



**CHAPBOOKS, RELIGION AND THE IDENTITY OF THE
MARGINALISED: A HISTORY OF THE POST-COLONIAL STREET
LITERATURE OF CALCUTTA**

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Abstract: Production of chapbooks gained popularity in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century Calcutta, and flourished alongside elite publications. These chapbooks, which formed the corpus of the street-literature served as a popular medium of entertainment and propaganda until the advent of modern dissemination technologies. Yet, they have remained in production albeit in newer avatars and themes, serving as a vital mode of information, entertainment, faith, and propaganda for the marginalized, non-urbane and demonized class of urban society.

Though the nineteenth century corpus of street literature— collectively referred to as the Battala publications have received a fair share of scholarly attention, the post colonial Calcutta street-literature remains largely neglected. The post-colonial street literature is a unique cultural artifact of sociological interest illustrating a changing society, culture, economy and language of Bengal at a popular level and how it breaks free of the long tradition of cultural imperialism enforced

through colonialism and high culture.. They can provide an insight in to the society in terms of religion, politics, economy, popular culture so on. Therefore it is imperative to explore and study the wide range of post-colonial street-literatures that have been in circulation at an unassertive level in Calcutta and its outskirts.

This paper looks to study the street literatures on popular religions, faiths and mythologies to understand the unique syncretic secularism and tolerance in the chap-book markets as it produced both literatures pertaining to the Hindu mythologies-ritualistic handbooks, Islamic-style *qissa* books written in Islamic idioms, as well as folkloristic literatures. It seeks to demonstrate how these chapbooks help the marginalized classes find legitimacy and a sense of belonging in the realm of religion and the politics of identity by securing a connection with a larger community and creating sacred spaces — eventually become vernacular sources of local histories.

Key words: Street-literature, Chapbooks, Culture and identity, Postcoloniality

A popular printing industry emerged in the second city of the British Empire devoted entirely to cater the masses after the advent of the printing technology in Calcutta. In the nineteenth century, after typesetting of Bengali letter was started off by the Sreerampore Press a generation of “enthusiastic semi-educated lower middle class Bengali entrepreneurs”¹ set up printing presses in the northern part of the city. Production of chapbooks gained popularity in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century Calcutta, and flourished alongside elite

¹ Banerjee, Sumanta, “The Story of 'Battala'”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 43, No. 15, 2008, pp. 44. Also see Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial society, 1778-1905*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

publications. Thus, a new category of literature thus, was born which “offered a counterculture vis-à-vis the ‘high’ literature of the educated bhadraloks, who mainly followed the hegemonistic model of a uniform ‘standardised’ Bengali written style.”² These chapbooks, which formed the corpus of the street-literature served as a popular medium of entertainment and propaganda until the advent of modern dissemination technologies such as radio, and later on television, and the rise of the urban petit bourgeoisie class which could afford the modern technologies and high literature. Yet, they have remained in production albeit in newer avatars and themes, serving as a vital mode of information, entertainment, faith, and propaganda for the marginalized, non-urbane and demonized class of urban society even today.

If for the sake of argument, one is to consider the postcolonial street literature as the progeny of the erstwhile nineteenth century corpus of cheap publications—collectively referred to as the ‘Battala’ publications, it should be noted that the post-colonial street literature are at an even humbler state than the former. The ‘Bat-tala’ publications have received a fair share of scholarly attention. The post colonial Calcutta street-literature remains largely neglected. Throughout the Indian scholarship of literature and book history they have been persistently ignored. Street literature, which is concerned with the cheap ballad-sheets, pamphlets and other ephemera of the popular masses, circulated since the inception of printing by the hands of Gutenberg up to the present times. If we talk about the histories of development of printing and literature in colonial Bengal a one sided view can be found in academia about the growth and development of vernacular literature by higher classes of professional authors during the nineteenth century till the current times. Although there is no denying about the contribution of such histories of the development of modern print culture in south Asia but one has to agree that

² Banerjee, op. cit., P. 44

such renditions of history concern and talk about a privileged section of the society majorly the upper classes and the educated middle classes but not about the general semi-educated or semi-literate masses – who form the majority in this part of the world whether in the nineteenth century or twentieth or currently the twenty-first century. In the first century of printing in Calcutta, the common histories on print culture and book history majorly talk about the emergence of the educated middle classes in the nineteenth century and the surfacing of the popular writer reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar then Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee and finally the polymath Rabindranath Tagore – with sporadic materials on *bat-tala* literature developed during the nineteenth century. In the post-colonial Calcutta the literary histories talk about the post-colonial giants of Bengali literature likes of Sunil Ganguly, Premendra Mitra, Narayan Sanyal, Sakti Chatterjee and even upto Satyajit Ray – but no mention of the literature consumed by the majority of the masses vis-à-vis the semi-literate variant under discussion.

The postcolonial city of Calcutta is a site of vibrant contestation wherein innumerable antagonisms and negotiations are played out in the bid to turn global.³ There was significant social reorganization happening in the city as more and more people migrated to it. This social reorganization began soon after industrialization had come to the country in the mid nineteenth century. The in-flux of migrants increased after decolonization due partition, war, conflicts, and more so in a search for a better life and opportunities. This has given rise to a class of demotic semi-educated⁴ class of people who look for options to learn and teach themselves not only the tropes of an unfamiliar city life, but also acquaint themselves with high culture. Here is where

³ See Bhattacharya, Swati and Jayesh G, “Postcolonial global cities: The Indian experience”, *The Newsletter*, No. 57, 2011, pp. 4-6

⁴ By semi-educated, I meant the demotic non-metropolitan classes whose education qualifications are not at par with the metropolitan standards. I have also referred to them as semi-literate for the same reason.

the importance of the post-colonial street literature arises. It is a unique cultural artifact of sociological interest illustrating a changing society, culture, economy and language of Bengal at a popular level and how it breaks free of the long tradition of cultural imperialism enforced through colonialism and high culture is of interest. They can provide an insight in to the society in terms of religion, politics, economy, popular culture, and so on. Therefore it is imperative to explore and study the wide range of post-colonial street-literatures that have been in circulation at an unassertive level in Calcutta and its outskirts.

Of course, in the first century of printing in Calcutta there are sporadic mentions of the mass-popular 'Bat-tala' literature but in the second century there is no mention of any such literature at all, as if after the colonial regime that particular genre and its consumers vanished and does not exist at all – but the truth is far from that. There is a huge market in Calcutta till present day where the so-called demotic cheap Bengali literature targeted at the so called lowly non-urban, semi-educated by the modern metropolitan standards exists and the majority of it is marketed and sold on the streets of the city itself – cheap here is used both in terms of pricing and in terms of how academia ignored it altogether. This publishing industry is literally pre-industrialized where still today hand printing moveable type presses or the 'Bat-tala' era printing mechanisms are used to print and supply such literatures. They covered a wide range of subjects from religion, folklore, agriculture, laws, rights, and government procedures to fashion, cookery, and technical self-help to entertainment to horror, mystery, scandal and erotica. They were printed on poor quality paper, with covers in bright coloured images, and using simpler Bengali which makes them comprehensible, and appealing to the common mass. These street literatures of Calcutta are marketed and sold by humbler bookshops in College Streets or Golpark area but majorly on footpaths across the city majorly near about the Sealdah-College street stretch along

with through hawkers on roads, buses and trains, railways stalls and village *haats* or temporary markets.

Therefore we can say that street literature of post-colonial Calcutta represents a literary genre that records the efforts of the underprivileged people to use this print media to register their voices. Their cultural tastes worked in tandem with the commercial motivation of the printers and writers who also came from the same urban petite bourgeoisie and lower classes. The street literatures of post-colonial Calcutta become an important lens to examine the post-independent Calcutta scene. The street literature market also emulate a unique syncretic secularism and tolerance as it produce and sell literatures pertaining to the Hindu mythologies-ritualistic handbooks, and Islamic *qissa* books written in Islamic idioms, alongside books on folklore without discrimination or bias only driven by a common commercial incentives. They not only help the voiceless find a voice, they also help the marginalized to find legitimacy and identity through the connection formed with the larger community which turn them into great sources of local histories which otherwise get ignored by popular academic historical efforts.

As mentioned earlier the migrant city dwellers of the semi literate people like to learn and familiarize if themselves with the tropes of city life. From a global perspective the first and foremost necessity of urbanizing oneself is to acquaint oneself with the language, i.e., English, Bengali or Hindi. So there are titles such as শিশুবোধ আদর্শ লিপি (*Shishubodh adorshyolipi*)⁵ published by Akshay Library in College Street. When one looks at the book there are a few things that stand out. Firstly the shocking red colour of the cover with floral designs, a distorted

⁵ *Shishubodh adorshyolipi*, published by Akshay Library in College Street, Kolkata. A digital copy of this rare artifact is available at the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. This particular item was archived as part of the Endangered Archiving Programme funded by and in collaboration of the British Library, United Kingdom.

sketch portrait of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar along with his signature. Also it is interesting to note the tag lines highlighting the contents of the text like an advertisement. It should also be noted that most of the things that this primer claims to contain, it does not like the নামতা or the multiplication tables are not present. Also, the original *Adorsholipi* is not one of Vidyasagar's works. *Bornoporichoy*⁶ on the other hand is a well know primer by him. Therefore it becomes clear that publisher compiled this primer from various sources, used Vidyasagar as a brand logo of high literature. This is quite similar to the fake conterfeighted products of major global brands we find in flea markets like in Esplanade or New Market.

There are other primers that are sold as street literature as well— সহজ দশমিক ধারাপাঠ⁷ (*Sohoj doshomik dharapath*), publisher unknown, for example is a primer on Mathematics in vernacular, it also provides Bengali transliterations of the English names of the digits. Similarly in another primer for English alphabets and names called *Children ABC with Word Book*⁸ another offering from Akshay Library contains Bengali transliteration as well as translation of English names of birds, body parts and so on. Therefore it becomes evident that in order for the semi-literate in terms of metropolitan standards who might have a very basic education, can understand and relate to words and object while learning about them. Also, another thing that is of interest is that most of these primers are perhaps used for the education of the children of these semi-literate populace, presence of transliterations or translation in Bengali may help the parents to guide their children at home. Furthermore, the grammatical error in the title is an obvious

⁶ *Bornoporichoy* is a two part primer that was authored by Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, and published in 1855.

⁷ *Sohoj doshomik dharapath* publisher unknown. A digital copy of this rare artifact is available at the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. This particular item was archived as part of the Endangered Archiving Programme funded by and in collaboration of the British Library, United Kingdom.

⁸ *Children ABC with Word Book* published by Akshay Library. A digital copy of this rare artifact is available at the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. This particular item was archived as part of the Endangered Archiving Programme funded by and in collaboration of the British Library, United Kingdom.

indication of the low-cost productions which does not bother checking the grammar; in addition it tells us that the publisher too is not well versed in language, and about their social class.

There are other titles like গৃহিণীর টুকিটাকি (*Grihinir tukitaki*)⁹ by one Shripitwiraj, published by General Library and Press in Burrabazar area of Kolkata or another that goes by the title A টু Z অফ বেডসাইড হোমিওপ্যাথিক মেডিসিন¹⁰ (*A to Z of Bedside Homeopathy Medicine*) written by Dr. Surajit Kar published by Orient Library or ডাক্তার যখন হাতের কাছে নেই¹¹ (*Daktar jokon haater kache nei*) author Dr. P. Sil published by Rajendra Library. What is strikingly different from the above examples is that these titles have authors.

The first title *Grihinir tukitaki* deals with basic healthcare and fashion tips for the homemakers. The introduction to the book sends an important message which goes like this–

“একবিংশ শতাব্দীতে গৃহিণী শব্দটির সংজ্ঞা পাল্টে গেছে...এখন নারীকে পুরুষের সাথে জীবিকা অর্জনের জন্যে পথে নামতে হয়েছে।এরই পাশাপাশি... দৈনন্দিন জীবনযাত্রার ক্ষেত্রে ঘটে একটির পর একটি নীরব পরিবর্তন।”¹²

⁹ Shripitwiraj, *Grihinir tukitaki*, General Library and Press, Burrabazar, Kolkata. A digital copy of this rare artifact is available at the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. This particular item was archived as part of the Endangered Archiving Programme funded by and in collaboration of the British Library, United Kingdom.

¹⁰ Kar, Surajit, *A to Z of Bedside Homeopathy Medicine*, Orient Library, College Street, Kolkata. A digital copy of this rare artifact is available at the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. This particular item was archived as part of the Endangered Archiving Programme funded by and in collaboration of the British Library, United Kingdom.

¹¹ Sil, P., *Daktar jokon haater kache nei*, Rajendra Library, Burrabazar, Kolkata. A digital copy of this rare artifact is available at the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. This particular item was archived as part of the Endangered Archiving Programme funded by and in collaboration of the British Library, United Kingdom.

¹² “Bhumika”, *Grihinir tukitaki*, op.cit., p. 1.

In the twenty-first century, the definition of the word housewife has changed...both men and women have had to step out of their home to earn a living... there has been a gradual yet silent change in their day to day life.¹³

This is an example of the progressiveness that the street literatures promote as opposed to some elite publications of high literature which tend to promote that women are best suited to run the household than step out to make a career of their own, for example in the popular Bengali sleek sleuth novel by Sharadindu Bandopadhyay, *Byomkesh Bakshi*. In the story we come across Satyabati, Byomkesh's wife who is as intelligent as the sleuth, and even helped him solve cases on numerous occasions, but is always portrayed as a quaint woman looking after the household and doing her chores while her husband and his friend are either solving cases or simply lazing around the house. Many might argue that this is a story set in the colonial period, and such was the general societal structure. However, one should take note that a number of renditions of the sleuth have been done in the twenty-first century, where the plots have been modified to suit the times in more than one occasion, but it never portrayed Satyabati solving crime side by side with her husband. It also reverberate the point of view of many scholars on women emancipation and liberation.¹⁴

Interestingly enough in the case of the second titles *A to Z of Bedside Homeopathy Medicine*, the publisher not only provides the author's name but also a couple of references on him in terms relation. Title page of the book reads,

¹³ Translations are made by me.

¹⁴ See Sharadindu Bandopadhyay, *Byomkesh Samagra*, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 2018. Also see Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian History: Some Interpretations*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1966; Tanika Sarkar, *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Times*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009; Gayatri Chakravarty-Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* London: Macmillan, 1988.

“স্বর্গীয় ডাঃ শৈলেন্দ্রনাথ কর মহাশতের পৌত্র এবং প্রখ্যাত হোমিওপ্যাথিক ডাক্তার
স্বর্গীয় ডাঃ ভোলানাথ চক্রবর্তী স্নেহধন্য”¹⁵

“Grandson of late Dr. Sailendra Kar, and a loving acquaintance of the eminent
Homeopathic physician Dr. Bholanath Chakraborty.”¹⁶

Printing such a list of reference might have an effort on the part of the publisher to lend some authenticity to the book. It should be kept in mind that we cannot be sure what were the sources of the information printed in the book nor can their correctness be verified. Another interesting feature of the book is the title. The title is though printed in vernacular script but is in English. Perhaps this was an attempt by the publisher to make the more attractive to its target audience by making it seem more global.

The third title mentioned above *Daktar jokhon haater kache nei* which in English mean what do you do when there is no doctor available nearby. The book is basically on first aid using herbs and plants. As an urban dweller who is well versed in proper first aid or someone who can afford the bills of a hospital, the book may seem not very helpful. Nevertheless, this book may help a semi literate lower middle class worker to provide first aid to his near and dear one in a time of crisis.

Another interesting category that can be is the sort that busts myths and superstitions by providing some sort of a scientific explanation for it. For example, the title কু-সংস্কার বনাম বিজ্ঞান চেতনা¹⁷ (*Ku-sanskar bonam bigyan chetona*) published by the Orient Library which

¹⁵ “Title page”, *A to Z of Bedside Homeopathy Medicine*, op. cit.

¹⁶ Translations are mine.

¹⁷ *Ku-sanskar bonam bigyan chetona*, Orient Library, College Street, Kolkata. A digital copy of this rare artifact is available at the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. This particular item was

means myths and superstition versus scientific awareness— this chapbook unlike the most lacks an attention grabbing cover page, priced at a meager amount of Rs 3.20 printed on the cheapest quality of paper and print. This perhaps indicates its lack of demand among its target audiences who, quite naturally hold their traditions very close to them, as that is what keeps them connected to their roots; it also shows the contrasting psychology of a seasoned urban citizen and a populace that has travelled to the city in search of job opportunities. If we look at the content of the book, we will find that it promotes certain traditional practices which by providing a simple scientific basis rather common sensical basis for them. For instance, there is a point that explains why one should not have eggs before exam. The reason the book gives that if someone consumes eggs before exams then it might cause formation of gas and lead to indigestion and irritation- পেট গরম (pet gorom) which is not desirable before an exam as most people tend to be nervous and tensed মাথা গরম (*matha gorom*) , this will only add to the discomfort. Although such explanation has no scientific basis in reality. Reaction to food and situation is relative to the person experiencing it. Nonetheless such information is important for semi-literate people who understand that egg is a nutritional food but may not know the side effects of it as a precaution or a preventive measure. This book is also a legitimate example of the secular syncretism practiced by the publishers. The title not only covers Hindu practices but also Muslim practices. Most importantly and interestingly, the cover/title pages show a Brahmin priest studying Hindu religious text while his immediate background is that of a mosque.

Moving on to the most widely printed category of street literature— religion. There are texts on ব্রতকথা (*brotokotha*) which are primarily derived in various forms from the

Mongolkabyas which were popular in medieval Bengal. These describe local ritualistic festivals their stories of origin (both the mythological and local), and how and why one should celebrate it. For example বিপত্তারিণী ব্রতকথা¹⁸ (*Bipottarini brotokotha*) – tells the story of how the worshipping of Bipottarini, (another name for Adyashakti, the mother goddess) came to be. From an academic perspective if this story is analysed it gives certain information about the practices and culture of a area called Kalidaha which is in Purulia district of West Bengal, and that there was a king named Kautilya.¹⁹ It also talks about the practice of consumption of beef by the subaltern as well as the patriarchal oppression on the women of the household, if we follow the lines below,

“কৈটল্য নামেতে রাজা ছিম পুরোকালে/গুণবতী পত্নী ছিল অতি-
পতিব্রতে...চামারিণী সনে তার হইল মিলন/গোমাংস দেখিতে সাধ রাণীর হইল...”²⁰

There was a king named Kautilya in the olden days, has a pious and virtuous wife who came across tenor’s wife one day and had the desire to see what beef looked like...²¹

The above line indicates towards the life style of the subaltern class represented by the subaltern class, and informs the reader that there was a practice of beef consumption amongst them. While the following lines show how the subalterns were treated as impure and un-pious, and coming in contact with or touching beef was considered an act of কুকর্ম (*kukarma*) or heresy.

¹⁸ Bhattacharya, Ashwini Kumar (ed.), *Bipottarini brotokotha*, Sajal Pushtakalay, Paturiaghata, Kolkata, 2000[1987]. A digital copy of this rare artifact is available at the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. This particular item was archived as part of the Endangered Archiving Programme funded by and in collaboration of the British Library, United Kingdom.

¹⁹ Not to be confused with Kautilya (Chanakya) from the Mauryan period.

²⁰ *Bipottarini brotokotha*, op. cit., p.4.

²¹ Translations are mine.

“দৈবকর্মে একথা রাজকর্মে গেল/কুপিত হইয়া রাজা মহলেতে এল/ক্রুদ্ধ হয়ে মাংস
কথা রানীরে জিজ্ঞাসে...ধর্মে কর্মে হও তুমি মোর সাথী/ কুকর্মে কেন হল তোমার এ
মতি...”²²

*By divine conspiracy the new reaches the king. Furious he became and visited the
queen in her palace. He demanded an explanation what caused her to perform
such an un-pious act.*²³

The lines below show the kind of oppression and suffering the women of the household
receive(d) in Bengal at the hand of patriarchy—

“ফুল্লরার পূজা-কথা সওদাগর শুনি।

ভেঙ্গে দেয় পূজা-ঘট আসিয়া তখনি।।

ভগ্ন ঘট হেরে করে ফুল্লরা রোদন।

নীরবে সহিলা নারী অসহ্য বেদন।”²⁴

*On hearing the news of Phullora's worship, the merchant smashed
the holy pitcher offered. On seeing the fragments of the pitcher,
Phullora wept- a woman suffered in silence.*²⁵

The *Brotokotha* also informs on the existence of a place called in the present day Purulia
region of Bengal,

²² *Bipottarini brotokotha*, op. cit., p. 5.

²³ Translations are mine.

²⁴ *Bipottarini brotokotha*, op. cit., p. 11.

²⁵ Translations are mine.

“...উপনিত সওদাগর হইল কালিদহো”²⁶

*The merchant un-boarded his ship at Kalidaha.*²⁷

The copy that I came across was published by Sajal Publisher of College Street, Kolkata. The cover is red in colour with the image of the Goddess Bipottarini and a couple worshipping her. Sometimes these covers are kept at homes of the non-metropolitan populace, and the image of the goddess on the cover is used in place of an idol while performing the rituals.

There are other texts such as religious dramas (*jatra-pala*²⁸), and on the histories of places of religious importance. For example কলিযুগে বাবা বড়কাছারী²⁹ (*Kalijuge baba borokacari*) written by Basudeb Chakraborty and published by Kajal kumar Dutta from Bakhrahat in 24 Parganas (s). The book is of interest because it not only preserves the tradition of *jatra-pala*, it also tell the history of the temple of Barakachari, located on the outskirts of the city near Budge Budge which is perhaps the second most popular temple of Lord Shiva after Tarakeshwar. In telling the history, the book also hints at a folk or tribal origin of the temple which led to the preservation of a sacred space. It also informs one of the existence small traditional printing presses, as well as local book fairs in the villages of 24 Parganas (S).

Another category of books which are popular could be categorized as spiritual rather than strictly religious, and these books preach secularism like none other. In this category, we find books on the Baul tradition of Bengal. The Baul tradition as we know is highly syncretic and a

²⁶ *Bipottarini brotokotha*, op. cit., p. 12.

²⁷ Translations are mine.

²⁸ *Jatra-pala* is a popular folk-theatre form of Bengali theatre, spread throughout most of Bengali speaking areas of the Indian subcontinent, including Bangladesh and Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, Assam and Tripura.

²⁹ Chakraborty, Basudeb, *Kalijuge baba borokacari*, Kajal kumar Dutta, Sanjuya Book Fair, 2005. A digital copy of this rare artifact is available at the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. This particular item was archived as part of the Endangered Archiving Programme funded by and in collaboration of the British Library, United Kingdom.

living folk tradition of both Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. It is as Rabindranath Tagore had said,

“... their syncretistic tradition as a common heritage of both Hindus and Muslims ... This confluence is the real reflection of Indian civilization ... This inspiration ... has been relentlessly at work in the depths of the village milieu of Bengal”³⁰

An example of this category of publication is লালন ফকিরের বাউল সঙ্গীত³¹ (*Lalon fakirer baul sangeet*) published by Sajal Pushtokalay is a compilation of songs by Lalon Fakir who was one of the most famous *baul* saints of Bengal. Many scholarly works has been done on him.³² This particular chap book on the collection of his songs curated and compiled by Ujjwal Biswas who happens to be musician as the cover page states, along with Sajal Kumar Nath. The book lacks any kind of preface or introduction, so it is difficult to say if the songs compiled are authentic. Also the name in the title page does not match that of the cover page. The name on the title page is লালন ফকিরের গান (লালন কিরের ছায়াছবির গান সহ)³³ [*Lalon Fakirer gaan (Lalon Fakirer chayachhobir gaan soho)*], which means that the book also contains songs from the Bengali feature film on Lalon Fakir which had released in 1987. Therefore, we can make the presumptions that all the songs in the collection are not of Lalon. The cover of the book is more interesting as it shows an embodiment of both Lord Krishna and Goddess Kali which is a take on

³⁰ Tagore, Rabindranath, Introduction to Muhammad Mansuruddin, *Haramani: lok sangit sangraha*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1942, pp. ix-xii.

³¹ Biswas, Ujjwal, and Sajal Kumar Nath (eds.), *Lalon fakirer baul sangeet*, Sajal Pushtokalay, College Street, Kolkata. A digital copy of this rare artifact is available at the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. This particular item was archived as part of the Endangered Archiving Programme funded by and in collaboration of the British Library, United Kingdom.

³² See Dasgupta, Atis, “The Bauls and Their Heretic Tradition”, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 22, No. 5/6, May - Jun., 1994, pp. 70-83.

³³ “Title page”, *Lalon fakirer baul sangeet*, op. cit.

the form of Kalikrishna³⁴ from the stories of *Srimadbhagvatam* as it carries the iconic symbols of both the gods vis-à-vis Krishna's peacock feather on the head, his flute in the hand while the figure's tongue is sticking out a popular iconography of Devi Kali. The figure is also donning a garland of severed heads and carries a *khargo* (a sickle like sword) which in the cover seems to have been fused with Krishna's flute. He/she is sitting happily on Lalon's lap (assuming the saintly figure is meant to be him), and listening his songs with the childlike innocence of the young Krishna. Lalon is depicted as a Vaishavite. From a religio-social point of view this kind of iconography on the book not only important, but also astonishing. The depiction shows a syncreticism not only between Hindu and Muslim but also between the two rivaling Hindu sects of Bengal the Shakta and the Vaishav. It also promotes inclusivity of the queer community. Also, it makes an effort preserve and propagate the folk culture of Bengal.

If we consider the title বনবিবির জহুরানামা³⁵ (*Bonbibir johuranama*), this too is an example of the inclusiveness of the Street Literature corpus and its market. The tale of Bonbibi is in fact a popular one among many believers. The story itself emulate syncreticism as Bonbibi is worshipped by both the hindu and the Muslim population of the Sundarban region of both Bangladesh and West Bengal for protection against the maneaters. Bonbibi is the guardian of the forest also referred to as Bonodurga or Byaghradevi. This tale of bonbibi when popularly published and circularized, it not only preserves the stories of folk beliefs, it also tells the history of the community of the Sundarbans as to how the people of the entire community consider the

³⁴ Kalikrishna is when Goddess Kali is worshipped as Lord Krishna. There is a prevalent folklore that Krishna transformed himself into Kali when Radha's husband, Ayan Ghosh, caught her red-handed with Krishna. Kali is worshipped as Krishna in the house of the Banerjees of Sri Gopal Mallik Lane off College Square. Porcelain versions of this tale were available here in early 20th century but few of these have survived. Soumitra Das, "Kali as avatar of Krishna", *The Telegraph*, 14.11.12.

³⁵ Rahim, Abdur, *Bonbibir johuranama*, Osmania Library, Mechuabazar Street, Kolkata, 1986. A digital copy of this rare artifact is available at the School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. This particular item was archived as part of the Endangered Archiving Programme funded by and in collaboration of the British Library, United Kingdom.

forest as sacred— as the abode of their deity Bonbibi and hence make efforts to preserve it irrespective of their personal religion. The particular copy of *Bonbibir johuranam* which I came across talks about the tale of “Dukhey’s Redemption”—

বন বিবির কেরামতি অর্থাৎ

বন বিবির জহুরানামা

ধেনামৌল ও দুঃখের পালা³⁶

(*Bon bibir keramoti orthat*

Bon bibir jahurnama

Dhenomoulo o dukher pala)

The text is an Islamic quissa book written in Islamic idioms. The book claims to be written by Abdur Rahim. It proclaims to be the most authentic version of the tale as the first thing printed on the top of the cover page is

আসলা! আসলা!! আসলা!!!³⁷

which roughly translates into

Genuine! Genuine!! Genuine!!!³⁸

It is published by Osmania Library of Mechua Street, Kolkata, and as a mark of genuine Osmania Library publication it states that,

³⁶ *Bonbibir johuranama*, op. cit., p.1.

³⁷ “Cover page”, Ibid.

³⁸ Translations are mine.

which means

With the typical mosque trade mark of Osmania Library.⁴⁰

If we consider the content we will find that the language is similar to the “Bat-Tala” Dobhasi language which was a mixture of Persian and Bengali. For example,

“পুরাতন ইতিহাস আগে জামানার।।

শোন যত বেয়াদর বয়ান তাহার।।”⁴¹

History of olden days

*Listen to what it tells.*⁴²

The rhythmic pattern and tone is similar to a *Bratakotha* or a *Panchali*⁴³. The story itself praches peaceful co-existence of the Hindus (Raimoni) and the Muslims (Bonbibi)— when Dakhinarai’s mother Raimoni⁴⁴ goes to war against Bonbibi, she gets defeated and her life is spared by the former, and they become friends. Then Bonbibi decides to divide the territory of *Atharo bhati* equally amongst them, and peacefully co-exist,

³⁹ “Cover page”, *Bonbibir johuranama*, op. cit.

⁴⁰ Translations are mine.

⁴¹ *Bonbibir johuranama*, p. 2.

⁴² Translations are mine.

⁴³ Cf. 18.

⁴⁴ There is some ambiguity with the name of Dakhinarai’s mother, in the earlier texts her name is mentioned as Narayani.

“রায়মণী তাবেদার হইল বিবির...রায়মণী কহিতে লাগিল এই বলে তুমি হইলে
কর্তা আঠার ভাটির। হুকুম কহিবে যাহা না হেলিব ছিরা। বনবিবি বলে সি
শোন বিবরণ...আটয়া ফাটয়া লইব... বাদা বাটয়া লইব”⁴⁵

*Raimoni becomes an amenable subordinate to Bonbib... Raimoni pledges
allegiance to Bibi saying that she will accept any and all her decisions
who is now the ruler of the land... Bobbireplies that she break and
divide the lan of Atharo bhati equally between Raimoni and herself.*⁴⁶

Therefore, this books not only emulates syncreticism, it also protects a folklore, an old dialect of Bengali, as well as is a source of local history of the Sundarbans region. It also informs one of the local conservation practices of the people of the region by creating places of sacred value.

Therefore, we can infer that the corpus of the post-colonial street literature of Calcutta is a rich source of information on the practices of the semi-literate classes dwelling in the city. It also paints a picture of the social restructuring that has come to be due to decolonisation. We have also learnt that these street literatures, may be cheap, not standardised but through their continuos circulation via unassertive channels have not only helped to preserve certain folk traditions, but even old dialects. The street literatures bind the publishers, sellers and the consumers, all of whom belong from the (semi)urban petite bougeoisie class of the urban society in one thread stimulated by their commercial motivations, thereby forming a larger community with which they can identify with; and this is one of the major characteristic of post-colonialism. The street literatures of the post-colonial Calcutta lend a voice to the voiceless.

⁴⁵ *Bonbibir johuranama*, pp. 18-19.

⁴⁶ Translations are mine.

Hence, we can conclude that the street literature is an important cultural artifact which helps to understand the socio-economic and religious scene of post-colonial Calcutta through its interpretations. It also help to understand the demotic printing culture vis-à-vis the industry that still exist in Calcutta with its pre-industrial printing technology. It is unfortunate that this genre of print publication has been ignored by mainstream academic scholarship of book history and print culture of Bengal for so long. This paper is written based on a preliminary research on this theme. It is just the tip of the iceberg, and has barely scratched the surface. More research into this genre of print culture should be encouraged.

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