite the sense of "battle" carried by the word *pōrāṭṭam*) but an ebb-and-flow, like the ocean Cuntarāmpāl's louse so fears.

This chapter will explore the role of dialectal forms in the elaboration of women's active intimacy with places across a handful of Tamilselvi's novels: *Aḷam* (*Salt Flats*, Trichy: Marutha, 2002), *Karrālai* (*Aloe*, Chennai: New Century Book House, 2014), *Kaṇṇaki* (Chennai: Uyirmai Pathippagam, 2008), and *Kītāri* (*Goatherd*, Chennai: Marutha, 2003). While sharing some common stylistic, thematic, and geographical ground, the four novels offer different narrative approaches that each involve a unique relationship to places, as expressed in the use of local language and as framed by different kinds of movement: refusal to move, migration (for economic, gendered, and personal reasons), and nomadism (by occupation).

Aḷam (*Salt Flats*), as noted above, is set in Vedaranyam, where salt production plays a large part in the local economy.²¹⁹ Cuntarāmpāl and her three daughters live in the village of Kōviltāḷvu, while her husband has gone off on a ship to work in Singapore and never returned. Cuntarāmpāl remains in Kōviltāḷvu through many hardships, spurning relatives' offers to help her move elsewhere, while her grown daughters all return to live with her after the oldest is twice widowed, the middle one divorced, and the youngest rejects her childhood sweetheart in defiance of town gossip against her family. Initially, they struggle to survive on what they can grow on their plot of land, forage from village commons, and earn through agricultural wage labor, but eventually they are forced to take up work in the salt flats, even managing to buy a small lot of their own.

The women's determination to stay in their home village despite all odds and temptations is striking for several reasons. Most obviously, it is a rejection of traditional gender roles, as women are routinely expected to move to their husband's town or home after marriage; both the passivization of women and their permanent relocation as integral components of marriage are evident in the frequent usage of the standard, gendered phrase *vāḷkkaippaṭuvatu*, [for a woman] "to get married" or literally "to experience/be subject to life" in conjunction with the name of the husband's town. Cuntarāmpāl has of course come to Kōviltāḷvu in accordance with this construction, and ostensibly remains there out of a faint hope that her husband may someday return from Singapore—"and if he asks, how did you move away from here without asking me? then what will I say?" However, there is more to her commitment to Kōviltāḷvu than this; her refusal to move itself poses a question, a form of resistance: why did you abandon me, and more

²¹⁸ This is how the author characterizes her work in the foreword to *Karrālai*.

²¹⁹ *Aḷam* has a worthy predecessor in *Karippu Maṇikaḷ* (*Salty Pearls*), a novel about salt pan workers by feminist author Rajam Krishnan (1925-2014). Vedaranyam was also the site of a satyagraha (act of passive resistance) during the independence movement. See Rājāji, Ji. *Rāmaccantiraṅ*, Ti. Ār. Patmanāpaṅ, *Vētāranayam uppu cattiyākkirakac carittiram*, Chennai: Cōmu Nūlakam, 1978.

importantly, why is it so difficult to live as a woman alone and with three daughters? Why is society structured such that we are utterly dependent on men and at the mercy of their whims? Her daughters take this line of thinking further as each of them chooses to take their lives in their own hands, stake a claim to their hometown, and ultimately value their commitment to each other above all other relationships. Reading between the lines of this translatable narrative, however, we can find more intimate, untranslatable elements of the women's relationship to Kōviltālvu. There is a powerful agency in the three daughters' sense of curiosity, discovery, and play (*veḷayāṭṭu*); the entanglement of their desires (*āca*) with the landscape, framed against its own harshness and the damaging social construction of female beauty; and their detachment (*vairākkīyam*, from Sanskrit, meaning "freedom from desire") from the socially sanctioned pleasures of married life, which is not merely a capitulation to the strictly monitored ideal of chastity but closely bound up with the idea of women owning their own sensual and aesthetic experience. These three elements, though identified by standard Tamil terms, are rendered audible, visible, and tangible using local language, lore, forms, and practice.

In contrast to *Aḷam*, firmly predicated on loyalty to a single land, the novels *Karṛālai* (Aloe) and *Kaṇṇaki* (Kaṇṇaki) are stories of migration. The two novels each draw their protagonists' names and some narrative elements from the two Tamil epics, *Maṇimēkalai* and *Cilappatikāram*. *Karṛālai*'s protagonist Maṇimēkalai is named after the heroine of the Buddhist epic of the same name, and *Kaṇṇaki*'s Kaṇṇaki after the heroine of *Cilappatikāram*. But while the epic heroines' quests for honor and inner peace unfold according to the complex and highly codified literary and philosophical systems that produced them, the novels' protagonists set out to attain a sense of strength and self-worth that is ambivalently connected to contemporary local and global discourses.

Karṛālai is set mainly in Tiruvarur and Thanjavur districts.²²⁰ Maṇimēkalai grows up in Kappuṇākoḷam (Karpakanātar Kuḷam, Tamilselvi's hometown) in the far south of Tiruvarur district and is married in the town of Vāṭiyakāṭu, just across the Manimutta river.²²¹ She remains close to her younger sister Vaḷarmati, who is married in the city of Kumbakonam in Thanjavur district. Known to her neighbors in Vatiyakkatu as "Kappuṇākoḷatakka" (Sister from Kappuṇākoḷam), Maṇimēkalai is abused by her husband and comes to despise Vatiyakkatu, sending her daughter Kala to grow up with her grandmother in Kappuṇākoḷam and then to study from her aunt's house in Kumbakonam; however, Maṇimēkalai finds a new community of working women and regains her sense of play in agricultural wage labor. During this time, she also encounters migrant workers from Ramnathapuram far to the south (254). Eventually, when Kala finishes school, Maṇimēkalai and Kala themselves migrate to the textile hub of Tiruppur in the distant Kongu Nadu region of western Tamil Nadu and enter factory work. Here, they encounter a wide

²²⁰ The "epic" *Maṇimēkalai* is also set in the Kaveri delta (the city of Kaveripattanam/Poompuhar) and ends on an island off the Jaffna peninsula. Maṇimēkalai is the daughter of Kovalan, Kaṇṇaki's husband in the *Cilappatikāram*, and his courtesan-lover Madhavi; this backstory has no parallel in *Karṛālai* and *Kaṇṇaki* but suggests a kind of affinal kinship between the two novels. The name and role of our Maṇimēkalai's sister Vaḷarmati is reminiscent of the epic Maṇimēkalai's friend and confidante Sudhamati. Broadly, both narratives relate a woman's quest for fulfillment that leads her to a far-off place and an alternative form of community.

²²¹ This appears to be a local name, as the better-known Manimukta river flows through Virutacalam and rejoins another river, never reaching Tiruvarur. The river nearest Karpakanatar Kulam is called Valavan River on available maps and the town of Vatiyakkatu, if an existing town, is too small to feature.

spectrum of women workers, each with their own story of adversity, mistreatment, and abandonment (by husbands/lovers but also by family members of both genders). Much against her will, Maṇimēkalai capitulates to family pressure to agree to Kala's marriage to a young man from Vadiyakkatu and goes there for the wedding. She returns to Tiruppur with a sense of relief, only to be joined some time later by Kala, whose marriage has failed, and her infant daughter. The women workers in Tiruppur form a sort of commune to care for themselves and their children, ending the novel on a utopian note despite the hardships of factory work.

Maṇimēkalai's character is strongly marked by detachment (*vairākkiam*), in keeping perhaps with her namesake, who becomes a Buddhist renouncer, and identified with aloe (the *Karṛālai* of the title) for her resilience to the drought-like lack of compassion she has faced (though the word is not used here, it may be helpful to note the Tamil idea of *īram*, meaning compassion and generosity, literally denotes "moisture"). Yet this defiant *vairākkiam* is again closely associated with attractions of the landscape and emotional bonds between women, which is expressed in forms of play (*veḷayāṭṭu*). Throughout the novel, there are strong tensions between different gendered relationships to place: Maṇimēkalai's virulent bias towards Kappuṇākoḷam as opposed to Vadiyakkatu; the unexpected pleasures of hard agricultural wage labor in both towns; the escape route glimpsed in education, completely absent in *Aḷam*; and the leveling space of the distant Tiruppur factory, where class and gender unite across regional origin, all vie for attention. Again, it is necessary to read a bit against the grain of the novel's conclusion, which seems to make distance from the suffocating village and entrance into the impersonal factory space a condition of liberation, to appreciate the nuances of the women's relationship to place and how the two faces of work—its intrinsic potential both to liberate and to oppress—emerge in local forms.

Kaṇṇaki's protagonist is named after the brave and virtuous heroine of the *Cilappatikāram*, but as with *Karṛālai*, the novel is far from a retelling; rather, it turns that narrative on its head.²²² As the epic *Kaṇṇaki* travels across three kingdoms in a righteous quest to regain her unfaithful husband Kovalan,²²³ so is the novel's *Kaṇṇaki* driven by her experiences at the hands of fickle and abusive men to travel across Virutācaḷam, Pondicherry, and Singapore in search of a life of dignity; but while the former is a symbol of chastity, the latter is a vulnerable human being for whom sexuality is an important part of life but does not determine a person's worth. *Kaṇṇaki* spends her childhood in Virutācaḷam, but due to the proximity of a red-light district to her parents' home, her mother sends her to live with her grandparents in Citterikkuppam. Her mother's best laid plans are foiled, however, when she is seduced by an electrician named Ācāitambi (the name means literally "desiring youth" or "young lover") and runs away with him to his hometown of Kārkūṭal to the south-east of Virutācaḷam (which we have encountered before as Añcalai's hometown in *Añcalai*). *Kaṇṇaki* stubbornly remains there even when her family begs her to come home and marry her youngest *māmā* (maternal uncle), but her chosen husband becomes abusive and eventually brings home two more wives. A long-suffering *Kaṇṇaki* finally decides to strike out on her own; she returns home but is rejected by her mother, and with

²²² Jeyamohan has reworked the entire epic in his 2005 novel *Kotravai*.

²²³ The *Cilappatikāram* spans three Tamil kingdoms, beginning in the Chola city of Poompuhar and moving through the Pandya city of Madurai to the Chera city of Vanchi.

the help of a stranger, Tivyanātan ("divine husband"), reaches Pondicherry and starts work for his aunt Māriyāpushpam, a fish merchant. Tivyanātan falls for Kaṇṇaki but runs away when he learns he has fathered a child; this is too much for Kaṇṇaki to bear, so after giving birth she leaves the child in an orphanage and, with the help of a friend, gets a job in Singapore as a domestic worker; as it turns out, this is a facade for human trafficking and her real job is as a personal sex worker for a big engineer. Ironically, after some initial violence when she realizes the nature of the position, her new employer is the most caring, generous, and committed lover she has ever had, and she stays long past her initial term of service, feeling sad to part ways even when she finally decides to return to see her now-grown-up son. The son, predictably, resents her, but the money she has brought back from Singapore is enough to support her comfortably for years; when the funds begin to run out, she ends up back in Pondicherry as the head of a group of women fish sellers and chooses to maintain her friendship with her former Singapore employer/lover at the expense of a possible reconciliation with her son.

While this sweeping, somewhat contrived narrative lacks the organic growth of *Aḷam* and even of the much longer *Karṛālai*, the part of the novel which takes place in the Virutācaḷam region retains the meticulousness mapping of places, social networks, and work relations through language and sub-narrative, and provides an interesting overlap with Kanmani Gunasekaran's work explored in the previous chapter.

Finally, we can turn from migrations of *Karṛālai* and *Kaṇṇaki*, in which the driving forces are gendered and economic, but the journey comes to fulfill personal needs, to the nomadic movement of *Kītāri* (Goatherd). Strikingly, there is no utopia in this novel; of the two girls who make a dramatic entrance at the beginning of the story, one is raped and killed partway through the story and the other dies, betrayed and abandoned, at the end, leaving her male child in the care of its grandfather as the only potential sign of hope. While domestic violence is a recurring theme in all four novels, this novel seems surrounded by many kinds of violence that affect women and children disproportionately but have far-reaching effects on men also.

I will now explore the construction of women's subjectivities around their bodies' relation to the land in which they find themselves at each stage of life through the ideas of *viḷaiyāṭṭu*, *vairākkiam*, and *vacikaram*, focusing on children's play and discourses of desire, women's work-songs and rhymes, *oppāri* (laments), curses, and stories inscribed in the landscape.

Veḷayāṭṭu: play in Aḷam

In all four novels, the sensory exploration of the local environment in children's play—in the interstices of their work as productive members of rural working-class families—feeds into the complex social, emotional, and psychological terrain of young women's coming of age and the strictures to which she will be subjected as a "*periya maṇuṣi* (grown woman)." Despite these constraints, their desires remain irrepressible and manifest themselves in old and new forms—songs and rhymes, wordplay, stories, and practices through which they inhabit the local environment.

In *Aḷam*'s narrative dominated by sheer struggle for subsistence, three aspects of play are highlighted: the invocation of play to mask serious concerns; the social and economic constraints on play and desire; and the performative-transformative potential of

play, its power to include/exclude, to shape self-image, and to build reserves of strength. Each of these aspects emerges in the women's relationships to the town of Kōviltāḷvu and its surrounding landscape.

Veḷayāṭṭukku connaṅ (I'm just playing): crafting masks of detachment

The word *veḷayāṭṭu* (formal *viḷaiyāṭṭu*, play) appears in character dialogue at moments of high stress, functioning as a defense mechanism. A close reading of these scenes reveals how the entanglement of play, attraction, and detachment unfolds through dialogue in a representation of local speech (orthographical representation of regional pronunciation and usage) and through intimate attention to the details of local, gendered practices and the physical and social environment.

In the opening chapter of the novel, Cuntarāmpāl, already stressed by her husband Cuppaiyaṅ's inability to find work, waits anxiously to hear him confirm the rumor that he has been invited to work in Singapore. Cuppaiyaṅ asks expectantly,

"periyamoṭṭa vantu conṅiccā?"

Did Vaṭivāmpāl tell you? [using regional term for the eldest daughter]

"eṅṅa?" onrumē teriyātatupol kēṭṭāl.

"What?" she asked as if she knew nothing at all. [...]

"necamāvumē oṅakku oṅṅunteriyātā?"

"You really don't know anything about it?"

"terincikiṭṭētāṅ oṅkalukkiṭṭa veḷayāṭṭuraṅ. nēttu tāṅa māḷamāttikkiṭṭam. atāṅ kerakkattula veḷayāṭṭuraṅ"

"[I know everything, I'm playing with you. We got married [lit. exchanged garlands] just yesterday, that's why I'm playing around on the planets [in our horoscopes]]" (17).

Cuntarāmpāl's sarcastic comment leads to a page-long argument with little authorial interruption and trails off into the emotionally overcome Cuntarāmpāl's inability or reluctance to speak, represented by "..." in lieu of response. During the heated exchange, Cuntaram says to Cuppaiyaṅ,

"keppurutāna itellām?; vāyikki eṅṅaṭi vātam? nākkukku illaṭi narampunṅṅu nā eṅṅakkimē pecamāṭṭaṅ"

What is all this? Why are you arguing with me? You talk without nerves in your tongue, I'll never talk to you again.

Here she uses the word *keppuru* and a variant of the idiom used by the gossip in *Añcalai* (see chapter 3).

The following pages foreground *āca* (formal *ācai*, desire) and *kaṟuppu* (the color black). The objects of *āca* here are clothing and beauty products: himself astounded to hear from the recruiter that everyone in Singapore uses scented bath soap (instead of immersing themselves in a tank), Cuppaiyaṅ appeals to Cuntarāmpāl's desire (*āca*) to wear smooth saris like the other "*kappakāram poṅṭāṭṭi* (ship-worker's wives)" and defends to her Vaṭivāmpāl's desire for *cantu* (a cosmetic paste), "*pūcura māvu* (powder, lit. 'flour to smear' [on the face], possibly regional usage)" and two *mēlcaṭṭai* (jackets). Cuntarāmpāl

responds with a hurt show of *vairākkīyam* (“*onnum vēṇṭam pō*,” there’s no need), and objects to each request as an absurd and inappropriate luxury, using variants of a standard but untranslatable phrase: *namma keṭṭa keṭṭukku* (“for the blame which this would bring upon us [by being a ludicrous or reprehensible excess—in this case not monetary but behavioral]”) (19), and *keṭṭa keṭṭuvala* (f., “one who brings blame”) with reference to Vaṭivāmpāl. Two of her longer, intensely sarcastic utterances belie the source of her anxiety—that Vaṭivāmpāl will come of age while Cuppaiyaṇ is away. To her, Vaṭivāmpāl’s desire is frightening due to the weight of responsibility it places on her; she vents this anxiety by accusing both father and daughter of lack of awareness or shame, using vivid language such as “showing off like foreign prostitutes (*cīmattēvuṭiyāmēri*)” and “sitting in a grain-barrel (*kuturukkulla okkāntiru*)” until Cuppaiyaṇ’s return. Yet each time, Cuppaiyaṇ intervenes, invoking Vaṭivāmpāl’s *āca* as something incontestable: “*puḷḷa ācappaṭṭu kēkkutulla* (The child wants it, no? [lit. the child is asking desiringly];” “*ācappaṭṭuttān kēkkutu* (She’s asking because she wants [desires] it).”

Vaṭivāmpāl’s desire for *cantu* engenders a fascinating scene that unfolds in the interstices of her parents’ argument, opening up a new dimension of *āca* that cannot be measured by the yardstick of appropriateness—a sensual pleasure which we can think of in relation to *vacīkaram* (allure) in the sense that the latter combines *āca* (desire) with *aḷaku* (beauty). This raises the question, to whom does pleasure in adorning oneself belong? *Cantu*, a generic word for “paste,” here refers to a black cosmetic used for *poṭṭu* (a decorative and auspicious mark on the forehead, thought to ward off the evil eye). Vaṭivāmpāl interrupts them to ask if she can take water to rinse sesame at a neighbor’s house, and when Cuntarāmpāl dismisses the request, Cuppaiyaṇ retorts, “*puḷḷa ācappaṭṭu kēkkutulla. eppavumā onakku eḷuttanni keṭakkitu*. The child wants it, no? Do you get sesame water every day?” This refers to the water used to rinse sesame seeds being reused as an ingredient in making *cantu*; the latter part of Cuppaiyaṇ’s comment could possibly indicate that sesame is a less common crop in the region due to saline soil. Her father’s kind words remind Vaṭivāmpāl of a cruel comment he made one time when her mother was applying a black *poṭṭu* on her forehead: “You had such a black daughter and now you’re putting a *poṭṭu* on her. If you put a *poṭṭu* on her forehead, will anyone be able to see it?” Despite this comment imprinted on her memory and the fact that it is not an isolated incident but a pattern of behavior, the attraction of Cuppaiyaṇ’s present indulgence is so strong that Vaṭivāmpāl thinks, “*inta ammā mōcam. polutenakkim ētāvutu pēcikkiṭṭērukku. appā, nalla appā. celanēram pēcinālum celanēram ācaiya pēcutu*. This Amma is bad. She’s always going on about something. Appa is a good Appa. Even if he sometimes gives me a hard time, sometimes he talks nicely to me [*ācaiya*, lit. with desire, i.e. (here paternal) love].” Though this amounts to a complete misrecognition of her parents’ respective commitments to her well-being, the comment throbs with her intense desire [*āca*] to be the object of love [*āca*]. Meanwhile, Cuntarāmpāl grudgingly prepares four or five shells, a process described in minute detail as both Vaṭivāmpāl and her sister Rācāmpāl watch “keenly” to see how it is done: she scrapes out the fibers and *pancai* from the shells and rubs them smooth inside and out; then she takes some aromatic leaves of *katampapu* (a garland of mixed flowers and foliage) brought by Cuppaiyaṇ and *viruntāṭi* (“guests,” formal *viruntāṭi*)—these two terms in the narration are given single quotes, indicating nonstandard usage or pronunciation—which she has dried and placed, wrapped in a cloth, in a pot, and pours these into the winnowing pan, commenting “Can even a thousand

flowers match these aromatic leaves? See the fragrance they still have, it hasn't changed a bit." She then takes two *cerunkai* (measurement—joined handfuls?) of "black rice" (immature grains of rice, black in color) and puts a small pot on the stove, where the rice and leaves get charred black and turn to a fine powder, then melt to a resin; into this she pours the black water from washing sesame, and grinds the powder with a ladle so it dissolves and the water thickens and begins to dry out. Finally, she cools it down, pours it into the coconut shells, and puts it away out of the sun to dry. The recipe is so detailed that the reader is tempted to try it out, and the product's attractions are not lost even on Cubbaiyan, who asks if it will dry before he leaves, so that he can give some to the man who recruited him to work in Singapore, for his daughter.

In the space of five or six pages, the scene establishes several things: Cuntarāmpāl's fighting spirit; the multiple valence of play (*veḷayāṭṭu*) with which we began; the complex field of interaction in which children's seemingly simple desires (*āca*) are expressed and appraised; the many points of reference and layers of significance that the color black will take on in the narrative; and the demand for meticulous documentation of local, gendered practices, and how they are passed on in home learning environments, to develop these trajectories, which leads the writer to devote almost two pages to a *cantu* recipe we learn along with the two young girls. Note Cuntarāmpāl's comment about the fragrance of the leaves: though she seems to approach the task grudgingly, it is one of significant sensual pleasure, and the care with which she prepares it suggests that it has a value beyond social approval or appropriateness. The girls learn not only how to make the *cantu*, but how to be connoisseurs of it; in other words, they can own the product, the skills and labor used to produce it, and the pleasure of consuming it—something possible only with the knowledge of gleaning or recycling techniques developed and transmitted informally at the local level. This kind of knowledge and appreciation is to be their strength and their beauty, to sustain them through all the trials to which their precarity and marginality subjects them.

We see another side of Cuntarāmbal, and another side of the "foreign," while she gathers wild *amalai* (soapnut?) plants. Thinking of her husband's failure to return from Singapore, she sings wistfully,

*ciṭṭukuruviyaḷā...cemaḷōrattu pacciyaḷā...
 cīmakki pōṇiyaḷā? cevantakani tinniyaḷā?
 ceṭiyerakkam koṇṭiyaḷā? yān cimāna pattiyaḷā?
 pacca kuruviyaḷā paṭṭanamtān pōṇiyaḷā
 paḷuttapaḷam tinniyaḷā? pacierakkam koṇṭiyaḷā...?
 yām paḷikāra pāviya pattiyaḷā...?
 Sparrow...[] bird...did you go to a foreign land?
 did you eat red fruit? did you get the seedlings?
 did you see my good man?
 Green sparrow, did you go to the city?
 did you eat ripe fruit...? did you get your fill...?
 did you see my disgrace of a man? *Aḷam* 35*

This song of longing, resonant with consonantal rhyme (initial *ca* in the first verse and initial *pa* in the second), plays on the idea of the foreign land: while the word *cīma* in the earlier passage indicated outlandish and unacceptable desires, here it appears as a land of

plenty where the legitimate object of desire resides, painfully out of reach. The speaker wonders about the unknown lands in which the absent (migrant) lover must be wandering, far from home.²²⁴ This relation contrasts with that of *oppāri*, explored later in the chapter, in which known lands become estranged due to the loved one's absence.

Vaṭivāmpāl's naivete is soon effaced by the harsh conditions in which she grows up, and she adopts before her time her mother's attitude of *vairākkiam*. When the teenage Vaṭivāmpāl is about to marry her first husband, 50-year-old Ponnaiyan—who is marrying late because he has just returned from years of work in Singapore—, she half-confesses her feelings to her sister Rācāmpāl, also about to marry a younger, but poorer man: “*attān...attānnu vārttakki vārtta collāta naṭuttāṅkacci [...] nammalukku tāttāmēri* (Don't say “brother-in-law,” “brother-in-law” all the time, sister...he's like a grandpa to us)” but quickly covers up her concern, saying “*cummā veḷayāṭṭukku connaṅ* (I'm just playing around),” and goes on to sing a song she heard Mīnāṭci *āttā* sing when she was little, about a young widow whose ornaments, gifts from her older husband, shine uselessly for her now that he is gone:

*kīlatteruvulayē nā keḷavanukku vākkapaṭṭēn
vākkappaṭṭu munāmnāḷu pākkutiṅka pallu illa.
āṭu vaḷattāraṭi tāttā, aṭṭiyapanni pōṭṭāraṭi
māṭu vaḷattāraṭi tāttā, māṭṭalpanni pōṭṭāraṭi
kōḷi vaḷattāraṭi tāttā, kolucupanni pōṭṭāraṭi
ellām pannipōṭṭa tāttāpāṭu mutiṅciraṭi
māṭṭala kayāṭṭuṅkaṭi tāttā maṅṭaiyōram vaccaluva
aṭṭiyala kayāṭṭuṅkaṭi tāttā aṭimatiyē vaccaluva
koluca kayāṭṭuṅkaṭi tāttā koṭāṅkayōram vaccaluva.*

I was married off to the old man in the east street
three days later, he had no teeth to eat betel nut.

Grandpa tends goats, he made me a choker

Grandpa tends cows, he made me a hair-chain

Grandpa tends chickens, he made me a pair of anklets

Grandpa made everything for me, and then he kicked the bucket

Let them take off this choker, friend, keep it by Grandpa's head

Let them take off this chain, friend, keep it in Grandpa's lap

Let them take off these anklets, friend, keep them in the crook of Grandpa's arm (179)

The sound-play between the names of the animals ‘Grandpa’ tends, the names of the ornaments he gives his young wife, and the parts of his body where she relinquishes them is not easily replicated in English, but Vaṭivāmpāl's feelings, wavering between the urge to confide in her sister and the need to cover up her distress, are palpable in her pointed “playfulness,” and the song captures the *vairākkiam* that numbs the young widow, using the classic trope of lament, explored later in the chapter. The echo of the early *cantu* scene

²²⁴ The expression of a woman's longing in the context of men's migrant labor is reminiscent of the *biraha* of eastern India (a common theme in songs of Bihari migrant communities in Bengal); in Bengali, the idea of *biraha* goes back to Radha's longing for Krishna, but also finds expression in migrant contexts such as in the folksong “*cal mini āsām jābo* (Come, Mini, I'm going to Assam, i.e. to work in the tea plantations).”

heightens the contrast between the child Vaṭivāmpāl's expectation and her now foreseeable rejection of gifts, useless without the giver's *āca*.

The play of *āca* figures also in a scene just before this, at the end of a day of work in the salt flats (*aḷam*). The youngest sister Añcammāl washes the stinging salt from her hands and legs and goes to meet her childhood sweetheart Pucci ("Bug"), who is leaving Kōviltāḷvu with his family to live in another town. She teases him about claiming to be a loyal "*kōyittāvukkāran* (Kōviltāḷvu man)." Seeing he is offended, she says "*veḷayāṭṭukku collurañ, kōccikkiṭātē* (I'm playing around, don't get mad)." Saddened by this, he wants to know what she is joking about; she says enigmatically, "*veḷayāṭṭu venayāyīṭa pōvutu* (It's all going to become [child's] play)" (168), referring, it seems, to their ill-fated relationship. When Añcammāl goes home, she is greeted by a dinner of greens and water; Rācāmpāl says, "*cōru tiñka ācayarukkummā* (I feel like eating rice, Amma)" but until they have sold the salt they have collected, there is no money for rice.

In each of these scenes, the speaker invokes play as an unattainable thing of the past, belonging to childhood or the rosy early days of a relationship, to sarcastic or disarming effect. Notably, in all three scenes what is at stake is leaving the town of Kōviltāḷvu: in the first scene, Cuppaiyaṇ is leaving to work in Singapore; in the second, Vaṭivāmpāl is about to "marry into" Ponnaiyaṇ's town; and in the third, Pucci is moving to another town and Añcammāl foresees that there is no coming back. Play, desire, responsibility, and restraint all become bound up with a strong commitment to the town (*ūr*). This connection grows over the course of the novel through the embedding of *āca* in the local landscape, which persistently decenters the women's *vairākkīyam* towards the conventional good things of life (nice clothes, jewelry, even just rice) by shifting attention to the powerful, easily overlooked, and sometimes unexpected attractions the local environment holds for them.

Ācayarukkummā (I want to, Amma): a botany of desire

The relationship Cuntarāmpāl and her daughters have with the local environment is one of an intimacy born of necessity. Abandoned by Cuppaiyaṇ, they subsist on what they can grow and forage on their plot of land and in the village commons and what they can earn through casual wage labor for their neighbors. They survive in this way through illness, injury, terrible storms and floods, until finally they are forced to take up work in the salt flats. Though salt production provides a seasonal livelihood to most of the town's residents, they have avoided it as long as possible due to the harshness of working conditions. Yet despite these grim conditions, the narrative repeatedly draws attention to the irrepressibility of *veḷayāṭṭu* (play), *āca* (desire), and *alaku* (beauty) as they learn the uses and pleasures of local natural resources, creating a strong counterpoint to *vairākkīyam*.

The novel introduces the reader to a wide spectrum of local plants and trees and their recreational, nutritional, and other uses. The girls' childhood games naturally involve the use of local trees and other materials, and their ability to find joy in these things is framed by, and subtly entangled with, adult desires, disappointments, and drudgery. For example, in chapter 2, five months after Cuppaiyaṇ leaves for Singapore, Vaṭivāmpāl gets a scolding because her younger sister Rācāmpāl has hurt her knees falling from a makeshift swing in a *pūca* tree (29). This incident of childhood play is woven into a scene that

sketches multiple disappointments of grown women's *āca*: one Meenatci *atta/āttā* (auntie to the mother, grandma to the girls) comes to visit Cuntarāmpāl after one of her perennial fights with her daughter-in-law; during their conversation we learn that Cuntarāmpāl's father had hoped to marry her to one of Meenatci's sons, then settled for Cuppaiyaṇ when that plan fell through. Meenatci, feeling unwanted and humiliated by her daughter-in-law, now regrets this.

The swinging scene is echoed in chapter 5, where Vaṭivāmpāl's irrepressible desire to play and enjoy dances around the figure of her mother, stiffened by hardship and anxiety. At this point, it has become clear that Cuppaiyaṇ will never return, and Cuntarāmpāl, concerned that Vaṭivāmpāl remains unmarried several years after coming of age, consults an astrologer and finds that she has a *tōcam* (fault) that must be removed by means of a pilgrimage to the seashore. The entire chapter is devoted to this journey of discovery for Vaṭivāmpāl, who has never traveled this route and has no faith in the pilgrimage, describing in rich detail the lay of the land, natural and human-made landmarks, and their stories: the narrow track through the *karuvaikkāṭu* (ācacia/mesquite forest) just outside the town; the vast expanse of the *aḷam* (salt flats) on three sides, treacherous to cross due to the deep mud in the pits/ditches of the *otavu* (?); the *kōṭiyakkāṭu* (cape forest) to the southwest;²²⁵ the railroad from Agastiyampalli to Kotiyakkarai that splits the *aḷam* in two; the temple of Cervarayan, a local deity, in a *vīramaram* (veerai tree, a kind of small fruit tree); *irāmar pātam* (Rama's footprint), where Rama came searching for Sita and gazed across the sea to Lanka; *avuliyākani* (the dargah of Auliyakani, a Muslim *pir*) under another veerai tree; and Akastiyampalli temple, named for the sage Akattiyar (Agastya). Through Vaṭivāmpāl's eyes, we see the entanglement of human life with the local ecology on multiple scales, from the intimacy of subsistence labor and local ritual to the hugeness of the salt flats—not a natural feature but an indication of the scale of exploitation—and the networks that connect the people of Kōviltāḷvu to other worlds, by rail-line or by story-line.

The chapter begins with Vaṭivāmpāl echoing the opening scene, defending her youngest sister Añcammāl's desire for jaggery and coffee powder (*tū!*) to their mother, who thinks of coffee as an extravagance: "*kācipaṇam irukkuravvōtān kāppittanni ṭittannikkellām ācappaṭanum. nammaḷukku tenamum teluvuttanni keṭaccāp poratu?* (Only people with money can afford to want coffee and tea. Isn't it enough for us to get clean water every day?)." As before, she feels Añcammāl's desire brings shame on the family: "*vūṭu vūṭāppoyi itukkellām muñci vīnkippoyi vāriyā ni?* Have you been going around to other people's houses and pouting for all these things?" But Vaṭivāmpāl rebukes her mother sharply: "*tenamum poṭṭuttānnā kēkkutu? oṛunālakki poṭṭukkuṭuppamunnutāna kēṭṭutu* (Is she asking for coffee every day? She's just asking to make it once)" (70). Vaṭivāmpāl herself has no interest in going on the pilgrimage, which she sees as "*vīnā celavu* (a waste of money)," but she enjoys the journey thoroughly. Just before dawn, they sit with their backs to the dark forest looking out at the *aḷam*, waiting for enough light to see the path; in the pre-dawn silence, the sound of the train gives Vaṭivāmpāl "happiness" and she feels a desire (*āca*) to see the train (71), but it is not visible. Even in the dawn light, they cannot see the track that will lead them through the forest to the rail line, so Vaṭivāmpāl climbs a *nāval*

²²⁵ The cape of Kotiyakkarai, also known by the anglicized name Cape Calimere, is a wildlife sanctuary with dry evergreen forests, mangrove and wetlands.

(jamun or black plum) tree to search for it. Comfortably perched there, she starts swinging on the tree branch. To Cuntarāmpāl's rhetorical questions, "*iñca vantutān veḷayāṭurata* (did we come here to play)?...*veḷayāṭura vayacā onakku* (aren't you too old to play)?" Vaṭivāmpāl simply responds "*ācayarukkummā* (I want to!)" (73). Another desire of Vaṭivāmpāl's is to see "Rama's footprint" and the dargah of Avuliyakani, which she has heard about from other women's stories (*kataikataiyāy colliyirukkirārkal*, they have told of it in many stories). Finally, once the ritual bath in the sea is complete, they visit Akastyampalli, where the desire of Agastya to see the wedding of Siva and Parvati, inscribed in the legend of the temple, converges with the Cuntarāmpāl's desire to see her own daughter's wedding (79).

As the family's poverty grows increasingly dire, the girls discover many kinds of edible plants, and we learn their names, tastes, how to harvest them, and how to cook them. When a terrible storm (*poyal*, formal *puyal*) hits Kōviltālvu in chapter 6, the youngest of the three girls, Añcammāl, expresses a naïve desire to see it: "Hey...I've never seen a storm...is it going to hit now, *akkā?* I want to see it (*pākka ācayārukku*)" (84). Characteristically, her mother snaps back, "You want the storm to hit? I'm praying for it to let us off lightly, and she says she wants the storm to hit. When it hits, you'll know all right" (85). In the wake of the storm, which nearly buries them alive in the house, the family scrounges for various kinds of roots, a preoccupation that takes up the next several pages. At first they eat the immature (*kurutta*) roots of *panaimuṭṭu* (palmyra). Añcammāl proves to be the expert on edibility of available plants: she tells her older sister, "Akka, the seeds of these young palmyra roots are like mango seeds." Here begins our crash course on the varieties of edible seeds of tuberous plants: *karaṇaikkoṭṭai*, those in which the sprouts do not grow into roots but shrivel into stubs, and when cut, the flower inside is sweet and a floury texture, unlike the root-bearing ones, which are inedible; *tannirkkoṭṭai*, those in which the flower is soft and tasteless and submerged in a watery substance; *caḷikkkoṭṭai*, those of very young roots which spurt a thick substance, having moderately good-tasting flowers; and *mākkkoṭṭai* (not described but presumably larger, judging from the name). Since all the roots are immature, they are not suitable for frying and must be boiled; in any case, starting a fire with damp wood after the storm is not easy, so the girls' aunt resorts to a rhyme: "*pāppā vūttula pāluncōrum vāṅkittāram pattikkō, pattikkō* (I'll buy milk and rice for baby's house, catch, catch)" (97). The irony of this rhyme is that the storm has completely destroyed Vaṭivāmpāl's longed-for rice crop, which she insisted on sowing against her mother's wishes, and the whole town is to survive the storm's aftermath by foraging. The girls move on to harvesting *koṭṭi* roots (an aquatic plant with purple flowers) from the low-lying fields (*paḷḷakkollai*), now the main source of food for the townspeople.

The *koṭṭi* plant, the root of which is here a source of sustenance, appears later in the novel in an *oppāri* (lament). There, the *koṭṭi* flower represents the *koṇam* (formal *kuṇam* (nature, good qualities, intrinsic value) of the landscape. The speaker's loss denies her full enjoyment of the landscape's beauty, its thriving profusion seeming useless without the loved one. When Cuntarāmpāl is bitten in the eye by huge ants (*cevapperumpu/mucutterumpu*, "red" or "brown" ants) while harvesting jackfruit from the *kōṭiyakkāṭu* (cape forest), she sings:

alliyum tāmaraiyum
āttaṭacci pūttālum

alli koṇamariñci – enna
ātarikka yārumilla
koṭṭiyum tāmaraiyum
kolattatacci pūttālum
koṭṭi koṇamariñci – enna
koṇanaippār yārumilla
kātattuk kaṇṇāṭi
kaṇṇaṅkaiyi lāntarutān
karipuṭicci maṅkāma – nā
kavalavacci maṅkuṇanē
tūrattu kaṇṇāṭi
tulukkaṅkaiyi lāntarutān
turuppuṭicci maṅkāma – nā
toyaramvacci maṅkuṇanē
 lilies and lotuses
 bloom thickly in the river, yet
 to know the lilies' beauty – and
 support me, there is no one
koṭṭi flowers and lotuses
 bloom thickly in the tank, yet
 to know the *koṭṭi's* beauty – and
 embrace me, there is no one
 The far-off mirror
 that wanders in Krishna's hand (?)
 is not dimmed with soot – I
 am dimmed with sorrow
 The distant mirror
 that wanders in a Turk's hand (?)
 is not dimmed with rust – I
 am dimmed with grief (127)

Although two lines here are obscure to me, again there is a beautiful sound-play in each verse with the letters *a ā, ka,* and *ta,* which not only falls well on the ear but also creates a relation between bodies of water and human bodies in the first two verses (*āru* river and *ātaravu* support, *kolam* tank and *koṇṇanai* embrace) and between the optical effect of distance and the physical effects of exposure (*kātattu kaṇṇāṭi-kari-kavalai* far-off mirror-soot-sorrow and *tūrattu kaṇṇāṭi-turu-toyaram* distant mirror-rust-grief) in the second two verses. Calmed by her song, Cuntarāmpāl goes to a neighbor's house to have breastmilk applied to her eye as a remedy, which reminds her of her husband's childish demands for breastmilk at the slightest sign of eye irritation. "*paṭupāvi manucan. avvō kaṇṇa nallākkikiṭṭu yāv vālkayayē kurutākkikppuṭṭu peyiṭṭāvōlē* (That sinner. He cured his own eyes and left my life blind)" (130).

Vācāppu (curse): from catharsis to resistance

Returning to chapter 7, the narrative turns quickly from the search for *kottī* roots to an incident that briefly places the women's suffering in its political context. The townspeople become aware that government aid is not reaching their town due to the interference of a local bully living in a nearby town, a rags-to-riches character who is rumored to be a murderer and, according to Ganesan (Cuntarāmpāl's brother-in-law), bears a caste-based grudge against the people of Kōviltālvu (neither caste is mentioned by name). The men of Kōviltālvu take matters in their own hands, leading to a confrontation, and the bully backs down. Yet even in this scene, which concerns a dispute between men on the road outside the town, one of the more memorable moments is the bout of curses and laments that one Murugaiyan's wife lets out during a flashback to one of the bully's earlier acts (he forcibly took the bullocks from Murugaiyan's cart for himself):

He snatched the bullocks I raised like children. Won't someone take his children? My belly is burning! This time of day they'd be shouting for water...They'd be shaking their heads saying "bring me bran"! Even if I was inside the house they'd be shaking their bells and calling me. I can't hear the bells from the barn! Won't the conch blow in his house? Why won't the cobra bite him. Why won't the bite him...Let lightning strike him...Let him go to destruction..." [...] Finally she would sing a lament, have a cry, and stop, worn out. (102-103)

While this speech-act explicitly leads to catharsis for the woman, the insertion of this memory in the present context leads directly to the men's act of protest. This points towards the novel's implied linkage between the performative and transformative aspects of language, as speech-acts not only serve a cathartic function but sow the seeds of a new understanding of identity and rights. In this scene, there is a conventionally gendered division of labor in this process, but the novel's primary focus is on the growth of women's consciousness.

In an early scene, also structured as a flashback, childhood play establishes the norms of exclusion and negative self-image that will compound the girls' economic problems and push them to develop a defiant independence. Vaṭivāmpāl and her sisters play *kāyāṭṭam*, *noṇṭiyaṭṭal* (hopscotch), and *kankattī* with their three girl cousins, still children of no more than 10. But when their handsome young uncle (*māmā*) Kovintan comes along, he will sing,

āhā ānantamānē...
yāng rācākkuṭṭiyē...
onna kaliyānam panni
nā velayāṭa pōraṅ...
 Oh, my joyful deer...
 my princess...
 I'm going to marry you
 and play with you...

However, he never includes Vaṭivāmpāl or her sisters in this game, as they are undesirably dark. She then sits alone and curses him, only half understanding her own words:

onna pāmpukaṭikkō,
paracattaṅ kekkō.
pāṭa kelampō.
pattamēla patta aṭukkō.
patinārupatta melatukkō.
oṅkoṭalula elavu porappuṭō.
kumpacāti kaṭṭō.
oṅkālula kaṭṭa molakkō.
paṭuvam porappuṭō.
 Let a snake bite you,
 let the *parai* drum be heard.
 let the bier take you away.
 let them perform your funeral twice
 let them perform your funeral sixteen times over
 let youth leave your body.
 let your legs be stunted.
 may you wither (46)

There are some of the same formulas here as in the other woman's curse (snake bite, funeral imagery, utter destruction). However, the memory of Vaṭivāmpāl's curse is one of a series of flashbacks to scenes of ritual that take up most of chapter 3, framed entirely by the gathering of the *amalai* plants. The chapter opens with Cuntarāmpāl singing the song discussed above and recalling how she came to realize that her husband would not return. Once this sinks in, she appeals to Noṅṭivīran, the *kulateyvam* (community deity) during an annual ritual and promises to sacrifice a goat on her husband's return; but as he never returns, she never worships the deity again. Back in the present, Vaṭivāmpāl comes to meet Cuntarāmpāl, who chides her for coming to join her in an area where there might be "*kāttukaruppu*" ("wind or black ones," i.e. spirits, ghosts)." This reminds Vaṭivāmpāl of Kovintan and how, when he died suddenly, she was scared stiff, thinking of her curse, until she learned of the real reason for his death. Her fear gone, the thought of her "blackness" continues to depress her and make her doubt her community's beliefs, as she is still unmarried three years after coming of age. She replies cynically to her mother's admonition with a play on words: "All black [ghosts] will flee seeing my blackness, Amma. No black [ghost] will catch (*piṭi*) me. Don't be afraid. Nothing likes (*piṭi*) me" (44). This defiance does not prevent Vaṭivāmpāl from later consenting to, and even feeling genuinely thankful for the transitory pleasures of two short-lived marriages—one to an older man returned from Singapore, the other to a man suffering from epilepsy—but her independence and skepticism serve her well, as after she is twice widowed, she has no choice but to make her own decisions and take care of herself and her mother and sisters, pushing back against the townspeople's assumptions. The negativity behind her fiercely performative language as a child thus matures into determination and a strong bond with the women of her family. She develops a strong sense of detachment (*vairākkiam*) but never loses her deep attachment to the landscape even in its harshest aspect, out in the hot sun and stinging salt of the *aḷam*, which she makes her own.

Vairākkīyam: detachment in Karṛālai

In the patrilocal context, women must adapt themselves to their husband's livelihood and economic standing, family, community, and town. In *Karṛālai* as in *Aḷam*, the sacrifices women make in the context of marriage are strongly associated with *vairākkīyam* (detachment). Yet here too, the end of childhood is not the end of play: women's work-songs (referred to generally in the novels as "*pāṭṭu*," songs, rather than by the name of a form) sustain and entertain them through long days of *kūli vēlai* (wage labor), cultivating grain, camaraderie, and imagination. These forms of play, embedded in work on the land and in the local language, affirm women's agency through active inhabitation of the landscape and community while precisely registering—and sometimes challenging—its structural limits, both gendered and economic. Over the span of the novel, *vairākkīyam* comes to mean a commitment to these alternative forms of community.

The title *Karṛālai* refers to the aloe plant, which Maṇimēkalai first appreciates in a new way when bathing alone in the local tank after learning of her engagement to Caṅkaran, who later dies before the marriage can take place. In an extended passage, Maṇimēkalai opens her senses to the ocular effects of the water, the white sand, the lilies and lotuses on the surface, and the little fish that come to nip at her, attracted by the pods of the aloe she uses to wash her hair (40-42). The aloe reappears many years later in the narrative, on the eve of her daughter's marriage. Maṇimēkalai points out to her sister Vaḷarmati the irony that the coconut grove she planted at much expense in memory of her father has withered, but the aloe plants she transplanted for free from the uncultivated land next to the plot is thriving. Vaḷarmati turns the aloe into a metaphor for her sister's own determination: "if the aloe that stores water in its roots and survives even the harshest sun dies, then you should be sad" (408). Yet taking the earlier passage into consideration, the aloe symbolizes not only survival against the odds but the means of this survival, which is her ability to take sustenance and pleasure from her surroundings. Maṇimēkalai's attitude hovers between conservatism and radicality: she rigidly maintains her reputation as a good wife, and endures, up to a point, an increasingly abusive relationship; but she never wavers in her mental rebellion and strives tirelessly to find meaning in her own life and prevent her sister and daughter from suffering as she has. What sustains her effort is a *vairākkīyam* (detachment) that does not amount to a rejection of pleasure but depends on remaining open to alternative kinds of fulfilment, in enjoying the natural world and the work of the hands as well as bonds with other women (not, in any of these novels, sexual). The novel approaches women's work, sociality, and intimacy with landscapes and localities through seasonal rhythms and associated language and forms.

As both *Aḷam* and *Karṛālai* concern communities dependent on seasonal agriculture and gathering, chapters or sections habitually begin with the month, the weather, and the state of the crops before getting down to the developments in the characters' lives. In keeping with the demands of regional literature, this draws attention to a relationship between the landscape and human endeavors and emotions that does not neatly fit other conventional models, from the extraordinarily detailed but highly stylized the classical *tinai*s to the melodrama of the commercial cinema, but is vital and precarious, quietly intimate and deeply formative. In *Karṛālai* particularly, the seasonal rhythm not only indexes local resources and practices and marks the passage of time but lends the whole narrative a sense of cyclicity which is broken at the end when Maṇimēkalai achieves a

kind of transcendence—the intertextual echo of Buddhist thought in her naming is thus present in the novel’s temporality also. However, to understand how this trajectory is produced, the environment that produces it demands attention, especially the rhythms of children’s work (*meyccal* or grazing), women’s work (*naṭavu* or transplantation), and women moving into work associated with men (both agricultural and factory jobs).

Meyccal (grazing): a pastoral education

The novel is structured as a flashback, beginning with her daughter’s marriage and then recounting her life from childhood to the that point and beyond. Maṇimēkalai grows up among many kinds of grass: she first appears going out to cut “*pillu*” (formal *pul*, grass) for the cows with a “*pāmini arivāl* (woman’s sickle),” a task at which she is an unrivalled expert. Here we learn how grass is measured in *piṭi* (handfuls) and *kuṭankai* (joined handfuls) of 10-15 *piṭi*, stacked neatly into a bale as tall as her chest, packed down to waist height by tying tightly with palmyra fiber, and hoisted by four people to carry on her head. Then, in chapter 8, which opens with a detailed account of the season (the month of Puraṭṭāci or September-October, during the fall rains) and the state of the crops, we learn of a type of grass called *karaṇakaṭṭai pul*, with “its stalks heavy with multiple firm *karaṇai* (segments)” that boosts cows’ milk production, and the difficulties involved in getting the cows to the place where this grass grows, as they have to be herded along in the canal to avoid them eating the crops in the fields. The work of grazing livestock is mostly done by children who are not in school, usually for economic reasons; Maṇimēkalai has had to leave school without finishing class 6, as her envious older sister has sabotaged her plan to study at the *kurukulam* in Vedaranyam (where Tamilselvi studied as a child). Maṇimēkalai’s mother Pākkiyam is alerted to her arrival by one of the girls she employs to help with the cows and sees her coming with her skirt and half-sari (*tāvani*) hitched up above the knee. The *tāvani* indicates Maṇimēkalai’s marriageable age; Maṇimēkalai is coming to take over the grazing of the cows from her mother because visitors have come with a marriage proposal (summarily rejected, as the groom turns out to be the son of a relative who ran away with the tax collector’s son).

The passage emphasizes Maṇimēkalai’s liminal state—halfway between childhood and womanhood and in a kind of half-codified interaction with the children who work for her mother. As she is the daughter of the children’s employer they refer to her as ‘Manimela *ciṅṅammā*’ or ‘auntie’ and address her with the honorific plural ‘you.’ However, once she has sent her mother home to receive the guests, they quickly take her into their fold. Despite being somewhat older and an expert in certain tasks, she appears less knowledgeable and skilled in the pleasures of a pastoral childhood, and the other children take on the role of her educators, showing her how to trap fish in the canal, roast it, and eat it. The preparations for this picnic are accompanied by songs and rhymes. They make an earthen *kaṭiyam* or fish trap, like a mud house with a “doorway (*vācal*),” break snails into the trap and sing to entice the fish in:

kaṭiyōv kaṭiyōv
nattē kari...puttām pūcci...
āyirakala natta...

alli koṭṭirukku...

vantu tinnuṭṭu oṭiyē peyirunṅka...

Oh *kaṭi*, oh *kaṭi*

snail meat...*puttām* bug (dial., perhaps butterfly [standard *paṭṭāmpūcci*]...)

snails with a thousand *kaḷam* (cells)

we've poured them in

come eat and run... (87)

The children have some difficulties finding dry kindling due to the rain, but they manage to get a fire going with the help of a rhyme:

pāppā vūttula pāluncōrum vāṅkittāram pattikkō, pattikkō

I'll bring milk and rice to Baby's house, catch, catch...(88)

Like when this same rhyme appears in *Aḷam*, the rhyme's content is incongruent with the children's actual fare. Enjoying the roasted fish, Maṅimēkalai asks the children if they do this every day, but they say her mother would not let them, providing only roasted peas as a snack, which they supplement with *pillumuṭṭai* ("grass eggs") found on the roots of *upparukam pul*, another type of grass that grows in saline soil (*uppu* meaning salt; probably a variety of the *arukam pul* used in medicine and rituals). Maṅimēkalai is surprised that they are eating this already, as her family only eats it during the winter months of Tai (January-February) and Maci (February-March). The relation between children's play, a young woman's developing body, and the fertility of the land in the rainy season thus goes far beyond conventional associations into a literal and complicated physical and social terrain. This close attention to local detail is made possible by the use of dialect—not only the representation of the sound of "spoken" language but the local names, properties, and seasonal uses of plants, animals, and implements—the construction of a bale and a fish-trap, the taste and benefits of different types of grass, etc.—on the one hand, and socially coded verbal interactions on the other. The land's resources are necessarily known to Maṅimēkalai, whose family depends on it, but its pleasures are most intimately known by the children who subsist on it at a more basic level; it is Maṅimēkalai's curiosity and openness to the sensual experience of work and play, or work-as-play, that will sustain her when, as a married woman and a victim of domestic abuse, she takes up work outside the home.

The scene now shifts to Pākkiyam's desires (*āca*) and anxieties about her daughter's marriage (replicated later with Maṅimēkalai and her own daughter Kala), and then again to Maṅimēkalai's shy daydreams about the proposed bridegroom Utayakumaran, who courts her through her younger sister Vaḷarmati, playing the classic role of *tōli* (female friend and go-between) after encountering Utayakumaran while he bathes at a *kuḷam* (tank) where she goes to pick *maramallika* flowers—echoing Maṅimēkalai's earlier *Karrālai* (aloe) bath earlier as well as a later song about *maramallika*, discussed below. Maṅimēkalai herself brings the relationship to an abrupt end by refusing to run away with Utayakumaran—her first act of *vairākkiyam*. So Maṅimēkalai's desire for love, like her desire for education, is nipped in the bud.

Naṭavu (transplantation): cultivating community

The repetition of seasonal rhythms, while indicating the intimacy born of dependency on the land, seems to have distancing effect on human temporality, rendering the passage of time so relentless and cyclical that many events in the characters' lives are recounted rapidly or mentioned only in retrospect. Yet on closer inspection it is not the implacability of nature or time but the dysfunctionality of human society that is at stake.

At the opening of chapter 15 of *Kaṛṛālai*, it is the month of *āṭi* (July-August) and the women of *Vāṭiyakāṭu* have gone to weed the fields in *Perumaḷai* in preparation for transplanting. In the next section it is the rainy month of *āvani* (August-September), the work of transplanting begins, and the women not tied down with small children are working day, evening, and night shifts (*nera*, *anti*, and *rā-naṭavu*). In chapter 16-17, the rainy season comes around again, indicating that a year has elapsed; the women work in the rain transplanting the seedlings and cross the flooded river to take work there as well.

Within this *naṭavu* cycle, the story of *Maṇimēkalai*'s own transplantation from *Kappuṇākoḷam* to *Vāṭiyakāṭu* unfolds. Though *Maṇimēkalai* worked "like a cow" in her mother's house, this is her first time working for an employer. We learn in some detail of *Maṇimēkalai*'s first experience of wage labor and the new set of relationships—friendly and exploitative—in which she finds herself: *Kuḷḷa Cānaki* heads a "set" of women wage workers; her job is to call them for work, distribute wages, and find out about the next day's work. Attracted by the promise of steady work and timely wages, *Maṇimēkalai*'s mother-in-law *Māmaṇi* has left her dried-fish business and joined the set, bringing her daughter-in-law along. In a dialogue between *Cānaki* and her employer around the reputed quality of her workers, we learn that *Māmaṇi* used to sell coconuts, but couldn't carry them any longer and switched to dried fish, which she has now left to work in the fields. For *Maṇimēkalai*, it is hard work for no pay, as the *karuvai* (acacia) thorns and snail shells hurt her feet—recalling the snail bait in the *kaṭiyam* scene—and her mother-in-law keeps all her wages except for a small allowance to buy her husband's beedis. A sudden bout of abuse results in the loss of *Maṇimēkalai*'s unborn child and she returns to her mother's house to recover, where she arranges for her younger sister to study in the *kurukulam*.

The violent loss of *Maṇimēkalai*'s first child, of tremendous emotional significance, is recounted briefly and matter-of-factly, so that it almost feels like a digression from the work of transplantation. This generates a sense, not so much of the natural cycle's indifference to *Maṇimēkalai*'s suffering, but of her state of shock, which gives way to a sort of numbed practicality labeled *vairākkiam* (detachment, 169). It is her sister *Vaḷarmati* who rails against her brother-in-law for his atrocious actions, while *Maṇimēkalai* takes this opportunity to enroll *Vaḷarmati* in school and goes back to her husband feeling "at peace...she prided herself on 'having done such a good deed in the twenty or twenty-five days she had been sick here'" (171). Clearly, she considers education a safeguard against the abuses she suffers. Yet, this task accomplished, in the following chapter, we pick up where we left off, with the transplantation of the *campā* paddy, as if a time warp has erased the year that has presumably passed between the end of chapter 15 and the beginning of chapter 16: *Maṇimēkalai* rejoins the natural rhythm of work with a sense of comfort, and the erratic, unnatural actions of her husband recede into the background.

The narrative of *Maṇimēkalai*'s psychological and practical responses to cycles of abuse is thus nested within that of the cycle of agricultural work; this in turn generates

forms of play that constitute an alternative social space. Mapping these spaces and recording these forms is the work of dialect in the novel. Chapters 16-17 concisely establish the relationships among women agricultural workers and between them, the landowners, and the land through dialogue, song, and story. While the women are transplanting *campā* paddy in the rain, as they do every year, some tension arises between older and younger women around their perceived right to complain about the working conditions. Māmaṇi diffuses the tension by suggesting they sing a song together, to which they readily agree, declaring proudly that their song should be heard far and wide, “chasing the cold” out of people across the river. The chosen lead singer Añcammāḷ’s voice rises “suddenly, without any prelude,” and the rest join in, “louder than the rain:”

tannānē tānanannē tannānē tānanannē
tannānē tānanannē tannānē tānanannē
maṭiyila kalporukki
maṭiyila kalporukki yammā...
maṭiyila kalporukki
māṭavaṅkal uṅṭu paṅṅi...
māṭavattu mēlālē
māṭavattu mēlālē yammā...
māṭavattu mēlālē
maramallika pūttirukku.
maramallika vācattukke
maramallika vācattukke yammā
maramallika vācattukke mayilu vantu kuṭiyirukkum
mayila verattātiya
mayila verattātiya yamma...
mayila verattātiya
mayilu muṭṭaya eṭukkātiyya.
mayilōṭa pāvam vantu
mayilōṭa pāvam vantu
mayilōṭa pāvam vantu
manica talaya cuttumuṅka...
kūṭaiyile kalporukki kūṭaiyile kalporukki...
kūṭaiyile kalporukki kopurankal untupanni...
 Gathering stones in our lap
 making *māṭavaṅkal* [dial., perhaps a niche]
 on top of the *māṭavam*
 the maramallika (cork flower) is blooming
 The scent of the maramallika
 brings crowds of peacocks
 don’t chase the peacocks away
 don’t take the peacocks’ eggs
 the peacock’s sins will come
 circle around us humans’ heads
 Gathering stones in our baskets
 making towers...

The song itself, apparently unrelated to the work they are doing, seems premised on a sort of ecological thinking, but also echoes an earlier scene in which Udayakumāran, the suitor whom Bākkīyam rejected, courts Maṇimēkalai through her sister Valarmati at a tank where the *maramallika* blooms. The singing not only makes the work go faster, but gives Maṇimēkalai a deep sense of pleasure and empowerment: “she liked the way more than 20 women standing in the pouring rain raised their voices in song just as they pleased...she thought how satisfying it is to work in the midst of laughter (*cirippu*), play (*viḷaiyāṭṭu*), song (*pāṭṭu*), and fun/joking (*parikācam*). She thought she shouldn’t stop coming to transplant the fields even if she didn’t get any wages” (175). With this thought, we come full circle to the tension at the beginning of the chapter between the women of the “set” over their perspectives on the conditions of work and the mutual responsibilities of workers and employer. The song, then, has been a temporary release, and does not itself have transformative power; however, the experience strengthens the bonds between the women, which they will need to handle collectively situations like the one that arises in the next chapter, where a man from across the river hires them at a higher rate than their current employer and they are harassed for accepting the offer.

If chapter 16 demonstrates the necessity of play in dealing with work conditions and relations, chapter 17 and 19 illustrate its role in negotiating, and pushing the boundaries of, gendered social expectations. Chapter 17 continues with the informal rules governing the women’s work of transplantation, while chapter 19 witnesses Maṇimēkalai taking on the “man’s job” of operating a *nāttumāla* (*nāṟṟu mālai*, apparently an implement for transplanting seedlings) in Kārkōttakam, a difficult area due to especially low-lying ground. As before, Maṇimēkalai’s personal troubles are quickly recounted in the intervening chapter 18; we are told at the beginning of the chapter that Maṇimēkalai has lost another baby, this time after birth, and had a third daughter who survives and is in the care of her mother; love for this daughter catalyzes Maṇimēkalai’s inner rebellion against her husband, even if this remains outwardly limited.

In chapter 17, on their way to work across the river in Taccaṅkōttakam, the women find their way to the nearest bridge blocked by men from Perumaḷai. One of the women boldly suggests they ford the river, but as they do so, one woman is nearly swept away by the current. Rattled by the narrow escape and the ridicule of the men from Perumaḷai watching them from the bank, they recall the story of Paṭāmuniyamman or Maṭaimaṇiyamman (“Goddess of the Sluice-gate), a twelve-year old girl from Vāṭiyakāṭu deified 40-50 years ago for giving her life to prevent a flood. They pray to this deity as the rains intensify over the following month, causing extensive floods. Notable here, however, is Māmaṇi’s comment about the harassment by the Perumaḷai men which has led them to this pass: “*avanuvōḷukku anta paṭāmuniyamman kūli kuṭukkum* (Paṭāmuniyamman will give them their wages, i.e. their just reward)” (186).

In chapter 19, Maṇimēkalai takes two friends to work in Kārkōttakam operating a *nāttumāla*. The friends’ addressing her as “Kappuṇākoḷattakka” (sister from Kappuṇākoḷam, her hometown), though conventional, seems also to reinforce her independence of mind, as she outwardly conforms to the expectations of a wife in her husband’s town, but remains firmly a daughter of Kappuṇākoḷam. The friends tell her she is the talk of the town of Vāṭiyakāṭu, which initially makes her apprehensive, but when it turns out she is reputed to be a rare paragon of virtue in the town’s supposedly corrupting

environment, she relaxes enough to let them persuade her to tell a story about two frogs (213). Disconcerted by their interjections about the gender of the frogs, she still manages to get through the story, which features the following song:

‘Golden frog,
 your husband won’t eat or sleep
 he won’t chew a pack of betel leaves
 let’s go home, come down, golden frog’ she said.
 ‘So what if he doesn’t eat or sleep
 So what if he won’t chew a pack of betel leaves
 I have no relationship with anyone, I don’t want to live with him
 See, your pot-belly is aching
 Go back and tell him I forgot the way I came
 Sister frog’ she replied. (etc., 216-217)

This amusing story concludes with the frog running back home when she learns her husband has taken up with another woman. The ending foreshadows Maṇimēkalai’s husband’s betrayal, which finally pushes her to leave him and, even at present, generates reflections on married life that reduce her to tears. This prompts us to take a detour from the formations of play to the structures of lament before examining Maṇimēkalai’s move to Tiruppur.

Oppāri

The *oppāri*, a form of lament usually performed by women collectively or singly, has a strong presence in contemporary Tamil literature. Regardless of the presence or absence of a formal gathering, which provides an occasion for *oppāri* to be shared, the songs offer emotional release to women in response to a variety of personal losses. The performance of *oppāri* in a gathering of women as a part of funerary rites—a site in which to analyze collective catharsis as well as other facets of community relationships—is complemented by the spontaneous *oppāri* that often function in novels in a way almost analogous to the film song in commercial Indian cinemas—an affective high point which cannot be contained in the linearity of the narrative but has to suspend time and the illusion of “reality” (relative to the dominant narrative style) to enter into a poetic space.

The central structure of feeling in *oppāri*, as discussed before, is the beauty or fertility of the landscape, or other good things in life, which the absent or the dead, and thus also the bereaved, cannot enjoy—the painful indifference of the material world to the absence of the loved one. The two types of *oppāri* scene each emphasize a facet of the form’s community function and aesthetics. The *oppāri* of Bākkīyam in *Añcalai* and of Cuntarampal and Murugaiyan’s wife in *Alam* fall into the second category of spontaneous expression of personal sorrow, while the extended *oppāri* scene in *Karṛālai* emphasizes the relations between women in a funerary *oppāri* session. Interestingly, the protagonist Arokkiyam in Imaiyam’s *Kōvēru kaḷutaikaḷ* occupies a kind of intermediary space between the two approaches, as her *oppāri* are mostly spontaneous, but she figures as a community lament specialist much in the manner of Sucāñḍ in Tarashankar’s *Hāṃsuli bāñkēr upakathā*, explored in chapter 1. In other words, Arokkiyam’s *oppāri* occur outside of the funeral

context in response to personal losses, yet they take on the function of lamenting the changes in society that are displacing her entire community, rendering their livelihood increasingly precarious, while also transforming its traditional ignominy into a different kind of marginality towards which the narrative remains ambivalent.

To return to *Karṛālai*, a death in the neighborhood of Maṇimēkalai's husband's house in Vāṭiyakāṭu occasions a collective *oppāri* scene which frames Maṇimēkalai's troubled relationship with her mother-in-law Māmaṇi and the way in which, despite being a skilled and diligent worker and maintaining a reputation for wifely virtue, she remains an outsider. Feeling lonely as her in-laws have gone to the widow's house, her estranged husband is out, and her daughter is at her mother's house, Maṇimēkalai goes to join the gathering. When she arrives, the widow is telling stories about her late husband, punctuated by *oppāri* such as:

mañcaētta pōna vaṇṭi – enakku
maṇalētti vantataṭi
iñciyētta pōnavāṇṭi – enakku
eḷaniyētti vantataṭi...
 the cart that was to be loaded with turmeric
 came to me loaded with sand
 the cart that was to be loaded with ginger
 came to me loaded with young coconut (223)

Noticing Maṇimēkalai, Māmaṇi is displeased that she has left the house empty, as her son has not returned. Maṇimēkalai gets up to leave but the other women object: “the girl came to hear *oppāri* and you're chasing her away before she has a chance to sit down (dial., *kuntavutāma*)!” Māmaṇi retorts, “*oppāri kattukkirṛa vuṭṭulayā atu vantū vākkap paṭṭurukku* (did she marry into a household of *oppāri* singers)?” The debate continues, the women arguing that it is proper for Maṇimēkalai to stay and participate, as she will be the one to cry for Māmaṇi when she dies; but even this does not move Māmaṇi, who quotes a proverb:

akkarakāramkūṭṭi arakkuruṇa noyvāṅki
ākkiṭṭa tāyārukku – innakki
koṭṭenna molakkenna
pompolikka tērenna'ṅkuṛa mēri...
 you swept up the broken rice from the brahmin street
 and cooked it—today
 so what if you clap and shout
 so what if you deck out the bier? (225)

Why should I care what happens after I die, she argues? The widow, known as Pavunu kiḷavi, says “*vakkaṇa kuttuṛa olakkatān pūṇum putucārukkaṇum māvum nayicārukkaṇummunnu nenakkimām* (they say it's the pestle that crushes who thinks the flowers should be fresh and the flour should be fine).” But Māmaṇi does not hesitate to deride even the bereaved, saying “The lizard that foretells a death in a villager's house is friendly with the whole house.” The old woman feels pangs of guilt, as her reluctance to

take her husband to the hospital for treatment may have hastened his death. She launches into another *oppāri*:

kāṭṭa kalaccivacci
karunāya ēvalunnaṅ.
karunāyikkum caṅkilikkum – nān
kaikuṭukka valliviyō...
ceṭiya kalaccivacci
cerunāyē ēvalunnaṅ.
cerunāyikkum caṅkilikkim – nān
cēticolla vallaviyō...?
 Upsetting the forest
 he unleashed the black dog.
 the black dog and the chain—I
 didn't come to lend a hand?
 upsetting the plants
 he unleashed the small dog.
 the small dog and the chain—I
 didn't come to tell the news? (228)

While sharing the same structure as the laments discussed earlier, these laments play on different aspects of the incongruence central to the form: the first one here emphasizes disappointment through the figure of the cart bringing unexpected goods, while the last one enigmatically evokes a situation that has gotten out of the speaker's hands. The suggestion of the speaker's agency is striking here in contrast to the other examples. Though Maṇimēkalai's voice is ultimately not heard in this gathering, the scene sets up several aspects of her later determination to live independently and build an alternative community: her desire to join the women in their collective expression, the way she is claimed by the women but pushed out by her mother-in-law, and the extended focus on women's language foreground the question of how women's interactions counter or reinforce patriarchal structures.

Kampeni (Company)

Maṇimēkalai's life in Kappunakolam and Vatiyakatu takes up the first 300 pages of the novel. From grass cutting to transplanting, *tannane* songs to *oppāri*, these pages are steeped in local techniques, knowledges, affects, and creative forms; they firmly establish Maṇimēkalai's identity as a daughter of Kappunakolam and her strenuous efforts to inhabit Vatiyakatu despite her harrowing experiences there. When she finally decides to strike out on her own, bringing her daughter along, she first thinks of going to work at the *kurukulam*, but as that plan does not seem feasible, they end up in the textile hub of Tiruppur in faraway Kongu Natu.

Although the speech of people in Tiruppur (locals and migrants) as quoted in dialogue does not register any drastic difference from Maṇimēkalai's, she and her daughter immediately notice the difference in the speech of their neighbors when they move into room 10 of the *ottucalai vitu*, a building with ten rooms all in a row. When Teyvanai in

room 9 comes to help them set up the house, “It was funny to hear her talk. She couldn’t say even one word properly. When she talked it was like she was biting, tearing, and spitting out the words” (318). Kala also finds it funny to hear how Payamma in room 7, originally from Madurai, talks with a drawl (*iluttu iluttu peciyatu*). Payamma is the resident storyteller: as Teyvanai comments, “She won’t shut her mouth until she’s told you the history (*varalaru*) of all ten rooms in this house.” Over the next few chapters, we learn the stories of each of the women neighbors, who have come from all over Tamil Nadu, alone or with their families, to work in the Tiruppur factories; there are also women workers from Kerala (372). Despite the regional diversity of their neighbors, Kala feels a need to adjust her speech to the locality, while her mother cannot adapt so readily: when they go to relieve themselves in the morning before work, in the adjacent field of full of spurge, acacia, and pigs that eat human waste (a rudimentary form of sanitation in semiurban areas underserved by municipal facilities), Maṇimēkalai says “*tekkākka pōranna iruṭṭōṭa peyiṭṭu vanturulām* (We should go poop while it’s still dark).” Kala corrects her, “*tekkākkannu collāta. atu namma ūrula. iñcayellām kāṭṭukkunnutān colrāvō* (Don’t say ‘tekkākka.’ That’s in our town. Here they say ‘kāṭṭukku’ [‘to the fields’]).” Maṇimēkalai says, “*enakku tekkākkannutān varutu vāyila* (It just came out that way)” (363).

The Tiruppur factory neighborhood is thus a place where women from anywhere can to some extent leave their pasts behind, work to support themselves, and live independently. When Kala marries a young man in Vatiyakkatu, breaking her mother’s heart and bringing us up to the point at which the novel began, Manimekalai continues living in Tiruppur and founds a kind of commune together with the other women from her building. It may seem, then, that the village to which regional dialect is strongly tied is too conservative for this kind of development; and outside the context of local practice, how long can its language retain meaning? Yet it is not the impersonal space of the factory as such, nor its exploitative structure, but the industrial neighborhood that is briefly but vividly portrayed here. This neighborhood is a locality: its organization, opportunities, and difficulties are different from those of the villages, it is diverse and dynamic, but to inhabit it demands as much resilience and creativity as the women needed to make their homes and livelihoods in other landscapes. It is the ability to know a place, its resources and technologies, its language and customs (both senses of *valakku*), and its stories is what gives the women agency in crafting their own lives and relationships.

Vacikaram (attraction) in Kaṇṇaki

In *Kaṇṇaki*, the *vairākkiam* central to the other two texts is decentered by *vacikaram* (attraction or allure, derived from a Sanskrit word literally meaning “to enthrall”). This word is used infrequently but offers a way of thinking about how Kaṇṇaki to some extent can wrest her desire (*āca*) and beauty (*alaku*) from the thrall of oppressive gendered structures by achieving economic independence and self-esteem. In the opening chapter, when we first encounter Kaṇṇaki as head of a group of women fish merchants in Pondicherry, the description highlights her *vacikaram*: an ineffable attractiveness in her appearance and presence, as well as in her arrangement of fish to attract customers; she has also acquired a shrewdness (*cāturiam*) that the narrator comments would have been helpful when she was married at the age of thirteen. That Kaṇṇaki becomes involved with two men outside of marriage, chooses to leave her child in foster care, and is a victim of abuse, abandonment, and trafficking in no way diminishes her attractiveness or integrity as a character; she is portrayed empathetically throughout as a thoughtful, skilled, and courageous person with both vulnerability and inner strength, in Tamilselvi’s characteristic matter-of-fact style. In both the intertextual and the contemporary context, this makes a strong statement against the common tendency to blame the victim for sexual and domestic abuse. But for the present analysis, what attracts attention is how local lores and practices inform and frame our understanding of Kaṇṇaki’s characterization and the problems in which she is caught up. I will explore only the first half of the novel, set in Virutacalam district, which throws desire for land and body and the violence of caste and gender into sharp relief.

The opening chapters of the novel give a detailed mapping of Kaṇṇaki’s childhood which emphasizes her loving family and her curiosity about sexuality, framed against an evolving Dalit experience and a half-urban, half rural environment. She grows up in Ayiyar Matatteru (Ayiyar Matam Street) in Virutācaḷam, just across the Maṇimuktā river from a prostitutes’ street known as Rain Karai. The women of that street are objects of great curiosity for Kaṇṇaki, who sneaks glances at them while playing in the nearby Pillaiyār temple and delivering milk for her mother, who has a small dairy business supplying local teashops. She travels often to see her grandfather, a butcher, in the Dalit colony of the town of Citterikkuppam, a village north of Virutācaḷam, to which she must walk across a countryside full of lakes. We learn that the colony people used to butcher and eat only cattle that died naturally in the town, but now they get cattle from a nearby market. Kaṇṇaki’s grandfather Kācāmpu has three wives, seventeen sons, and one daughter, her mother Kacantāmaṇi. Kacantāmaṇi takes Kaṇṇaki out of school after she cuts class to play (in Kaṇṇaki’s pronunciation, *vellāṭu*) and eat the offerings in the next-door twin temples (Appācāmi Koyil and Ammācāmi Koyil—the deities are a couple, referred to as *appā* “Father” and *ammā* “Mother;” we don’t get the backstory in the novel), and ends up spending the night there.²²⁶ While in the temple, Kaṇṇaki has a desire to touch the *nanti* statues (Shiva’s bull), which look so familiar to her, growing up with calves; she also wants to cover up the naked statues of the goddesses, scandalized by the schoolboys’ behavior with them (27). The pronunciation represented in the dialogue differs markedly from that

²²⁶ This end to Kaṇṇaki’s education, due to cutting class out of a desire for *prasad*, is reminiscent of Añcalai, who likewise cuts class to go home for rice balls.

of the other two novels, set in and near Tiruvarur district—most noticeably, the latter dialect tends to raise vowels (for example, “*poyiṭṭu*” for “going” becomes “*peyiṭṭu*”), which this dialect does not. When Kaṇṇaki’s body begins to develop, her mother sends her to live with her grandfather, but from there she runs away with an electrician to his hometown of Kārkūṭal.

Kaṇṇaki’s Kārkūṭal, precisely mapped in terms of resources and work arrangements, caste and folkloric space, provides an interesting contrast to *Añcalai*’s Kārkūṭal, bustling with gossip, arguments, and play and deeply imbued with the affects of home and youth. This difference has to do with inhabiting the town as a native and as a married woman, but also with how the landscape feeds the two novels’ respective interests. You will recall that *Añcalai*’s Kārkūṭal is strongly identified with rice cultivation and the work of *naṭavu* (transplantation), at which she is an expert and during which her “play (*viḷaiyaṭṭu*)” with the landlord’s son goes haywire; the rice fields are an integral part of her subjectivity, as when talk of *Añcalai*’s engagement arises, the village women joke that she will change from “*vayakkattu Añcalai* (*Añcalai* of the fields)” to “*muntirikkattu Añcalai* (*Añcalai* of the cashew groves).” Kanmani Gunasekaran’s the three towns of Kārkūṭal, Maṇakkollai, and Toḷār are characterized by the different crops that grow in their different soils: rice in Kārkūṭal, cashew in the red earth of Maṇakkollai, and sugarcane in the blackish earth of Toḷār. By contrast, our introduction to Kārkūṭal in chapter 6 of *Kaṇṇaki*, shortly after she comes to live there with Acaitambi in the house of her father’s friend Kaci and his wife Cinnaveṭai, focuses on the tamarind grove by the lake, highlighting caste issues. The grove and lake are both part of a government-owned village commons; each year, someone from the town will lease the grove to harvest the tamarind but will rarely go to the side adjacent to the Dalit colony, keeping a contract laborer (*pannaiyal*) there as a watchman instead. During a cholera scare when everyone has gone to get vaccinated, including the watchman and his wife, Kaṇṇaki and her sister-in-law Cakuntala steal a lot of tamarind and sneak it home in their saris. This feat along with Kaṇṇaki’s growing reputation as a skilled worker persuades her mother-in-law Nakammal to finally take the young couple into her household. Thus, in *Kaṇṇaki*, Kārkūṭal is not characterized through contrast with other villages in terms of dominant crops; the various crops in this one town, regardless of the relative extent of cultivation, are various sites to explore Kaṇṇaki’s growing awareness of the social and economic forces to which she is subject. Coming to Kārkūṭal as a married woman from a significantly different environment—her semi-rural, semi-urban childhood surrounded with cattle, milk, and meat—Kaṇṇaki is in a position to look at the town with analytical clarity as well as aesthetic pleasure, as *Añcalai* does in Maṇakkollai. Although Kārkūṭal is a rice-growing town, Kaṇṇaki’s sojourn there is introduced not through *nataṅgu*—which, as seen in *Karṇalai*, is conventional women’s work, linked with ideas of wifely virtue, though with an implicitly demarcated, gendered space for play—but through the quick wit and survival tactics exemplified in her tamarind heist. Moreover, while caste discrimination does not go unnoticed in any of Tamilselvi’s or Gunasekaran’s texts, as it is inscribed in everyday use of space and work relations, *Kaṇṇaki* addresses caste directly even though the narrative’s core concerns are gender and sexuality, pointing to the intersectionality of these structures of oppression through the affects of land.

In fact, the sequence of chapters following Kaṇṇaki’s arrival in Kārkūṭal draws a parallel between her experience of domestic violence and the awakening of her caste consciousness. Like Manimekhalai in *Karṇalai*, Kaṇṇaki miscarries twice due to brutal

beatings from her husband, who lashes out at her body “fattened on meat” (52), referring to her growing up with her grandfather the butcher; later, he brings home a second and a third wife, and the fact that her same beloved grandfather had three wives does not make this development any less hurtful. After each miscarriage, she goes into a state of shock; other women try to bring about catharsis by encouraging her to cry and sing *oppāri*, but she does not respond, so they have to sing for her—the absence of any quoted *oppāri* in this text is notable, as is the lack of an *oppāri* in Manimekalai’s voice in *Karṛalai*, and suggests that *oppāri*’s cathartic function, so effective in coping with death and social injustice, cannot fully operate in the face of domestic abuse (54, 71) These two violent episodes, in chapters 7 and 9-10, are sandwiched with two chapters (8 and 11) in which Kaṇṇaki goes to work in the fields with her mentor Cinnaveṭai, who lays out for her exactly how the landowners limit workers’ agency and access to economic mobility.

Cinnaveṭai’s critique of the system of informal labor and its economic and psychological impact on Dalits is interwoven with stories of the land and its supernatural guardians. Listening to these stories (*kata*) and critiques with equal attention, Kaṇṇaki becomes aware of her twin desires (*āca*) for ownership of the land she works and of her own body. Kaṇṇaki and her neighbors, like Añcalai, are Paraiyars by caste and landless laborers by occupation. Cinnaveṭai explains in chapter 8 that most of them are under contract (*pannai*) to a particular farm in the village and therefore cannot take work in the next village for higher pay, because the landowners will prevent them from going there—and yet they go to the landlords’ houses for leftovers and brag of their masters’ affection and generosity, which goes against Cinnaveṭai’s sense of self-respect (57).²²⁷ In chapter 13, Kaṇṇaki’s sister-in-law Cakuntala is married to the son of one of the “*eṭṭu kūṭṭāḷi* (eight friends),” who are the only Paraiyars to have come together and rented land directly from their elderly landlord, which they are even on the point of buying despite uppercaste opposition. Despite their apparent success, no one else has “come forward to live with self-respect (*cuyamariyātai*)” (95).²²⁸

Chapter 11 weaves together local lore, desire, and caste consciousness especially tightly. Kaṇṇaki and Cinnaveṭai are going to clean *mallaṭṭa* (dial., peanuts, cf. Gunasekaran’s *mallaṭṭa*) in a field that lies past the Karuppannacamī temple. Kaṇṇaki finds this land enthralling: “*akkaraveḷi maṇṇapāttalum payirappāttalum ācayā irukkutta* (When I see this earth and these crops, I desire them)”. Cinnaveṭai comments: “*maṇṇukkuḷḷa pōra oṭampu, maṇṇōṭa maṇṇā makkapōra oṭampu. maṇṇa pāttā pinna āca varātā?* (the body will go into the earth, the body will mingle with the earth as earth. Then seeing that earth, won’t you feel desire?)” (74). This desire for the land and its deep connection to the body frames the following series of anecdotes: first, Kaṇṇaki recounts how she visited the temple once when escaping from a landlord with some stolen sorghum—one of three thefts that confirm Kaṇṇaki’s fearlessness and virtuosity, if not conventional virtue; second, Cinnaveṭai tells the story of the three local deities, brothers who lost a ball when playing together and spread out looking for it to three points where they still remain, watching over all good

²²⁷ Their situation is thus very similar to that of the women in *Karṛalai*, who are threatened by their employers and defiantly ford the river to take higher-paying *natavu* work, see above).

²²⁸ The term *cuyamariyātai*, along with its approximate synonym *tanmānam*, were the keywords in the Periyar-led Self-Respect Movement.

people who pass through the land thus delimited;²²⁹ and third, when Kaṇṇaki doubts if she is a good woman, blaming herself for her repeated miscarriages, Cinnaveṭai responds with her by now characteristic combination of piercing insight and local wisdom: she observes that this is due to her husband's abuse—"atukku cāmi enna ceyyum? What can god do about that?"—but goes on to suggest that Kaṇṇaki do a ritual bath called "*moṭavan moḷavu* (lame man's bath)" (78). She tells Kaṇṇaki the backstory behind this ritual, which also gives an etymology of local place-names, including their own town, Kārkūṭal: a king, his mind poisoned against his son by a new queen, orders his followers to cut off the prince's legs and leave him in the forest. The prince picks up his severed legs, drags himself to the Manimukta river, which is in flood, and sings:

punkamaram puḷaṅki puḷiyamaram vērkeḷaṅci
vārālām kāvēri malaipariya cīmaikkē
ārukaṭal tāṅṅi akkaraiyum tāntāṅṅi
ēḷukaṭal tāṅṅi irukaraiyum tāntāṅṅi
vārālām kāvēri malaipariya cīmaikkē
taṅṅu patakkam taniṅca niḷal kākkum
mūkkutti muttu munna neḷal kākkum
vārālām kāvēri malaipariya cīmaikkē

Boiling the pongam (beechnut) tree, stirring the roots of the tamarind tree
they say the Kaveri will come to the edge of the mountains
crossing the six seas, crossing that shore
crossing the seven seas, crossing both shores
they say the Kaveri will come to the edge of the mountains
to protect the shadow/reflection [of the?] stalk/stem pendant
to protect the shadow/reflection [of the?] pearl nose-stud
they say the Kaveri will come to the edge of the mountains (80).

At this, the flood sweeps him off, he is sighted by villagers and rescued, and miraculously recovers his legs, hence the name Kārkūṭal (>kal kutal, "rejoining the legs"). Kaṇṇaki worries the townspeople will object to her bathing at the designated place, "Motavantorai," for caste (untouchability) reasons, but Cinnaveṭai dismisses this as "it's not standing water like a tank or a lake, you're going to bathe in running water?...what is this *tīṭṭu* (ritual impurity) we supposedly have anyway?" (81) In conclusion to this conversation, Cinnaveṭai further points out that the owners of the land adjacent to the town proper are Pillais, Reddys, and a few Iyers (Brahmins), while the owners of the akkaraveli and the land adjacent to the Paraiyar colony are Paṭāccis (82); the Paraiyars' landlessness is the root cause of all the humiliations they suffer at the hands of the upper-castes, because it forces them into economic dependence. At the end of the chapter, the word *vairākkiam* appears for the first time as a synonym for determination: "A *vairākkiam* arose in Kaṇṇaki's mind that she must get a slice of land in Kārkūṭal for her own, one way or another" (82). Kaṇṇaki's nascent caste consciousness and desire to own the land she tills is thoroughly entwined with her all too full awareness of the violence of patriarchy and her desire to own her own body; in the end, however, the latter proves stronger than the former. She asserts

²²⁹ Karuppannacamī, Karumbayiram Kontan, and Vetappar

that she has no desire for a child, but desires the “*paccai mokam* (lit. green, or young, face)” of the grain. Cinnaveṭai objects that she is talking like someone who works “for a government salary” or “like she owns twenty *kani* of land,” but Kaṇṇaki retorts: “*payiru paccakkitt teriyavāp pōkutu nān kollakāriyā illa kūlīkkāriyāṅkuratu* (does the grain know whether I’m a landowner or a laborer)?” (106). She later admits that she is beyond the point of wishing for a child to distract or protect her from her husband’s abuses and would choose to abort should she now conceive: “*āca vaccip pettukkirratu tān puḷḷa. arippetuttu pettukkirrattukkellām pēru puḷḷayilla* (a child is the one born of desire. the one born of harassment is not called a child)” (116). This conviction finally compels her to set out on her own, abandoning the hope of land. Yet as with Manimekalai in *Karṇalai*, I argue that Kaṇṇaki’s scrappy, passionate, but ultimately thoughtful intimacy with the land is what equips her to survive the blows she is dealt along the way and finally to stand on her own feet, if not as the owner of twenty *kanis* of rice field, then at least as the owner of a small fish stall, where she reigns with the *vacīkaram* of self-respect and self-care.

Conclusion

In reading this handful of Bangla and Tamil texts, dialect emerges as a critical element in the formal and affective relationship between literature and orality; in literary mappings of locality and community, habitation and migration; and in understanding literary language as cultural practice. The first half of the dissertation explored the role of dialect and nonstandard language in the construction of “modern,” “modernist,” and “Dalit” literary subjectivities in relation to subalternity and precarity. The second half of the dissertation addressed the place of local language in the “globalized” present, its novel and varied uses in telling untold “stories” and its demand for attention, which may come with or without political labels such as “Dalit” or “feminist.”

Chapters 1 and 3 demonstrated the persistent attraction of dialect for writers across many generations in Bengali and Tamil respectively, and the diversity of ways these writers have handled the relationship between “literary,” “colloquial,” and “dialectal” language in different historical, cultural, and political contexts.

Chapter 2 showed how four modernist authors approach dialectal language from radically different perspectives, yet with a shared emphasis on its capacity to distill the tensions and struggles of marginalized and dislocated individuals and communities. The work of Jibanananda Das obsessively reworks the micro-traumas of normativity and the entangled losses of empathy and feeling-at-home in late-colonial society through the estrangement of colloquial language. The manipulation and residual power of local/occupational dialect and oral culture prove fundamental to Manik Bandyopadhyay’s complex portrayal of economic exploitation while belying strong tensions within it. Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay’s insistent underlining of linguistic difference and exploration of the dramatic potential of oral-dialectal forms also lend both force and ambiguity to his depiction of a subaltern community facing rapid and drastic change. Advaita Mallabharman’s unparalleled intimacy with the language and culture of the Malos brings home like nothing else could the collusion of environmental, social, and economic forces in the community’s loss of habitat and self-respect.

Chapter 3 highlighted the role of dialect in constructing Dalit and indigenous identities and contesting dominant paradigms of caste, class, and nation. Invocation of the power of language and form, reclamation of dismissive appellations, and play on the tropes of intelligibility and cultivation disrupt the standard operations of the literary establishment while at the same time establishing an intertextual lineage. The relationship of land and language plays a critical role in the contexts of displacements including the Partition and the disempowerment and silencing of indigenous peoples.

Chapter 5 recognized the demand for attention to local language in contemporary writing, specifically in Kanmani Gunasekaran’s mapping of localities and routes through gendered agricultural and technical work, as an untheorizable “*avaciyam*” or need to counter pervasive neglect and forgetting. Despite the evident difficulties of translating dialect writing, this sense of need offers a valuable perspective on translation, questioning yet again the premise of intelligibility.

Chapter 6 foregrounded the importance of play in and with local language as an irreplaceable component of feminist writing, specifically in the work of Tamilselvi. Here the “global” discourse of feminism has as its condition of possibility the place-bound language, lore, and practice of women engaged in various kinds of domestic and informal agricultural

and industrial work, or more precisely the process of learning, deploying, and passing on such local knowledge in the continual building of community between women, in new places and across generations.

Overall, we have seen that dialect has important aesthetic and political functions for all kinds of writers, working under many different labels such as “modernist,” “Marxist,” “realist,” “naturalist,” “regionalist,” “Dalit,” and “feminist.” Dialect enters the literary text in a multiplicity of forms, in everyday speech and dramatic utterance, narrative and song, and in the shifting, shared spaces of implied author, narrator, character, and reader. Dialect brings with it complex claims to places, times, communities, and identities, while the interactions of these entities in and with the literary text belies their mutability and permeability. And finally, just as dialect cannot thrive without practice, without dialect, the record of practice and its emotions is lost. This urgency marks the works explored in all four chapters.

Boi (“books”): new directions

When I began this project, I intended to explore the theories and histories of dialect writing and translation in and between the two languages in greater scope and detail. However, in the dissertation, I have prioritized close reading almost to the exclusion of other relevant methodologies. This is because without close reading, it is too easy to accept and pass on received ideas and categories of speakers, writers, and texts and too difficult to see the alternatives that may be waiting right there on the page. However, I take these few readings as a starting point for many potential projects—my own or others’—including the material and affective histories of dialect, not only in literature but in *books*, questions of how these books come to be and circulate as personal and community objects, their lives in orality, print, and translation; the theory and practice of translation of dialect texts out of and between South Asian languages; and comparative and intertextual approaches to dialect across national boundaries, particularly in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka as well as the Bangla and Tamil-speaking diasporas within and beyond Asia.

The question of who makes a dialect book and where it can be found leads us to explore the local *addas* (“hangouts”) both within and far beyond the traditional metropolitan centers of the literary and publishing establishment, such as the Thursday evening *adda* at the Chaturtha Duniya stall in Kolkata’s College Street and the book fairs in small towns all over West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, and their counterparts in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka; the printing presses that produced the texts of local authors and the aesthetic and political problems of printing dialect in the digitized present; the local libraries where a generation of living Tamil authors encountered Tamil translations of Bengali regional fiction, some of which are still sought after; the little magazines in Kolkata waiting for someone to fill the void left by translator Krishnamurthy, single-handedly responsible for translating an impressive number of texts between Tamil and Bangla in both directions; and so on. The material life of these texts is fascinating, from manuscripts written on the backs of cinema posters (Kanmani Gunasekaran)²³⁰ or hoarded in trunks (Jibananda Das), to the gems discovered in a Sunday Market (where old books rub shoulders with new plastic buckets and other “fancy items”), and perhaps even to the

²³⁰ I learned this from M. Kannan, personal communication

probable end of some little-known publications in the cart of the *kāgojwālā* or *paraiya paperkāran* (scrap-paper dealer or recycler) whose call is a familiar part of the urban soundscape.²³¹ While studies of colonial print culture in both languages exist, there is much scope to explore post-Independence and present-day cultures of writing, reading, and publishing with specific attention to nonstandard language.

The question of who reads a dialect book and how is perhaps better framed as one of listening. As shown in chapter 3, dialect texts demand attentive listening to neglected languages, stories, and ideas. Dialect books sometimes quite literally require listening: the predicament of dialect writers, as Kanmani Gunasekaran has expressed pithily in several of his interviews in literary magazines, is that those whom they write for do not understand the dialect and those whom they write about do not read—both a blessing and a curse perhaps, as this distance produced between writer and community can be a source of sadness but also safeguard the writer’s commitment to truth—and yet the gap is not entirely unbridgeable, as those who cannot read can always listen to someone else read aloud, or even watch the author speak on TV!²³² There is thus also scope for studies of orality to take into account the oral life of printed texts.

In closing, I want to return to Jibanananda Das’s notion of *bilās*—in my reading, the pleasure of books and their languages, a sense of which is essential to unraveling the aesthetic and political threads of heteroglossia and multilingualism. While narrowing down my selection of works for the dissertation, I was struck by the preface to Tamilselvi’s novel *Alam*, in which she recounts her experience as a student in the Vedaranyam Gurukulam, where she would filch unfinished or imperfect copies of books from between the bamboo slats of the shed housing the school’s printing press and sew them into the covers of her school books to read in secret. This reading habit led her from the Mahabharata to Tamil translations of Bengali modern classics. While the novel itself has no reference to school, printing, or books, being the story of a family of women with no access to literacy, I found this preface oddly appropriate as the novel is also a story of *bilās* in the form of the women’s irreducible, indomitable *ācai* (desire/wish/hope/love) as expressed in local language and practice (see chapter 4). This *bilās*, as I see it, is a common thread through all the works explored here.

In fact, my own relationship to South Asia, though it incidentally began with music, is profoundly shaped by the materiality of books and by the snippets of dialectal speech that have filtered down to me, through both books and people, from times and places to which I have no other access. I have distinct memories of a pocketbook translation of Premchand’s *Godan* and a “Learn in 30 days”-style Hindi grammar purchased from a miscellaneous import shop on University Avenue in Berkeley; of the rarely visited stacks of the South Asian language section in the San Francisco Public Library, where I browsed wondering if I would ever encounter another person there and selecting books mostly by cover, including the works of Premchand and Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s novels in Urdu translation; of a colonial Bengali grammar containing such useful sentences as “Hail, ye trees”; of the face of Jibanananda Das staring out of a yellowish cover printed with hessian and someone’s neat handwritten notes in red and green pen decorating the

²³¹ For a discussion of hawkers’ calls, see Radhaprasad Gupta (1984): *Kolkatar firiwalar dak ar rastar awaj (Hawkers’ calls and street sounds of Kolkata)*, Kolkata: Ananda.

²³² See Gunasekaran 2018.

margins of *Mālyabān*. I remember, second-hand, what various relatives, neighbors, friends, and novel characters said in various dialects and idiolects in a past Kolkata I can never visit and a Tamil Nadu I have yet to properly explore. As long as readers have this sense of *bilās*, there is no reason to think that dialect writing has no audience or no relevance. After all, when you read Dostoevsky or Cortázar and encounter the dacha or the rulemans there may or may not be a footnote but you know that the dacha and the rulemans need to be there and they have entered into your language in some way, and so why not Jibanananda's saluye, because whatever it is you feel its jhanjh and why not Kanmani Gunasekaran's vāṭṭappali and kuttupoti, because their beauty is undeniably transfixing.

In an interview on "Why I write" (*Kanaiyāli*, 2002, reprinted in *Naṭunāṭṭu collakarāti*, 2007), Gunasekaran responded to a question about the need for "commonality" in writing with his inimitable humor and intensity:

This might be what those people say who wear sandals in the house and never get the dust of the earth on their feet. Why do we need commonality? I don't understand it. They say regional dialect is not clear to them. Those who love the earth, the people, the language that flows over the earth, those who have a passion to know the roots, the culture that arises from the roots of language, they will seek out and read anything and understand it...

More than the readers, it is writers who put forth the notion that we need commonality. Readers who strive will grasp the writing. When you write with particularity, with regional specificity, it is possible to bring out the depth and breadth of that land, the roots of that culture. Even if the bloody stickiness of a newborn child seems gross at first, the curl of that newborn's body suddenly snatches the heart of the viewer—like that, even if you feel unsure about dialect writing in the beginning, as soon as readers get deep into it they are so absorbed in a kind of warmth that they feel they can never get out. (350)

From my experience, I would say with Jibanananda's butler, "*Hācā kathāḍā* (True)."

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