# Orality, Inscription and the Creation of a New Lore

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**Abstract**

*This essay examines the process by which the discourse of folklore is used to entextualize and recontextualize the oral tradition in West Bengal through a discussion of two contemporary Bangla novels. Motifs from folk tales, myths, and popular epic poems are being re-appropriated by urban cultural forms– both popular as well as elite – to articulate new identities and subject positions. I selected these novels by considering the mode in which orality is inscribed and the time period. One of the novels attempts to re-constitute oral lore from a popular epic composed in the medieval period, and the other re-inscribes an origin myth that is part of folk ritual into a new genre via the mediation of folklore discourse that is responsible for the first step in entextualizing the myth. This essay concludes by suggesting that folklore's conception of tradition as being temporally disrupted has facilitated these new literary appropriations of oral lore. It is precisely because folklore's subject matter is supposed to be out of sync with the times that allows for conceptions of culture that are porous enough for innovation.*

…[The] peculiar temporality of folklore as a disciplinary subject, whether coded in the terminology of survival, archaism, antiquity, and tradition, or in the definition of folkloristics as a historical science, has contributed to the discipline's inability to imagine a truly contemporary, as opposed to a contemporaneous, subject… Folklore is by many (though not all) definitions out of step with the time and the context in which it is found.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett,
"Folklore's Crisis" 1998, 283

In an essay that critically reviews folklore's disciplinary position vis-à-vis history and culture, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) says that temporal dislocation between the site of origin and the present location of particular cultural forms signals the presence of folklore. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett thus conceptualizes culture as heterogeneous, layered and composed of multiple strands that are interconnected in rather haphazard and contingent ways. This sense of contingency comes about through the juxtaposition of different time scales such that the idea of locality or location becomes the conceptual frame within which the heterogeneous and circulating strands that we call culture come to cohere, if only for a moment. However, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out, even before location comes to be viewed as a spatial category it is a temporal one, and by constituting the present as a series of disjunctive moments, folklore creates a gap between the contemporaneous and the contemporary.

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In a different, though related, fashion students of Indian society have made a distinction between "Great traditions" and "Little traditions" (Redfield 1955, Sinha 1957); or between *desha* (regional, provincial) and *marga* (sanskritic, global). Folk rituals, belief systems, and the cultural institutions of rural India are thought to reveal an interaction between the forces of globalization and parochialization, or *margi* and *deshi* aspects (Marriot 1955, Sinha 1957, Trautman 1997). For most scholars this interaction is a long-term and largely unconscious process. However, the historian Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal (2004) holds a somewhat different view. In his study of a small principality in one of the border regions of West Bengal, he shows how the semi-tribal Mulla court, in what is now the Bardhaman district, produced political institutions that self-consciously integrated aspects of what was then thought of as "high culture" – i.e. the culture of the Mughal court in North India –with indigenous elements taken from local tribal and peasant communities. Many such peripheral principalities were declared to be tributary states owing formal allegiance to the great, though distant, Mughal Empire. The geographical distance between the central authority and these border states gave the latter some degree of autonomy. Thus, they were able to selectively adopt elements of Mughal culture while retaining much of what was traditionally available. The Mughal presence was thought to be alien but distant enough to be non-threatening, and could therefore become a site for experimentation with novelty. Traces of this self-conscious adoption of high culture aspects is, according to Sanyal, still visible in the peasant societies of these border regions, for instance in the cultivation of particular genres of folk songs that can engage with forms of novelty. Sanyal says that many genres of folk song in Bengal have been cultivated into popular forms that require different kinds of performative contexts. He suggests that folk culture is constituted at three different levels: *jana* (local), *desha* (regional), and *marga* (global or pan-Indian). He says that the *deshi* or regional level acts as a site of mediation between the local and global levels.

Unfortunately Sanyal does not develop this theme further. However, as several scholars have tried to show, the conception of a cultural region is important in the study of folklore's engagement with forms of modernity (Morinis 1982, Blackburn 2003, Chatterji 2005). Self-conscious reflection on context, style, and the process of transmission actually occurs precisely at this level. Further, this is the level at which the local is conceived of as such and thus also is the level at which "metadiscursive practices for creating, representing and interpreting" folk discourses are developed (Briggs 1993). In this essay I examine some contemporary attempts at producing new kinds of folk discourses in a deliberate attempt to empower certain marginal groups in West Bengal. These attempts, as I will show, are part of a larger movement for the articulation of a distinctive regional identity in which folk culture plays a central role.

The idea of region is not necessarily restricted to a geographical unit, but refers rather to a social field formed "by a

network of governmental processes, cultural flows and forms of popular transmission shaped by oral, print and visual media" (Chatterji 2005,1). In this sense my field is carved out of a set of overlapping political regions–the states of West Bengaland Jharkhand as well as the erstwhile province of undivided Bengal of the colonial era; parts of which are now independent states in India, including the independent nation-state of Bangla Desh.

**Folklore and the Literary Canon**

Even though the folk have played an important part in articulating ideas about Bengali culture and tradition, there have been no significant grassroot reformist movements of the kind that have taken place in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.[1] West Bengal, governed as it is by a combination of communist and socialist parties for three decades, is typically identified with a kind of middle class radicalism. Most reforms have been top down, including those that were initiated by an "enlightened" elite in the colonial period (Basu 1992). Instead the folk are perceived as an abstract category–an aid to the process of "traditionalization" – a term coined by Shuman and Briggs (1993) to identify "aspects of the past as significant to the present" (ibid. 1993, 109). Folklore comes to represent the authentic voice of the folk, a living museum from which Bengal's history may be excavated.

In a previous paper I have shown how the discourse of folklore, reinforced by state policy, comes to constitute parts of Bengal as a folklore region (Chatterji 2005). Once constituted, this region then becomes the location for creative experimentation with the oral literature found there. Traditional folk themes begin to circulate among new publics in popular urban spaces. I will examine two Bangla novels that reinterpret folk myths as part the ongoing project of the Bengali intelligentsia to find contemporary significance in traditional lore.

In an important paper on the Grimms' anthology of fairy tales, Charles Briggs (1993) says that folklore discourses use entextualizing strategies to produce authentic folk voices. These texts are created with a political agenda in mind and the task of the folklorist is to deconstruct these texts for the powerful effects that they produce. Unlike the texts that folklorists usually analyze, the texts that I present here are explicit in laying out their political agenda. Both novels draw upon the mother goddess complex to frame their stories. The fact that mother goddess worship (*shaktaism*) is an important religious tradition in Bengal may have influenced the choice of subject to some extent, but more importantly, the significance of the mother goddess as a mediator between the "Great traditions" and "Little traditions" of Hinduism, or between local religion and textual, or *shastric,* religion gives this theme its symbolic charge (Beane 2001, Humes 1998). Coburn (1988) says that even though the origin of the mother goddess complex lies in India's non-Aryan pre-history, continuous interplay between various religious streams–local/tribal, Buddhist, and Hindu–has produced the mother goddess complex as we know it today. A point of significance for my argument is that the mediating position occupied

by the mother goddess tradition allowed Bengali nationalists to claim a distinctive place for Bengal's culture within the civilizational mainstream (Chatterji 2003).

Mahashweta Devi's *Vyad Kaand* (The Book of the Hunter) and Nilakanth Ghoshyal's *Bhumi Kanya* (Earth Maiden), both fall within the Bengali nationalist tradition of historiography, which assumes Bengal's folk traditions had a seminal role in shaping her culture (Dutt 1990, Sen 1985). In keeping with a modern political perspective, they use folk tradition as a site for articulating contemporary concerns. However, in the forms in which they have become available for literary interpretation, these folk traditions have already been mediated through inscription. The role of folklorists in bringing oral traditions to print in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been extensively studied in India (Blackburn 2003, Sen 1960), but the relationship between writing and oral literature has a much older history. *Mangala kavyas*, long narrative poems about specific gods and goddesses, written from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century in Bangla, circulated in oral forms long before they were written down. According to Clark (1955) these poems have two distinct levels–the popular and the learned–and he believes that there is a chronological relationship between the two levels. The oral lore was re-inscribed in an orthodox Brahminic literary canon, but the fact that the medium was Bangla rather than Sanskrit allowed for its mass circulation, a fact that holds true today as much as it did in the medieval period.[2]

*Bhumi Kanya* by Neelkanth Ghoshyal was serialized in a Bangla literary magazine called *Desh* in 2004-2005. It is a creative re-telling of some of the myths associated with Bhadu, a local goddess cult still prevalent in the border regions of West Bengal. The influence of recent folkloric interpretations of the Bhadu story and their role in the process of entextualizing the rituals and songs associated with her worship is evident in the novel. My selection of these two works has been determined by the fact that the subjects that they deal with represent two important moments of literary inscription – one set in the sixteenth century and the other in the present.

## Chandi Mangala of Mukundaram and Mahashweta Devi

In the preface to her novel, Mahashweta Devi says that the *Chandi Mangala Kavya* of Kavikankan[3] Mukundaram is the inspiration for this work. The epic poem is composed of several different stories that bear little connection with each other: an autobiographical account of the composer's journey to a new settlement in a different part of Bengal that reveals, according to critics, a detailed knowledge of the current socio-political state of the society (Bhattacharyya 1976, Devi 2002); the *Vyad Kaand*, the story of the hunter Kalketu and his wife Phullara; and the adventures of the merchant Dhanapati, his two wives Khulana and Lalona, and his son. According to scholars such as T.W. Clark (1955) and Ashutosh Bhattacharyya (1976) these stories show evidence of the evolution of the cult of Goddess Chandi from that of a benign protector of forest life to a more malevolent deity who deliberately

brings misfortune to coerce humans into giving her worship. (Bhattacharyya says that the poetic text was written at a time when distinctions between different groups of goddess worshippers were becoming blurred. However, he bases his hypothesis on the text itself and not on other historical sources).[4]

According to the preface of *The Book of the Hunter*, Mahashweta Devi was inspired by the *Vyad Kaand* of Kavikankan Mukundaram's epic poem, where he describes the lives of nomadic, forest dwelling tribes such as the Shabars. She describes the clash between contrasting forms of life through the experiences of two couples, the migrant Brahmin priest Mukundaram and his wife, and Kalya and Phuli, a young Shabar couple. She explores the culture of the Shabars and how they cope with the erosion of their way of life as new settlements encroach on forestland. In the novel, the Brahmin Mukundaram is seen using his experiences with the forest dwelling couple to depict the characters of Kalketu and Phullara, both re-incarnations of demi-gods who were cursed to suffer mortal birth. He invokes the Goddess of the Great Forest (Abhaya or Reassurance) through the voice of the hunter Kalketu (Devi 2002, vii).

Mahashweta Devi says that Mukundaram's personal experience with hunter-gatherers in medieval Bengal inspired her to write a novel that would help in the re-historicization of the Shabar tribe. Apart from being a renowned novelist, Mahashweta Devi is also a well-known activist who has worked among former "criminal tribes" like the Lodhar and Kheria Shabars of Central India.[5] She thinks of this novel as an attempt to re-create the lost oral lore of the Shabars and thereby restore their self-respect. The novel is based on her experiences with the Shabars and with the stories that they have published about themselves and their lore in her journal, *Bartika*.

The novel is interesting not only in that it seeks to re-inscribe a medieval literary text in the form of an experimental Bangla work using contemporary stylistic devices, but also because of the way that the author seeks validation both from the Shabar community as well as from the Mukundaram's life experiences. She says that she was inspired by Mukundaram's own endeavour, which combined direct experience and acquired knowledge of the socio-political events of sixteenth-century Bengal.[6] She weaves fragments of the *mangala kavya* story of Kalketu and Phullara into her own narrative in a way that both subverts it and gives it authenticity. Thus, whilst in the *mangala kavya*, the goddess gives Kalketu a boon that makes him the founder and chieftain of the city of Gujarat; it is not because of his devotion to her or to forest creatures but rather, to put a break on his wanton destruction of forest dwelling animals.[7] Instead, Kalketu becomes the first priest of a new goddess cult and, according to Devi, an ancestor of one of the priestly clans of the Shabar. In the novel, an old rogue elephant representing the forest goddess kills Kalya as he inadvertently ventures into the sacred grove where hunting is forbidden. This act of transgression and his untimely death lead to his transfiguration into a clan ancestor and demi-god.

The character of Mukundaram (who is responsible for this transfiguration) is opposed to the deceitful Brahmin priest in a Shabar origin myth who betrays the hospitality of his tribal hosts by trying to steal an iconic symbol of the forest goddess. The Brahmin is killed by the goddess, and the Shabar people condemned to destitution. Their lot will change only when a Shabar hunter is able to find and trap the golden iguana, the *vahana* (vehicle) of the goddess, as Kalketu once did.

Devi draws on the authority of the myths published by Shabar activists in her journal, *Bartika*, to validate her version of the Kalketu story rather than on stories that are orally narrated. In fact, she stresses that the stigma of the label "criminal tribe" imposed on the Shabar in colonial times gave them a form of cultural amnesia so that they forgot their oral lore.[8] In this context, the attempt to re-historicize the Shabar is interesting, though somewhat paradoxical. The Shabar voice must first be entextualized before it can be re-inscribed in Devi's novel. Similarly, when she refers to Kabikankan Mukundaram's first-hand knowledge of the Shabar and the forest, it is at the moment when the forest and the Shabar's distinctive way of life is about to be destroyed. Thus she refers to the names of trees mentioned in the *Chandi Mangala* that are felled when Kalketu clears the forest to make his settlement.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) quotes Ong as saying that writing did not reduce orality when it was first introduced but rather enhanced it. She also says that inscription creates a gap between words and speakers, a space that allows for creative innovation (ibid. 1998, 309). In the example discussed above we see how an act of inscription by a Brahmin in the sixteenth century–the compilation of oral narratives about the goddess Chandi into a written text–led to a proliferation of similar texts. Thus, not only are there several other versions of the *Chandi Mangala* compiled by other authors in the medieval period, but there are also more recent oral and painted narratives in Bengal's folk tradition based on the *Chandi Mangala Kavya.*[9] Similarly, Mahashweta Devi's novel has inspired popular plays on the same theme and has even became the theme of a Durga *puja pandal*[10] in Calcutta last year (Ghosh 2000).[11]

Mahashweta Devi's novel allows us to read popular culture as a post-modernist text that makes self-conscious use of citation as a device to politicize its location both within tradition and the modern. Peter Shand (2002), in a paper on the cultural appropriation of Maori art, discusses Julia Kristeva's view of language as being constitutive of texts that form "mosaics of citations; every text is an absorption and transformation of other texts" such that it is able to straddle disjunctive registers.[12] He says that the fusion of high and low art creates opportunities for cultural critique made possible through dislocation from their conventional contexts (ibid. 2002, 54). In the examples discussed here we see that this concept holds true for medieval times as much as it does today. Kavikankan Mukundaram's text draws upon earlier versions of the epic found both in the oral and the written

traditions. Similarly, other composers in the sixteenth and seventeenth, centuries as well as folk painters and story tellers, modern day novelists and playwrights, and contemporary producers of popular culture all become part of a culture of citation and circulation.

In the next example, folklore writing gives the impetus for the process of entextualization. As I will show in the next section, the production of certain folkloric themes has given rise to new literary subjects that are in circulation in the Bangla public sphere.

### Bhumi Kanya: The Transformation of a Goddess Myth

Let me begin with a summary of the novel by Neelkantha Ghoshyal:

Folklorist Papiya is researching Bhadu *puja* in Purulia when she comes across Herambh Bauri (a low caste man) who tells her the secret story of Bhadu's life. Bhadu was an orphan found by the chief (*mukhya*) of Lada village. Raja Nilmoni Singh of Kashipur in whose kingdom Ladha is located has just introduced a new strain of rice–*Bhaduyi* – for cultivation in Kashipur. He tours the kingdom, disguised as an alien traveler, to see if his subjects are in favor of the new crop. His minister, Dhruvachand, accompanies him. In the course of his travels he hears that the chief of Lada village has a daughter who is the living embodiment of Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity. He decides to see her in person and visits Lada disguised as a Sanskrit *pundit* (scholar). He is wonderstruck by her beauty and grace and decides to adopt her as his daughter. However, since her father, the village chief, will not let her go away, the king decides to let Bhadu stay in the village but to be educated in a manner befitting a royal princess. Dhruvachand stays behind to oversee her education. Bhadu's new identity, as a royal princess, is kept secret. Bhadu is very popular among the village people because she works actively for their betterment. In this way she meets Anjan, the son of the doctor (*kaviraj*) of a neighbouring village. They fall in love, much to the dismay of Dhruvachand. In the meantime the British imprison the king because of his active involvement in the popular uprising of 1857.[13] He is, however, later released. When he hears about Bhadu's involvement with Anjan, he orders the latter's capture and secret imprisonment. Bhadu is heartbroken and, together with two of her companions, travels across the kingdom singing songs at the gates of various forts in which Anjan may be imprisoned, hoping that he will recognize her voice and respond. The king relents and Anjan is released, but by then Bhadu has disappeared. Her companions report that one morning she seemed to fade away, merging with the sky. Village women continue to sing the songs that Bhadu first sang in the fruitless search for her lover.[14]

The positioning of Papiya, the researcher, as the main interlocutor signals the novel's self-conscious location within the larger discourse of folklore. The folk goddess Bhadu has been at the center of folklore research for the last four decades. More recently, her story has been dramatized and is now on the way to becoming a popular theme in urban performative and literary genres. Thus,

accounts of the Bhadu *puja* produced by folklorists have been used as source material for the transformation of a ritual complex into a literary subject. This is demonstrated in the way in which certain motifs from the folklore discourse are woven into the literary text. Before I discuss the motifs in detail, a brief account of the Bhadu complex is in order. My account is based on versions of her origin myth that circulate in the border districts of West Bengal, Orissa, and Jharkhand (Chakravarti 2001) and on songs sung during her festival.

Bhadu, a local goddess who was born human and the daughter of the royal house of Kashipur (a former principality in Purulia,) gained the status of a goddess after her early death. The enigma of her virginity and untimely death has led to many stories that purport to explain it. One set of stories views Bhadu as an incarnation of the goddess Durga, who was born to the Maharaja of Kashipur in answer to his prayers. Being a goddess she could stay with him only for a short period of time. She died a virgin because no human man dared to marry her. After her death the king instituted this *puja* in her memory. It is performed in the rainy season between August and September at the time when the rice seeds are transplanted. The worshippers are exclusively women.[15] The songs that are sung about the goddess are an important feature of the ritual.

Most of the songs depict Bhadu as a young married woman who is visiting her parents' home for the festival season. These Bhadu songs follow the pattern of the *agomoni* songs sung to welcome the goddess Durga at the time of the Durga *puja* in October and November. However, some Bhadu songs refer to historical details in the goddess's biography, such as the name of her father, Raja Nilmoni Singh Deo. Raja Nilmoni Singh Deo is an important historical figure in Purulia. He participated in the uprising in 1857 and was imprisoned by the British for instigating his Santal subjects to raid the royal treasury.[16] However, Nilmoni Singh Deo had no daughters and this fact is one of the folklore conundrums that have generated much speculation.

Interestingly many Bengali folklorists attempt to re-construct Bhadu's history, and the songs and origin myth are used as archeological objects that may help to reveal Bengal's pre-history. Ashutosh Bhattacharyya (1965), one of the first folklorists to write on Bhadu, views this *puja* as a tribal agricultural ritual that has been transformed by "Hindu iconicity" (*Hindu poutolikta*) and by the colonizing influence of the Maharajas of Kashipur. Later folklorists do not necessarily follow Bhattacharyya in making a strict separation between tribal and Hindu aspects of the ritual. However, they do follow his methodology in that they separate the songs from the ritual and foreground the former as the primary object of analysis. The discussion that follows is based largely on one text by Shubrata Chakravarti (2001) since this is one of the most comprehensive, and the most recent, of the studies on Bhadu and summarizes all preceding interpretations of the Bhadu complex.

As I have said, most folklorists have tried to re-construct Bhadu's life story from the songs sung during her festival.

Two significant events of her life stand out – these are her birth as Raja Nilmoni Singh Deo's daughter and her untimely death as a virgin. Given that it can be demonstrated that she was not his daughter, some folklorists assume that this festival was started by the king to deflect the force of a rebellion among his poor subjects led, perhaps, by a woman. He was able, according to another account, to appropriate Bhadu's voice by giving her a royal lineage. Her untimely death has generated another set of explanations. Thus, Bhadu was indeed a member of the royal family even if not the direct descendent of the king. She eloped with a low caste man and was killed by her kinsmen in an attempt to avert dishonor to the family name. The royal house of Kashipur then instituted a festival in her name to deflect popular anger, as the king's low caste subjects loved Bhadu.

A point worth noting in these accounts is that the songs and myths are treated as potential documents. There is no attempt to analyze them as semiotic texts. No folklorist, as far as I know, has examined the genealogy of the royal family to discover whether a princess called Bhadu actually existed. I spoke to one of the senior members of the royal family in her home in Purulia town in 1983, and she told me that Bhadreshwari (Bhadu) was the daughter of Maharaja Bikhambar Narayan Singh Deo. She was to be married but her bridegroom died on the eve of the wedding (Clearly, the relationship between Nilmoni Singh Deo and Bhadu is a metonymic one, established in the oral tradition. Nilmoni Singh Deo is the subject of folk narrative, as is Bhadu, and that, since both figures are associated with Kashipur, they are often linked. Unlike the folklorists discussed above, my respondent was quite comfortable with a semiotic explanation for the Bhadu *puja*. She told me that the women of the royal family once performed a goddess *puja* at the time of great misfortune. Kashipur was being attacked and Bhadu, on hearing of an impending defeat, chose to kill herself rather than face dishonor.[17] However, the rumors of defeat were false and the goddess *puja* was institutionalized in Bhadu's memory).

In Chakravarti's text, the Bhadu myth is an ideological construct, a successful piece of propaganda to discipline and pacify a potentially rebellious population. The establishment of her worship can be interpreted as an attempt to incorporate the source of rebellion into the structure of power. However, Bhadu does retain her exemplary status in this text, if not as a goddess than as a figure that represents all womankind, and by extension, all subalterns. The emphasis on the songs, especially on the lyrics, have helped to crystallize a particular disciplinary perspective which assumes that folklore is necessarily concerned with the search for the authentic voice of the people and that the feminine voice is the privileged site of this authenticity.

Scholars like Chatterjee (1993) and Sarkar (2001) have said that the nineteenth- century nationalist historiography of Bengal posited a domestic space that was insulated from the modernizing influences of the colonial state. The internal space came to be represented as the site for national resurgence. The as-

sociation between domestic space and the women's activities that become the symbolic markers of this space is folklore's contribution to this historiography. This point will be elaborated in the next section. We must first, however, examine folklore's contribution to the new social imaginary that is being formed in contemporary Bengal.

To conceptualize folklore's role in cultural production, Gerald Warshaver (1991) proposes a triadic schema in which folklore of the first level is the lore produced by the folk. When this lore becomes the object of knowledge of a discipline, it becomes second level folklore. Third level or postmodern folklore consists of "abstract reconceptualization and denotative reconstitution of second level constructs of first level folklore so that it appears bearing traits which… can be identified as postmodern…" (ibid. 1991, 220). One could think of the two novels discussed here as exercises in postmodern folklore. The "representational practices" of folklorists constitute the raw material that the novelists work with (Warshaver 1991, 224). Thus *Bhumi Kanya* uses motifs from folkloric representations of the Bhadu story rather than from the oral tradition.

In an earlier work I have argued that Bengali folklorists have focused on songs to the exclusion of ritual to conceptualize *Bhadu puja* as a secular festival (Chatterji 2005b). Bhadu songs, now available in print form, are supposed to represent the authentic voice of rural women expressing their daily concerns. Secularism is associated with the folk voice in many parts of the world (Asad 2002). In Bengal today, left-wing oriented intellectuals use it to counter the cultural nationalism propagated by right-wing political parties. In this context women become suitable representatives of the folk,used to represent the category of the subaltern, cutting across such conflicting divisions such as class, caste, religion, and locality.[18]

**History, Realism and Folklore**

Bengali folkloristics has traditionally engaged with the ideology of secularism and the political form that it takes in the discourse of art criticism, i.e., realism. Since the first quarter of the twentieth century, Bengali intellectuals have tried to harness folk forms to the expression of popular political and social concerns.[19] In 1943, the left-oriented Indian peoples' Theatre Association (IPTA) formed to try to introduce the register of "socialist realism" into folklore and folk art so that the latter would reflect the real life concerns of the common people.[20] Folk art had to be transformed into a people's art that would help in the growth of people's power (Oberoi 1998). However, as Sudhi Pradhan (1979) says, IPTA's theatre activities in Bengal were largely confined to urban areas. Their impact on rural areas was limited. Also, they were less interested in folk culture per se, creating instead, hybrid forms of music and dance out of the three broad traditions that were thought to make up modern Bengal's popular musical tradition – i.e., folk, classical, and western (Oberoi 1998).

The Left Front government that has been in power in West Bengal for three decades has been more successful in this regard.[21] The first attempt at establish-

ing government institutions for the preservation and study of folk culture began in the late nineteen-seventies. An advisory committee called the *Loksanskriti Parishad* (Folk Cultural Committee) was set up to explore possibilities of district level interaction. Members of this committee organized workshops in the different districts of West Bengal to facilitate interaction between folk artists, local scholars, and government agencies. The government also set up a series of awards for folk artists and has instituted scholarships and pension schemes for folk performers. *The Folk and Tribal Cultural Centre* was set up in the early nineteen-eighties for the promotion and publication of research on the folk culture of West Bengal.[22] *Lokshruti*, the bi-annual journal published by the Centre, has become an important forum for intellectual debate and discussion on the folk culture of West Bengal.

The significance of such forms of government intervention lies in the fact that it creates sites on which a new form of local self-knowledge can emerge. Most of the scholars who contribute to *Lokshruti* have a moral and political stake in the constitution of folk culture. For them, folk culture embodies the symbolic imaginary through which they can critique certain trends in *bhadralok* (cultured) society. Folklore then represents the site which is both *of* Bengali society and yet not fully *in* it. The folk become a virtual community used to delineate the spiritual qualities, not just of the region, but also (through the mediation of state agencies) of the nation itself (Dutt 1954).

Government intervention in folk culture has allowed the latter to be transposed into a different register such that it can be co-opted by new forms of institutionalization. The print media is one such form. Since Anderson's (1983) seminal work, its role in the articulation of new political entities has been extensively studied. In India, forms of folk culture have been re-articulated by print media in the service of new political formations (Ashley 1993). In the process they also acquire a new kind of aesthetic autonomy such that they can absorb new contexts of performance.

In India, oral and literary traditions have co-existed for a very long time. Some scholars see this in a positive light as two intellectual streams that mutually enhance each other (Sen 1986, Bhattacharyya 1976). Beginning in the early part of the twentieth century, nationalist intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore, who set up Vishva-Bharati University at Shantiniketan, actively supported institutions for the propagation of folk culture. This meant that only the images selected for circulation in the literary media were considered archetypal folk forms, such as Baul songs made popular by poets like Tagore and Nazrul Islam, and Santali[23] dances represented in paintings of the Shantiniketan artist Nandalal Bose. Some activists like Pashupati Mahato (2000) consider this to be a process of internal colonization that has led to a form of "cultural memocide" and to a loss of voice among the tribal people of Central India. In this Mahato is responding to the writings of an earlier generation of folklorists like Ashutosh Bhattacharyya who felt that there was a mutual exchange of cultures between Bengali Hindus and tribal

groups and not a form of forced imposition (Bhattacharyya 1965). To illustrate this point he shows how particular forms of devotional song evolve from tribal (i.e. Santali) songs. Other scholars have pointed out factual anomalies in Bhattacharyya's data (Chakravarti 2001).[24] Bhattacharyya seems to have used the Santals as a reference point because they are important in the literary imagination of modern Bengal. In a similar vein, in recent theatre productions on the Bhadu theme Bhadu is called a Santal goddess, in spite of the fact that folkloric treatises on Bhadu and on the songs associated with her worship are commonly available and widely read all over Bengal.[25] All folkloric treatises on Bhadu refer to her as an agricultural goddess worshipped by low-caste Hindus in the border regions of Bengal. Some scholars like Bhattacharyya admit that her worship may have roots in some archaic tribal ritual, but much the same can be said for any form of goddess worship in India. The Santals have come to represent the voice of subalterneity in Bengal today and there are departments for the study of Santali language and literature in universities such as Vishva-Bharati University in Shantiniketan (Azad 2004). The attempt to incorporate the Bhadu cult into Santali cosmology is somewhat paradoxical, given the fact that the low caste groups who worship Bhadu were absorbed into the caste system only in the medieval period at the time of the composition of the *mangala kavyas*, when popular folk cults became Hinduized. Bhadu has no *mangala kavya,* so perhaps the absorption of her cult into Brahmanical Hinduism never did take place. These groups can lay claim to autochthonous status as much as the more autonomous indigenous groups that have been called tribes since the colonial period (Sarkar 2005). Mahashweta Devi refers precisely to a text that was used to proselytize–to bring groups into the Hindu fold–to re-constitute the lore of the Shabar tribe. Thus, tradition that is being re-constituted here is thought to be hybrid, disrupted by historical events, and not unbroken or continuous. This view of tradition allows selective re-appropriation to create a regional culture that can find its place within pan-Indian civilization.

In this essay I have juxtaposed two moments in Bengal's history when the written and the oral inflect each other (The *Chandi Mangala Kavya* belongs to the written tradition that is also part of secondary orality. Bhadu belongs to the oral tradition and has only recently begun to be appropriated by the written tradition). If we read the contemporary history of the vernacular public sphere in light of events of the medieval period, not only are recent attempts at entextualization and recontextualization given historical depth, but the past is made contemporary. Much of contemporary Bengal's oral lore has been re-contextualized from popular medieval texts like the *mangala kavyas* which are still enacted in villages. New forms of oral composition are modeled on the poetic language that was formed through these texts (Chatterji 1985).[26] Folklorists need to turn their gaze to the past, not to re-configure survivals but to make the discipline truly contemporary.

## Notes

[1] The Dalit (former "untouchable" castes) movement in Maharashtra and the Anti-Brahman movement in Tamil Nadu have re-shaped local societies in both the states (Basu 1992).

[2] The Bangla of Kavikankan Mukundaram's epic has numerous Arabic-Persian words in it. After the Turkish conquest of Bengal in the thirteenth century, Persian became the court language and Arabic was also studied. The composers of the *mangala kavyas* all pay homage to their patrons who were largely Muslims (http://www.banglapedia.org/HT/P_0336.HTM, downloaded on 18 April 2006).

[3] A title that he was given after he wrote this much acclaimed epic.

[4] Apart from the version composed by Kavikankan Mukundaram, there are several other *Chandi Mangalas* as well, some of which precede Mukundaram's version. Manik Datta composed the first one. Another composer, Dvija Madhava was probably Mukundaram's contemporary. Dvija Ramdev, from the border region of Chittagong, now in Bangla Desh, composed the *Abhaya Mangala* and Bharatchandra, the *Ananda Mangala*, all variants of the goddess narrative. (http://banglapedia.org/HTM_0123.HTM, downloaded on 18, April 2006).

[5] The "Criminal Tribes Act" was passed in 1871 by the British Indian government. It was believed that certain groups within the caste system were criminals by hereditary occupation. Meena Radhakrishna (2001) says that this act was based on assumptions about vagrancy and impoverishment that was associated with forms of life that were considered nomadic. Such groups were forced to adopt a sedentary ways of life. After independence such groups were re-designated as "de-notified tribes." I use the word "tribe" rather than "indigenous peoples" or its Indian equivalent "adivasi" as it is still commonly used in India, even by activists like Mahashweta Devi.

[6] Mahashweta Devi considers Kavikankan Mukundaram to be a forerunner to a more modern literary sensibility as he includes his own experience of migration in the epic text. The modern Bangla novel that deals with the subjective aspects of its characters is supposed to have been inspired by the English novel in the nineteenth century (Chatterjee 1993).

[7] This is a form of negative devotion that is well known in medieval Bengal. As important Sanskrit texts are translated and re-inscribed in folk culture, a transformation of the major characters also occurs. Demons come to acquire spiritual grace through the power of their hatred for the gods. Single-minded hatred is sometimes even more effective than single-minded devotion in achieving a sighting of God. The mystical movement called Bhakti (devotion) that spread throughout India in the medieval period shaped popular religion, lore, and literature. The reverberations of this movement are still being felt today (Sen 1987).

[8] She makes a distinction between groups like the Shabar who have forgotten their oral lore and those like the Santal, Munda, and Oraon; neighbouring tribal groups who have rich oral traditions.

[9] Bengal and Bihar have popular story telling traditions that involve depictions of sacred stories in the form of scroll paintings. Excerpts from the *mangala kavyas* or even variants of the stories told in them are sung, while the *patua* (painter of the scroll) displays the scroll register by register before an audience. The *pata* tradition is probably very old, but the first collections of such scrolls and writings on them date to the end of the eighteenth century (Singh 1995).

[10] *Puja* here refers to an annual public celebration and worship. However the word may also be used to denote worship organized within the household. A *pandal* is the temporary structure constructed to house the icon (*murti*). Unlike permanent icons made of metal or stone, the icon worshipped in Bengal, Durga *puja*, is made from straw and clay. The icon is immersed in a river or pond at the end of the five-day *puja*. Even though *pandals* are temporary structures, they are often very elaborate and designed around particular themes that reflect contemporary political and social issues.

[11] The Calcutta edition of the Telegraph posts a list (with description of the themes) of Durga *puja pandals* of Calcutta and its suburbs every year. Last year's list includes a reference to the "Nalin Sarkar Street Sarbojanin Durgostab" on Aurobindo Sarani, which had *pata* paintings of Phullara and Kalketu on the walls of the *pandal*. The goddess Durga was depicted as a village woman with the god Ganesa in her lap (http://www.telegraphindia.com/1031002/asp/others/print.html, downloaded on 18 April 2006).

Even though the selection of the theme was inspired by the popularity of Mahashweta Devi's novel among the urban elite of Bengal, the portrayal of the characters from the *Chandi Mangala* were inspired by the *pata* painting tradition of Bengal as was the juxtaposition of figures from different stories in the text. The scroll paintings that depict the *Chandi Mangala* always concentrate on the second story, i.e. the story about the merchant Dhanapati and his vision of a beautiful maiden, Mangala Chandi, who kept swallowing and regurgitating an elephant. In the scroll paintings there is only a fleeting reference to the story of the hunter Kalketu. He is depicted as carrying seven pots of gold, given to him by the goddess Abhaya or Chandi. He is seen accidentally by Khulana, a character from the next story. The rest of the scroll makes no reference to the first story. In the epic the two stories are kept completely separate. Interestingly, in the *pandal* depiction of the epic we find a confluence of two traditions: a contemporary activist one that gives prominence to the tribal presence in Bengali culture via the works of Devi, and the older popular tradition of *pata* narratives. Thus, the goddess is not depicted as "Abhaya" for which there is no iconic model, but rather as the maiden Managala Chandi with her elephant headed son in her lap. Recent pata paintings show the goddess seated on a lotus flower with Ganesa on her lap instead of showing her swallowing an elephant, and the song says that Dhanapati misread the vision of the goddess kissing her elephant headed son, Ganesa, and thought she was swallowing him instead (Singh 1995).

According to Anjan Ghosh (2000) public festivities associated with Durga *puja* emerged in the eighteenth century with the emergent comprador elite in Calcutta. The British colonial elite also patronized these festivities.

The Calcutta-based theatre group performed *Phullaketur Pala*, based on the *Chandi Mangala*, but clearly inspired by Mahashweta Devi's novel in that it emphasizes the story of Kalketu and Phullara. In the play, as in the novel, Kalketu is depicted as a tribal leader who leads the journey of his tribe from a nomadic way of life to settled agriculture. The handbill of the play reprinted in the *Telegraph* says that it depicts the conditions of that time and tries to historicize the modern psyche (http://www.telegraphindia.com/1031030/asp/others/print.html, downloaded on 18, April 2006).

[12] Julia Kristeva *Semeiotike:recherches pour une semanalyse* (1969, 146, quoted in Shand 2002, 56).

[13] Variously known as the "Indian Mutiny" and "The first war of Independence" depending on the perspective of the writer.

[14] "Bhumi Kanya" serialized in the Bangla magazine *Desh* from November 2004 to April 2005. Many new literary works first appear in this magazine before being published commercially.

[15] It will be obvious that I am referring to wet rice cultivation. In border districts like Purulia, paddy is sown in May and June and the crop is harvested in November and December. Dry rice cultivation is rare and until recently many areas in the border of Bengal cultivated only one crop a year (Chatterji 1985).

[16] The Santal are the largest tribal group in Bengal. The timing of uprising of 1857 dovetails with several other localized uprisings that were taking place in different parts of India at that time. One of these was the Santal rebellion of 1855-1857. Many nationalist historians interpret this rebellion as a first stirring for a nationalist cause by tribal groups in India, and view Nilmoni Singh as a nationalist.

[17] There is an implied reference to alien conquerors (i.e. Muslims) in this story. The story seems to have been influenced by Rajasthani tales of valour and virtue, in which Rajput women prefer to commit ritual suicide rather than face dishonour at the hands of the enemy. *The Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* by James Todd, a colonial administrator and folklorist, was widely read all over India and influenced many creative writers in Bengal as well, one of the most famous being Rabindranath Tagore (Mukherjee 2004).

[18] Bhadu songs that address the goddess as an ordinary village woman are privileged in folkloric discourse rather than those that describe her as a goddess. Thus:

Don't cry, don't cry Bhadu
Your father, o Blighted one
Where will he get more *kajal* (colloriuom)
Chatterji 2005, 199

Contrast this song with the following:
The drums beating in the bamboo grove
My treasure Bhadu is coming
Look, look Vraja maiden, how far is Vrindavan
You are a friend of Vrindavan, you live there
Who are your parents, whom do you look to for support
Whose house did you go to, who took care of you
Mother's hands are stained with red sandlewood paste, she wears a garland of red hibiscus flowers around her neck
I went to Kashipur and saw a tiger sitting on a golden plate
The tiger doesn't eat people, he has come to show himself
Bhattacharyya 1965,77

References to the Great Goddess, as Durga, as Kali, and even as Radha occur repeatedly in this song. Bhattacharyya professes to be puzzled by the imagery, probably because he views the Bhadu complex from the perspective of a so-called aboriginal, agricultural ritual.

[19] The *Swadeshi* (self-rule) movement, 1905-1907 was the first attempt to use folklore for political mobilization. This nationalist upsurge was sparked off by the plan to partition the province of Bengal. The rationale for partition was purportedly administrative. However there were also political reasons such as the threat of a burgeoning Bengali nationalism in the nineteenth century.

[20] The Bengal famine of 1943, the worst famine in living memory according to the oral

tradition in Bengal, coincided with the establishment of the IPTA. This famine was artificially induced in the sense that it was the result of the diversion of grain for the war effort by the colonial government rather than because of crop failure. Several of the IPTA's most famous theatre productions, as well as films by some of Bengal's most illustrious film directors, are on the theme of the Bengal famine. Folk songs on this theme are still sung all over Bengal (Chatterji 1985).

[21] "The Left Front" refers to a coalition of political parties in Bengal with communist and socialist orientations.

[22] Much of this information was given to me by Professor Mihir Bhattacharya of Jadavpur University, Calcutta. I interviewed Professor Bhattacharya in October 2004.

[23] The Santals are a numerical dominant tribal group in West Bengal. They are a significant presence in Bolpur, the place where Tagore established his famous institution, Shantiniketan.

[24] As Chakravarti points out the forms of song attributed to the Santals by Bhattacharyya are more popular among other, though less famous, tribal groups.

25 I quote: "*Bhadreshwarir Galpo* is the tale of a popular and benign princess's transformation into a cult figure. A popular folk icon, Bhadreshawari or Bhadu is worshiped by the Santals of the Bankura-Purulia-Birbhum-Burdwan districts of Bengal and a large part of Jharkhand state." (Telegraph, Calcutta, June, 17, 2003).

[26] While doing fieldwork in Purulia, a district in West Bengal, I realized that much of the oral lore, especially that which concerned traditional agricultural practices, was not based exclusively on local tradition but was imperfectly remembered from medieval texts like the *Sivayan* and *Khanar Bachan*, that circulated orally.

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# Response

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The evening before I had the chance to read this rich and stimulating article by Roma Chatterji, I had found myself riveted by a short book that a friend had passed on: *Lady Gregory's Toothbrush*, by Colm Toibin. I had so far known Toibin's marvelous novels, not his nonfiction; this lively biographical essay recreates the life, writings, and historical context of Lady Augusta Gregory (1852-1932). An amateur folklorist who crafted literary texts from Irish oral traditions, Lady Gregory was also a playwright, a founder and director of the influential Abbey Theater, a close associate of W.B. Yeats and a key figure in Irish cultural nationalism. Reading Roma Chatterji's essay set in contemporary Bengal, reminded me of the recurring association, across regions and historical eras, between writing down folklore, producing literary works inspired by folklore, and drawing on the language and themes pervading these forms of inscription to articulate a cultural identity with strong political ramifications.

Bringing the perspective of a folklore scholar to two contemporary Bengali novels, Roma Chatterji beautifully illustrates the complex and ongoing cycles of interchange between oral and written cultural materials in India. Her final footnote adds context from her own work: "While doing fieldwork in Purulia, a district in West Bengal, I realized that much of the oral lore, especially that which concerned traditional agricultural practices, was not based exclusively on local tradition but was imperfectly remembered from medieval texts…that circulated orally" (22). Just as the oral lore she encountered had sometimes already been written in other texts, so the folklore on which the novelists draw, Chatterji finds, has also already been entextualized elsewhere. Regarding these novels, Chatterji points to the centrality of other medieval Bengali literary writings, inscribing oral traditions in the 16th century, and also other forms of inscription and reformulation by activists and intellectuals, sometimes with government support. So Mahashweta Devi's *Vyad Kaand* (The Book of the Hunter) recreates the adventures of the author of a sixteenth century epic poem encountering hunter-gatherers in the forest, adding myths written by authors from contemporary tribal groups and published in her own journal. Neelkantha Ghoshyal's *Bhumi Kanya* (Earth Maiden), serialized in a Bengali magazine, draws extensively on rituals and songs published by folklorists. Tracking oral traditions through multiple media, Chatterji reminds us of how "composers…as well as folk painters and story tellers, modern day novelists and playwrights, and contemporary producers of popular culture all become part of a culture of citation and circulation."

I would like to have had further information from the authors of these novels about their creative process as Chatterji's conclusions prompt me to wonder whether, in addition to these chunks of entextualized folklore materials, the ongoing flows and permutations of oral tradition might not also be rippling through the novels. If the two authors have spent time in these regions,

one might assume that conversations with actual people would play an important role, with direct observation and listening joining practices of reading.

Both novels appear to be written from the perspective of a semi-outsider looking in, discovering and contextualizing a different world. This pattern makes me consider the different positions that authors take in regard to oral traditions represented in fiction. When are the traditions presented as one's own, recast from within, and when are they presented as the traditions of a closely related Other carrying key insights for a personal, regional, or national Self? How does a literary stance inflect a political message?

These particular examples also suggest a disjuncture between inscribers of oral traditions and literary creators. Yet, as Lady Augusta Gregory vivdly demonstrated, the two roles may also exist in the same person. While Lady Gregory mostly wrote plays, other folklorists have written in a diversity of creative genres (*cf.* De Caro, forthcoming). Chatterji points to the gap between past and present as key to literary innovations in folklore; as someone who writes fiction and memoir drawing on oral traditions I've also contemplated as a folklorist (Narayan 1994, 2007), I perceive the relations between everyday life and oral tradition's richly imagined parallel realms—(which might be located in the past, but are not necessarily so) as also inspiring creativity.

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