

The Persianization of *Itihasa*: Performance Narratives and Mughal Political Culture in Eighteenth-Century Bengal

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This paper explores the nature and understandings of history, or itihasa/Purana, in eighteenth-century India using two Mangalkabya narratives. These materials belong to a large genre of performance narratives, usually devoted to eulogizing various deities, that were produced in Bengal for several centuries. The paper illustrates how a “traditional” genre such as the Mangalkabya was effectively used to articulate contingent political and cultural preoccupations. The narratives studied here show that the historical experiences and contexts mirrored in them were derived from Mughal rule over Bengal and large parts of India during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The paper seeks to historicize and contextualize the shifts noticeable in these narratives and to engage with the notion that premodern, precolonial India lacked a sense of history molded by contemporary material and cultural imperatives.

THE VIEW THAT SOUTH Asian society lacked a proper historical consciousness until its experience with colonial modernity may not yet have been laid to rest completely. This view, given much publicity by colonialist writers such as Robert Orme (1803) and James Mill (1968), has been reinforced in recent times by scholars of modern Indian history (e.g., R. Guha 1988; P. Chatterjee 1993; Nandy 1995). The latter hold the position that history—which is understood to be a rational-positivist discipline—made its entry into India on the heels of British colonial rule and that one of its early manifestations occurred in the form of an Indian nationalist historiography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (R. Guha 1988; P. Chatterjee 1993). To both groups of scholars, what prevailed in India prior to colonial rule was mythic or Puranic history, which could not actually qualify as history in terms of its modern definition as a discipline grounded in verifiable facts. The specific reasons that disbarred this literature from claiming the status of history were many and ranged from charges that it was formulaic and unrelated to contingent material and political contexts to claims that it lacked a sense of historical time (Mill 1968; R. Guha 1988; P. Chatterjee 1993). As an emergent scholarly literature on early modern, precolonial historiographies in India was established

(e.g., Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam 2001; S. Guha 2004), there existed rich and varied traditions of writing about the past all over the Indian subcontinent, and though most of them did not totally fit the modern notion of history (as is true for very many traditions of historiography in the Western world, as well during the early modern era), they contained multiple elements, such as a concern with causation, the need to erect an interpretive “frame” within which to situate flows of events, and so on, that certainly bore a strong resemblance to what we now consider to be characteristic features of history writing (Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam 2001).

South Asian epistemologies do not contain any concept or term that corresponds to the contemporary meanings associated with the term “history.” The terms that come closest to this are *itihasa* and Purana. This paper is concerned with mapping out a particular vernacular tradition of *itihasa*/Purana in early modern Bengal, in part to demonstrate its richness and versatility and also to show that, far from being an unchanging medium, this particular vernacular tradition was firmly tied to an evolving political and cultural context and thus mirrored contingent shifts in identity and power stemming from actual historical experiences. I argue that the historical experiences and context mirrored in the narratives that I study in this paper were derived in large part from Mughal rule over Bengal and Mughal paramountcy over most of India during the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth century. Finally, this paper engages with the task of historicizing and contextualizing these shifts.

ITIHASA/PURANA

What complicates the quest to find a tradition of proper history (as distinct from myth, for instance) in premodern, precolonial South Asia is the fact that most of the scholarship devoted to this subject has tended to understand “history” in terms of the nineteenth-century, European, professional definition of it as uncompromisingly factual, rational, and objective (Gooch 1959; Iggers and Powell 1990). Such notions are hardly the most sensitive criteria for a tradition, which, in the premodern South Asian context, as Romila Thapar (1986) describes it, was an “embedded tradition.” This quality of “embeddedness” indicates that history or *itihasa*/Purana in premodern South Asia was frequently intertwined with myth, with stories whose spectrum covered the heavens, the underworld, and the earth and was expressed in a variety of genres and forms, both in prose as well as in verse. As Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (2001) point out, history had no *shastra* or science, had no fixed genre, and was not necessarily practiced by specialists in South Asia.

The term *itihasa* subsumed within itself the current meaning of history but did not exhaust it. When pared down to its basic grammatical derivation, the term *itihasa* is seen to be derived from *iti ha asa*, or “thus it was.” Thus,

itihasa could be simply a story whose purpose was entertainment, or it could be a story recounted for the purpose of entertainment as well as to convey a moral message. *Itihasa* could also refer to stories about past times—that is, about ancestors, divine beings, kings, heroes, and the origins of things, be it a chiefly lineage, a *jati*, or the cult of worship of a particular deity. A fuller understanding of the range of meanings associated with the term *itihasa*, however, can only be undertaken through a brief exploration of the function and significance of the Puranic tradition with which *itihasa* came to be closely intertwined.

Defining the Puranas is a difficult task. Put simply, the traits that are supposed to distinguish them from other texts turn out to be paradoxical as well as contested. First, the very number of texts that qualify as Puranas is open to disagreement, but the rough consensus—that is, if it is a consensus at all—is that there were eighteen original Puranas or Mahapuranas. The substance of the Puranic texts is similarly controversial. The Puranas are supposed to be recognizable by their five features (*panchalakshana*), which included accounts of the creation of the universe, the cosmic cycles, the genealogies of sages and kings, the exploits of the gods, and accounts of royal dynasties. But, in fact, many of the Mahapuranas contained materials that could not be contained within the *panchalakshana* definition, such as the glorification of sectarian deities, new myths and legends, and discussion of social and ritual norms. In any case, the Puranas or Mahapuranas refer to a corpus of Sanskrit texts that can be dated roughly to the middle of the first millennium BCE and contain some or all of the traits listed as part of the *panchalakshana* feature.

What makes the Puranic tradition especially significant here is that the Puranas represent not a static tradition but an essentially dynamic one marked by the continuous revision of its substantive materials, primarily through additions, replacements, and modifications. Such processes by which the Puranas were constantly recast often occurred at different time periods and presumably in response to contingent contemporary needs. This ceaseless remaking and recasting of the Puranas underscores the need for the texts to keep abreast of changing times and social conditions so that their importance as sources of religious, ritual, and social authority might not be rendered irrelevant (Hazra 1958–63; Rocher 1986).

It was probably inherent in the very nature of the Puranic process that the ever-present need to adjust to changing times would generate the birth of a related set of texts, the Upapuranas, which Wendy Doniger describes as the “poor cousins of the already poor Mahapuranas” (i.e., “already poor” in relation to the authority and status assigned in Brahmanical culture to the Vedas, for instance) (1993, ix). These Upapuranas consciously located themselves in the Puranic genre, and the principal characteristic of these texts was that their affiliations with specific regions were far stronger than in the case of the Mahapuranas. Second, they were even less concerned about adhering to the *panchalakshana* standard than the Mahapuranas. According to R. C. Hazra (1958–63), most

Upapuranas were written in areas peripheral to the core Brahmanical sphere of influence, and thus Bengal became a venue where very many Sanskrit Upapuranas (e.g., the *Brahmabairbarta Purana*, the *Brihannaradiya Purana*, the *Devi Purana*, the *Kalilka Purana*, and others) were produced, most likely between the eleventh and twelfth centuries CE.

The Mangalkabyas, which figure as the principal topic of discussion in this paper, can be located in a range of vernacular Puranas (such as the South Indian Sthalapuranas and other vernacular literary canons associated with different South Asian regions) that descended lineally from the Sanskrit Upapuranas. Thus, the Puranic genre, in all its variations, constituted a very important seed bed from which various literary and narrative traditions in different South Asian languages drew sustenance for many centuries. It symbolized, as Kunal Chakrabarty (2001, 55) points out, a mediating link between the “notional authority” of “high” Brahmanical traditions, embodied most typically perhaps by the Vedas, on the one hand, and by masses of popular, regional, and local customs and traditions, on the other.

The lineage of the term *itihasa* also suggests shifts and mutations in the meanings and functions attached to it. In the Rig Veda, the term *itihasa* occurs as an adjective, meaning simply “ancient” or “old” (Coburn 1985, 24). Subsequent references to the term *Purana* seem to suggest, however, that it was used to indicate a body of narratives or a body of stories or knowledge. Soon *itihasa* came to be associated with *Purana*, frequently in the form of a compound term, *puranetihasa*. But the distinction between the two was not always maintained, possibly because both terms were used synonymously to refer to bodies of stories or knowledge about the past (Gupta 1964, 454). A famous passage from the *Vayu Purana* seems to suggest that *Purana* and *itihasa* were, in fact, used in this sense:

That twice-born (Brahmana) who knows the four Vedas with the Angas (supplementary sciences) and the Upanishads, should not be (regarded) as proficient unless he thoroughly knows the Puranas. He should reinforce the Vedas with the itihasa and the Purana. The Vedas (is) afraid of him who is deficient in traditional knowledge (thinking). (Hazra 1953–62, 2:268)

This usage of *itihasa* and *Purana* is reinforced by the use of these terms in the *Brahma Purana*. There are references, for example, to “The four Vedas, the Vedangas, the different Sastras, Itihasas, Puranas, Vedangas and other sources of knowledge” (Sohnen and Shriner 1989, chap. 42, 38cd–42ab). Thus, it is perhaps not untenable to hold that by the age of the Mahapuranas, both *Purana* and *itihasa* were being used to denote bodies of knowledge or stories associated with former times or with an established tradition.

The earliest Bengali narratives that were recognizably Puranic were probably Maladhar Basu's *Srikrishnabijoy* and the well-known *Srikrishnakirtan* of Baru Chandidas (S. Sen 1405 B.S., vol. 1). But it is definitely the Mangalkabyas that merit special attention as the uniquely Bengali mediation of the Puranic genre. The Mangalkabyas refer to a large corpus of narrative poetry that was produced in Bengal during the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries and beyond that time as well. The typical story or theme of a Mangalkabya centered around the vicissitudes through which the worship of a particular deity was established on earth. Mangalkabyas written in honor of the deities Manasa (the snake goddesses) and Chandi (originally the patron deity of forests and animals, later metamorphosed into the Brahmanical Durga, the consort of Shiva) were composed throughout the late fifteenth century until the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century. Another large cluster of Mangalkabyas centered around the worship of Dharma Thakur emerged in the eighteenth century, particularly in areas of western Bengal, whereas lower Bengal became the stage for the production of Mangalkabyas celebrating hitherto lesser-known deities such as Dakshin Ray (the tiger god), the *pir* Bada Khan Ghazi (a protector from tiger attacks), Shashthi (the protector of small children), and Sitala (the goddess who protected against small pox). Specific Mangalkabyas, such as the *Chandi-mangal* of Mukundaram Chakrabarty, acquired landmark status in the history of Bengali literature (S. Sen 1405 B.S., vol. 2; A. Bhattacharya 1975).

The Mangalkabyas consisted of stories that were set to music and sung and, perhaps in some cases, narrated to an audience. These *kabyas* probably represent a later written form of an earlier oral tradition that had circulated among ordinary people in Bengal. But despite the emergence of a written textual tradition around the Mangalkabyas from about the late fifteenth century, the oral and performative nature of this literature was neither weakened nor eroded until well into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹ In fact, the performative dimension of the Mangalkabyas probably explains its remarkable durability, malleability, and potential as a site where urgent new social and political concerns could be legitimated.

The stories that the Mangalkabyas comprised were generally sung to audiences by troupes of singers and musicians. The same performance dimension also necessitated that these texts should be verse narratives. There is some indication that, occasionally at least, painted scrolls or *pats* were used during such performances (S. Sen 1405 B.S., 2:246). It is impossible to document when exactly the Mangalkabyas began to be textualized, but it was probably not much earlier than the late fifteenth century. The gradual textualization of these *mangal* stories or songs may, in fact, have emerged partly from the need to

¹A large secondary literature exists on oral and performance literature in South Asia. Representative examples include Stuart H. Blackburn (1988, 1996), Philip Lutgendorf (1991), and Kirin Narayan (1989).

have on hand written texts that troupes of singers (*gayens*) could use as a basis for their performances. Indeed, the Mangalkabyas represent an excellent example (to borrow a phrase from Goody 1987) of the interface between the written and oral. Thus, Mangalkabya writers occasionally described their compositions as *prabandhas* (essay or composition) and sometimes as *geet* (song). The manuscript texts of the Mangalkabyas have generally been found in the same areas or close to the areas where the works were originally composed.² Those Mangalkabyas that attained extraordinary fame, such as “Kabikankan” Mukundaram Chakrabarty’s rendition of the *Chandimangala* (S. Sen 1993) or Bharatchandra Roy’s *Annadamangal* (Bandyopadhyaya and Das 1369 B.S.), were, of course, known much more widely throughout many more regions of Bengal.³ The orality of these works made them extremely potent and valuable as a means of communication in a pre-print society. The Mangalkabyas could be consumed by a larger audience and were not restricted by conditions of literacy. It is also interesting to note that although Mangalkabyas were not, for the most part, essential aspects of religious ritual,⁴ their association with the exploits of gods and goddesses caused the texts of these *kabyas* to be regarded with such reverence and awe that they were often worshipped together with deities in a household or in a more public shrine. Both Sukumar Sen (1405 B.S., 2:128–29) and Edward C. Dimock (1999) have referred to this.

The social context of the Mangalkabyas underscores their amazing versatility in terms of the ability to forge connections among different groups in society, both elite and plebian. The authors, singers, patrons, and audiences of Mangalkabyas spanned a spectrum of social groups and classes—all the way from powerful rajas and zamindars to the humble and marginal people of some of the poorer areas of Bengal. The writing of Mangalkabyas was naturally associated with social groups having traditions of literacy and, frequently, fairly high levels of education. Thus, Brahmins, Kayasthas, and Baidyas figured heavily among the composers of Mangalkabyas. Many of the Brahmin poets in particular described a curriculum of Brahmanical instruction involving the study of *vyakaran*, *abhidhan*, *nyaya*, and *alamkara shastra* in schools (i.e., *tols*, *chatuspathis*) associated with such education (Sen, Mandal, and Sen 1956).

²I have relied on individual Mangalkabya texts, such as Sukumar Sen’s edition of *Kabikankan Birachita Chandi* (1993), as well as on detailed discussions in Sen (1405 B.S.), Ashutosh Bhattacharya (1975), to arrive at conclusions regarding the general features of Mangalkabyas, their performance, and ownership of Mangalkabya texts.

³I am indebted to one of the anonymous referees of this journal for pointing out that, although perhaps not typical of Mangalkabya texts generally, the circulation of manuscripts was often active and extensive. The Vaishnavas, for instance, routinely copied and circulated manuscripts all over Bengal, Orissa, and the Vraja region.

⁴For examples of cases in which Mangalkabyas were explicitly associated with religious ritual, see Sen (1405 B.S., 2:110–87) and Bhattacharya (1975, 28–29).

By contrast, authors from non-Brahmin but literate gentry backgrounds—mostly Baidyas and Kayasthas, such as Narasimha Basu, author of an eighteenth-century Dharmamangal text—described a course of education involving the study of Bengali, Persian, Nagri, and Oriya, as befitted a group from which professional scribes and bureaucrats recruited by various ruling regimes in Bengal were drawn (S. Sen 1405 B.S., 2:155–58). Although not represented in such large numbers as Brahmins, Baidyas, and Kayasthas, there are also examples of Mangalkabya authors who belonged to relatively low social and ritual status groups that were typically not associated with literacy and education, such as Tanti (a weaver), Kaibarata, Jogi, Shundi, and others (S. Sen 1405 B.S.; A. Bhattacharya 1975). Writers of Mangalkabyas sometimes doubled as singers of these stories. But we also know of persons who were associated with Mangalkabyas purely in the capacity of singers.

Mangalkabya performances—as proven by their durability over many centuries—were extremely popular, and audiences, in all likelihood, included ordinary people of humble means as well as (depending on the venue of the performance) high-status elites. Scholars have pointed out that most deities about whom Mangalkabyas were composed had Vedic/Puranic antecedents. But it is also true that in Bengal between the fifteenth to eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, the worship of most of these deities had maximum currency among ordinary people (with the notable exception perhaps of Chandi, who metamorphosed from the presiding deity of forests and animals into the Brahmanical goddess variously called Uma, Durga, or Parvati; see Chakrabarty 2001, 165–233). The priests or *sebayets* of sacred or ritual spots associated with Dharma Thakur were not invariably Brahmins (although they figured as *sebayets*, too) but also included persons of much lower castes. *Doms* in particular figured prominently as low-caste ritual specialists for the *Dharma gajan*. It has also been suggested that the cult that developed around the snake goddess Manasa, in fact, sank lower and lower down the social scale over the centuries until it was associated with the most marginal groups of people. Deities whose worship crystallized around the later eighteenth century, such as Dakhsin Roy, Bada Khan Ghazi, Kalu Roy (the crocodile god), and others, were very obviously associated with the poor, marginal people who inhabited the forested and swampy areas of lower deltaic Bengal.

But Mangalkabya performances were also staged in the courts (*sabhas*) and mansions of aristocrats, who frequently commissioned such works and provided financial support to the poets who composed them. The *Annadamangalkabya*, for example, was staged for the first time at the court of Maharaja Krishnachandra Roy of Nadia, who had also commissioned this work (Bandyopadhyaya and Das 1369 B.S., 349). Here the audience included associates, dependents, protégés, and employees of high rank of the raja, as well as the latter's kinsmen. It is more than likely that some ordinary subjects of the raja were also present in the audience during this performance of the *Annadamangal*. Apart from the fact that

these performances were enjoyed as entertainment, the popularity of many of the cults around which the Mangalkabyas were written made it politically expedient and culturally desirable for powerful local people—whether high officials of the ruling regime or zamindars—to be seen as patrons and supporters of such productions. Such support, by establishing a connection between local elites and certain locally or regionally popular deities, reinforced the social and cultural bases of the political and material power of these elites. Mangalkabyas, additionally, could become useful vehicles for glorifying and extolling the lineage histories of local notables—borne out, for example, by Bharatchandra Roy's treatment of the family history of the rajas of Nadia in the *Annadamangalkabya*. The performative nature of Mangalkabyas, as noticed earlier, aided the transmission of these materials across and within regions, and thus the fame and reputation of the patrons of these *kabyas* was disseminated within as well as outside the immediate locality.

An exploration of the terms used in Mangalkabyas to denote these works allows us to probe deeper into how copyists, authors, singers, audiences, and patrons categorized them and therefore what they perceived to be the function of these *kabyas*. The term *mangala*, which recurred in the titles of these works, referred to the bliss or prosperity that was believed to accrue to those who heard, composed, performed, and patronized them. A large range of other terminology was also deployed to describe them. One group of such terms—*geet*, *gatha*, *panchali*, and *kirtan*—referred to the oral and performative aspect of these literary productions. All of these terms in general denoted material that was sung or recited—*panchali* and *kirtan* more specifically denote the connection of these materials with the act of describing the actions of gods and goddesses or other superhuman or semidivine beings. Another group of terms used frequently to describe the Mangalkabyas—*itihasa*, *Purana*, *katha*, and *brata*—pointed to the content and, more pointedly perhaps, to the function of these materials. These terms were sometimes used synonymously for each other. Such usage is noticeable, for example, in the *Dharma Mangal* or *Dharma Purana*, composed by Jadunath or Jadabram Nath in the last decade of the seventeenth century; in the *Dharma Purana* or *Anadimangal*, composed by Kabiratna; and in the *Dharmamangal* of Dwija Ramchandra, who completed his work around 1732–33 (cited in S. Sen 1405 B.S., 2:149, 153, 154). In the 1750s, Bharatchandra Roy, at the termination of the second part (i.e., the Bidya-Sundar episode) of his long magnum opus, described it as a story or a *katha* (Bandyopadhyaya and Das 1369 B.S., 290). The author named Kabiratna, mentioned earlier, made the connection among these various terms even more explicit when he used the terms *panchali*, *itihasa*, and *Purana* synonymously to describe his composition entitled *Anadimangal* (S. Sen 1405 B.S., 1:153).

The interchangeability of these terms, I suggest, indicates that to the various groups of people involved in composing, listening to, and patronizing these works, the strict semantic distinctions among the deployed terms mattered

very little. Second, the fact that the Mangalkabyas did not attempt to define and elucidate the meanings of these words for their audiences and readers also suggests that in Bengal by the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, these terms enjoyed a fair amount of currency and that, in general, people understood what they meant. It has been suggested that within the cultural “ecology” of a particular text, internal textual markers (Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam use the term “texture” repeatedly to denote these internal qualities of texts) and, in cases in which these texts were used in performance, performance-related markers were recognized by readers and the audience. These markers enabled the consumers of a text—whether readers or audience—to recognize a text as a work of history or as something else. While agreeing in principle that within a specific cultural context, readers and audiences would certainly be in a better position (than us) to read the internal markers of a text, one also wonders whether the “modern” need to classify and categorize texts under neat labels such as “history,” “fiction,” and “biography” would be equally relevant, particularly to the usual audience of a Mangalkabya performance.

The Mangalkabyas thus represented a many-faceted and complex tradition. They portrayed religious issues and communicated myriad social concerns. Their performative aspect associated them with the value and function of entertainment; at the same time, they held the attention and interest of society by presenting tales of heroes and gods and their miracles. They also purported to be repositories of memories of bygone times—about traditions surrounding the establishment of the worship of various gods and traditions containing moral advice about the dangers of disregarding various gods and goddesses and, correspondingly, about the benefits to be derived from acknowledging their powers. In the “instruction and advice” mode, the Mangalkabyas presented models of ideal behavior through mortal heroes and heroines. Thus, Kalketu, the human hero of the *Chandimangala*, embodied the virtues that rulers were expected to possess (S. Sen 1993).

The following section demonstrates how the popularity and malleability of the Mangalkabyas allowed them to be used as sites where historically contingent concerns and priorities of the eighteenth century could be negotiated.

TWO EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NARRATIVES: THE *ANNADAMANGAL* AND THE *MAHARASHTRAPURANA*

This section focuses on two specific narrative texts that were produced around the middle of the eighteenth century. One of these is the *Maharashtrapurana*, composed by Gangaram in 1751–52 (Dimock and Gupta 1985). The other narrative, the *Annadamangal* of “Roygunakar” Bharatchandra Roy, is often considered to represent the highest pinnacle of achievement reached by Bengali literature in the early modern period. It was completed in 1752

(Bandyopadhyaya and Das 1369 B.S.).⁵ The *Annadamangal* was also phenomenally popular. Very many copies of this work have been found—both manuscripts and printed versions—testifying to its circulation and popularity. With the advent of print culture in early nineteenth-century Bengal, the *Annadamangal* was among the foremost texts to be printed and reprinted over and over again by the newly emerging popular presses, particularly the segment entitled *Bidya Sundar Katha* (Bandyopadhyaya and Das 1369 B.S., 16–18, 34–35). We know practically nothing about the reception and popularity of the *Maharashtrapurana*. Both works are verse narratives and were produced shortly after the termination of the Bargi raids that convulsed Bengal. The Bargi raids are, in fact, the central focus of the *Maharashtrapurana*; they are almost incidental to the principal concerns of the *Annadamangal* and are mentioned casually as a way of establishing the parameters of the temporal framework of the piece.

Bharatchandra Roy (titled “Roygunakar”) was well known as the court poet of Maharaja Krishnachandra Roy of Nadia, one of the most powerful zamindars of eighteenth-century Bengal. The *Annadamangal* was composed at the command of his patron, Maharaja Krishnachandra. Bharatchandra was himself the son of a wealthy, landed family. The seizure of his family’s estates by the more powerful and expansionist zamindari of Burdwan plunged Bharatchandra and his family into considerable material deprivation and difficulties. Bharatchandra suffered considerable vicissitudes of fortune following this event but managed nevertheless to acquire a distinguished education befitting the son of an aristocratic family. His adult life and material circumstances eventually reached a degree of stability with the acquisition of the patronage of the raja of Nadia (Bandyopadhyaya and Das, 1369 B.S.).

As a contrast to the personal details of the life of Bharatchandra, not as much definitive information is available about the poet Gangaram, who authored the *Maharashtrapurana*. According to the most plausible hypothesis about the identity and background of this writer, Gangaram Dev of Dharishwar village in Mymensingh belonged to a fairly well-established family that had lived there for several generations. He was employed as an official by a family of wealthy Muslim zamindars, rose to become *naib* in their service, and acquired the title of Chowdhury. He seems to have been a well-educated man who, in his later life, composed a few original works called *Shuk Sambad*, *Labkush Charitra*, and, most relevant here, the *Maharashtrapurana*. It is also generally accepted that Gangaram probably lived in the later eighteenth century and had therefore

⁵This paper does not purport to address the issue of whether the entire Mangalkabya genre can be characterized—at least in parts—as “history.” Such an endeavor would involve a close examination of numerous texts since the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as well as a close study of the historical contexts in which they were produced. The implementation of such an endeavor is not possible in the confines of a journal article. Here, the focus is on two mid-eighteenth-century texts that, in my view, can be accommodated within the Mangalkabya tradition.

experienced the Bargi invasions either directly or indirectly (Mustafi 1313 B.S.; K. Majumdar 1315 B.S.).

Bharatchandra named his verse narrative *Annadamangal*, thereby signaling his intention to situate his composition in the tradition of Mangalkabya narratives, which had enjoyed a long and popular career in Bengal. He also stated explicitly that his patron, Maharaja Krishnachandra Roy, had asked him to model his composition on the earlier, well-known *Chandimangalkabya* of Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakrabarty. Besides, Bharatchandra explicitly drew on the preexisting Mangalkabya tradition and made pointed intertextual references to characters and events mentioned in the *Manasamangal* and *Chandimangal kabyas*. Most importantly, the *Annadamangal kabya* exhibits many generic and thematic features that, by the eighteenth century, had almost become formulaic for Mangalkabya narratives.⁶ The *Annadamangal* was supposed to extol the greatness and powers of the goddess Annada (Durga) and recount the story of how her circle of worshippers was expanded on earth. But, as both the poet and his kingly patron knew, it was also meant to be a eulogistic lineage history of the rajas of Nadia.

The text is divided into three parts. In true Mangalkabya style, the first part deals almost exclusively with the actions and reactions of various gods and goddesses, culminating in Bhabananda Majumdar (the founder of the Nadia Raj family and the hero of this poem) being born on earth as a mortal in order to atone for a minor sin that he committed in heaven (Bandyopadhyaya and Das 1369 B.S., 39–160). The second part of the *Annadamangal* turns to an account of the exploits of Raja Man Singh in Bengal. The lengthy romance of Bidya and Sundar (which became the most popular segment of the poem) forms part of the story of Man Singh's activities in Bengal. The third section of the narrative focuses squarely on political developments of the seventeenth century as they affected Bhabananda Majumdar, an ancestor of Krishnachandra Roy, the poet's patron and the man believed to be the founder of the status and wealth of the rajas of Nadia (Bandyopadhyaya and Das 1369 B.S., 161–290). Here, the narrative recounts the story of Bhabananda's journey to the Mughal court in Delhi and his subsequent success there (Bandyopadhyaya and Das 1369 B.S., 291–389).

Bharatchandra's narrative has two principal aims: First, he shows how the goddess Annada possessed the power to reward, bless, and protect those who worshipped her and, conversely, meted out terrible retribution to those who initially resisted worshipping her. Second, he provides a historical grounding for the story of Annada's triumph and the intertwined story of Bhabananda's material success (of course, attributable to the blessings of the goddess) through a description of actual political developments in seventeenth-century

⁶For a discussion of the general criteria of Mangalkabyas and why the *Annadamangal* should be regarded as a Mangalkabya, see Clinton B. Seely and Fredrika V. Miller (2000).

Bengal—developments that also tied the Mughal military-political system to the fortunes of Bhabananda Majumdar, the mortal hero of the poem.

Existing scholarly opinion has been reluctant to categorize Gangaram's *Maharashtrapurana* as a proper Mangalkabya. Edward C. Dimock and Pratul Chandra Gupta characterize it as a “text of pure secular history” (1961, xx). Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam (2001, 238–39) point to the fact that in this verse narrative, human actions are depicted as largely autonomous and less tied to divine manipulation. Undoubtedly, this text does display significant departures from what had come to be seen as the typical formula of Mangalkabya narratives. Actually, for that matter, the *Annadamangal* also embodies significant departures from the typical characteristics of Mangalkabyas. These aspects of both texts in question will be further discussed later.

To return to the point about whether the *Maharashtrapurana* can be called a Mangalkabya, I prefer to locate this text within the tradition of Mangalkabyas because, in my view, this text gives singular importance to several features that link it quite firmly to the broader Mangalkabya tradition. The Bargi invasions of Bengal constitute the backbone of Gangaram's composition. However, its underpinnings, in the classic formulaic model of the Mangalkabyas, comprise an account about the power of the goddess Durga (i.e., her ability to punish evildoers and to reward those who acted in virtue). Gangaram set the groundwork for his tale by first explaining that the Bargi raids that convulsed mid-eighteenth-century Bengal had actually been the result of a divine command. The gods used the Maratha “Bargis” as tools to punish the people of Bengal, as well as the nawab of Bengal, for their sins. Second, he also explained it as revenge taken by the Bargis for the nonpayment of revenue by the Bengal nawabs to the Mughal emperor (Dimock and Gupta 1985, 41–43). Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam point out that this story “has no heroes” (2001, 238). Indeed, in the course of the narrative, the Bargis change from being the objects of divine command to a cruel, ruthless people who transgress the norms of ethical behavior. In fact, one of the most remarkable features of the *Maharashtrapurana* is its vivid description of the horrors perpetrated by the Maratha Bargis in Bengal, such as the plunder and sack of temples and the rape and assault of women (Dimock and Gupta, 1985, 49–53).

Just as the Bargis are transformed in the course of the poem from the chosen people of the gods to common marauders, so, too, is the nawab of Bengal also transformed in the course of the poem. In the latter case, the change is in a positive direction, as the nawab metamorphoses from a figure whom the gods decide to punish through the Bargis to a figure who appears virtuous and restrained in comparison to the marauders from Nagpur. The nawab of Bengal is able to annihilate Bhaskar, the leader of the Bargis, and free his kingdom from the Maratha scourge only after the goddess decides to withdraw her blessing and protection from the Bargis and transfer it instead to the nawab. Indeed, there are no stable heroic characters here. Good and evil thus do not reside permanently

in any individual or group of individuals. The actions of people determine whether they were good or evil and make them worthy or unworthy of divine protection and blessings. The success or failure of human endeavor is still ultimately rooted in divine pleasure or displeasure. The notion of modern, professional history that developed in Bengal in the late nineteenth century would have found itself hard-pressed to categorize a narrative giving central importance to the goddess Durga's machinations as a work representing pure, secular history.⁷

One of the most compelling reasons for choosing to locate the *Maharashtrapurana* within the Mangalkabya tradition derives from the fact that its author chose to name it *Purana*, thus indicating his desire to place it within a vast tradition of other narrative texts in Bengal that also labeled themselves *Purana*, sometimes in conjunction with other labels. This point has been explored earlier. More significantly, the use of the label *Purana* points to the long shadow cast by the Puranic tradition over Bengali literary productions, together with a certain legitimacy, status, and popularity with which authors wished to associate their compositions. By the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, the terms *mangal* and *Purana* were being used for narratives that sometimes had little in common with what had come to be seen as some of the defining features of the Mangalkabya tradition.⁸ This also points very importantly to the versatility of the Mangalkabya tradition that allowed it to accommodate new features. In my reading, both the *Annadamangal* and the *Maharashtrapurana* can be placed within Bengal's Mangalkabya tradition. In both works, generic Puranic features associated with Mangalkabyas are in evidence. The gods play major roles in both *kabyas*.

Neither the *Annadamangal* nor the *Maharashtrapurana* is an unknown or obscure work. Both have received sufficient scrutiny and comments, mainly from literary scholars, but also from historians of eighteenth-century Bengal. Gangaram's literary production is most often viewed by historians in particular (e.g., Sarkar 1973, 457–58) as a contemporary mirror of Bargi depredations in Bengal. The *Annadamangal* is hailed as one of the best-known Mangalkabyas to ever be produced and one that enjoyed immense popularity (e.g., Bandyopadhyaya and Das 1350 B.S., 17–18; A. Bhattacharya 1975, 833–51; Zbavitel 1976, 199–200). The *Annadamangal* in particular is regarded as a typical specimen of eighteenth-century Bangla literature, which is characterized quite often by literary scholars as imitative of earlier traditions, formulaic, and sometimes also

⁷Existing scholarship (e.g., R. Guha 1988; P. Chatterjee 1993) demonstrates the importance assigned by “modern” Indian/Bengali historiography of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to distinguish itself from earlier modes of recounting the past by attempting to eliminate supernatural, fantastic stories as causal factors. For a more nuanced view that posits the continuing existence of the fantastic and the “mythic” side by side with “modern,” rational historiography, see Kunkum Chatterjee (1999, 2005).

⁸A representative example would be the *Tirthamangal* of Bijoyram Sen, a travel narrative that was composed in 1769–70. For a discussion of the *Tirthamangal*, see K. Chatterjee (1999).

decadent (e.g., D. C. Sen 2002, 2:559–64, 589–99). What has gone unnoticed is the fact that behind the façade of “tradition,” which, I agree, these texts were very careful to maintain, both the *Annadamangal* and the *Maharashtrapurana* embodied significant deviations from the established models of Mangalkabyas.

Both Bharatchandra Roy and Gangaram positioned their compositions within the framework of the Mangalkabya tradition and yet, very importantly, these works consciously and deliberately deployed a tried and well-liked genre to stage concerns and issues that were neither timeless nor entirely universal but immediately related to the political anxieties of eighteenth-century Bengal. The expression of contingent material and political concerns was hardly new or unique within the Mangalkabya tradition—and indeed, it would be absurd to expect so. To provide one example: In his well-known composition dated usually to the sixteenth century, Mukundaram Chakrabarty discussed the crisis caused in his village by the depredations and oppressions of a certain *dihidar* named Mahmud Sharif (S. Sen 1993, 3). The gravity of the crisis as perceived by Kabikankan is evident from the fact that it compelled him to uproot himself and his family and flee his ancestral village. The point I seek to make here is that in the two eighteenth-century texts studied here, contingent political concerns were articulated in a mode and style associated with a Persianized Mughal political culture. Thus, it is not merely the incorporation of local concerns that is significant here; rather, it is their articulation in terms of a political and administrative culture that had come to be associated with the Mughal empire generally and with Bengal’s experience of Mughal rule.

TRANSGRESSING THE GENRE

Two themes run through both the *Annadamangal* and the *Maharashtrapurana*: first, the obviously Puranic, and second, the temporal. The political/territorial imaginations of both Bharatchandra and Gangaram were bounded by the South Asian subcontinent. In Gangaram’s portrayal, this territorial/political unit, which provided an important context for his story, was headed by the Mughal emperor at Delhi, while below him there prevailed regional powers such as the Marathas and the nawabs of Bengal (Dimock and Gupta 1985, 41–43). Bharatchandra, too, conceived of a political/territorial entity ruled by the Mughal emperors from Delhi. Beneath the political paramountcy of the Mughals were regional political powers such as Bengal, ruled by nawabs like Murshid Quli Khan, Shujauddin, and Ali Vardi Khan in the eighteenth century. Bharatchandra, however, went a step further than Gangaram in constructing in his narrative yet another layer of political power below the regional hegemony of the Bengal nawabs—the power of the zamindars (rajās and maharajās in the poet’s vocabulary), among whom specific references are made to the raja of Burdwan, Maharaja Pratapaditya of Jessore, and, of course, his own patron, Maharaja Krishnachandra Roy of

Nadia (Bandyopadhyaya and Das 1369 B.S., 291–321). Descriptions of rulers and relations among them, as well as between rulers and subjects, is hardly an uncommon theme in the Mangalkabya tradition.

The Dharmamangal narratives refer to relationships among several rulers: Gaureshwar, Lausen, and others (Sen, Mandal, and Sen 1956). The *Chandimangal* describes the process by which Kalketu, the poor hunter, became transformed into a king and proceeded to lay the foundations of his kingdom (S. Sen 1993, 66–83). These are merely two examples out of very many that can be presented. However, the relevant and important point is that neither of these examples reveals a clear-sighted knowledge and awareness of the subcontinental configuration of political power in the eighteenth century, in which the imperial Mughals were positioned at the very top of this political hierarchy. The *Annadamangal* and the *Maharashtrapurana* thus embed their temporal themes not just in any “local” contemporary concerns but quite explicitly in terms of a *Mughal* political culture.

Both of these texts give central importance to issues of loyalty, dependence, and trust, which ultimately underpinned relations between political overlords and their subordinates. These are certainly encased in the universal issues of sin and virtue, which ultimately constitute central motifs in both texts. However, what stands out is that these preoccupations find expression through idioms associated with the Mughal political and administrative culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For instance, in both the *Annadamangal* and the *Maharashtrapurana*, the preeminent causal factor for the disruption of relations among different levels of the political hierarchy is the failure of the political subordinate to pay revenue or tribute to the overlord. Mughal chronicles concerned with issues of governance gave preeminent importance to this issue, for revenue or tribute symbolized loyalty to a political superior and denoted the basic resource without which a political system could not function.

In Gangaram’s portrayal, the sinful activities of the people of Bengal induce the gods to send the Bargis there to punish them. At the same time, he provides a beautifully nuanced material/political explanation for why the Bargi raids occurred. This is further enriched by the presence of multiple perspectives. The Maratha leader, identified in the poem as Shahu Raja, wrote a letter to the Mughal emperor complaining about the fact that he had not received *chauth* (revenue, tribute) from Bengal. The Mughal emperor agreed that this was a serious breach of political duty, but he felt that, in addition, the nawab of Bengal was guilty of yet another serious instance of political misbehavior—he had shown himself to be completely lacking in political loyalty by murdering his master and assuming political power over the region (a reference to the coup staged by Nawab Ali Vardi Khan in 1740 against Sarfaraz Khan). The Mughal emperor felt that the nawab of Bengal ought to be chastised for transgressing the norms of political duty and conduct; thus, he ordered the Bargis to invade Bengal.

Interestingly enough, Gangaram does not paint the nawab of Bengal as an outright villain. Instead, he shows that, from the nawab's perspective, it was not he but the Bargs and the Mughal emperor who were in the wrong. In the nawab's understanding, the tribute from Bengal had never been paid directly to the Marathas but instead to the Mughal emperor. Therefore, the Marathas violated established custom by coming to Bengal as invaders for the ostensible purpose of exacting this tribute. Second, the nawab admitted that the Bengal tribute had not been dispatched to Delhi—but, as he saw it, he saw no reason to dispatch it when the Mughal emperor had not yet confirmed his accession to the throne by issuing a *sanad* to that effect. Having sketched out different perspectives on the same issue, Gangaram creates yet another layer of complexity by asking whether the Mughal emperor was under any political obligation to recognize someone who had usurped the throne through an act of political disloyalty (Dimock and Gupta 1985, 41–61). Thus, in the *Maharashtrapurana*, different sets of temporal/political perspectives nest within each other. Ultimately, though, these temporal/political questions are not unconnected to the universal notions of sin and virtue, as seen in the ultimate triumph of the nawab.

In the *Annadamangal*, the temporal/political concerns of the poet are made clear at the outset when he discusses the political situation in Bengal. These concerns find maximum articulation in the third section of the poem—in the episode involving Raja Man Singh, Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore, and Bhabananda Majumdar (the founder of the Nadia Raj and the ancestor of Bharatchandra's patron, Maharaja Krishnachandra Roy). Bharatchandra provides a fascinating depiction of the interplay of relations among the different levels of the political system—a depiction influenced, in all likelihood, by relations prevailing among himself, his patron, and various powerful potentates at different levels of the political system. He acknowledges that the nawabs of Murshidabad were the rulers of Bengal but then seems to ignore them until the very end of the narrative. He points out that one of the wrongful acts committed by Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore was to withhold revenue payment from the Mughal emperor—the payment of revenue symbolizing, among other things, submission to a political overlord. Yet nowhere in the narrative does he state that it was important for the zamindars to offer loyalty to the Bengal nawabs.

This almost deliberate effort to downplay the importance of the Bengal nawabs was almost certainly linked to two separate sets of circumstances. First, relations between the Bengal nawabs and the rajas of Nadia were not always cordial. Maharaja Krishnachandra's ancestors had been personally harassed and coerced by the nawabs, who were bent on squeezing out more revenue from them (Pertsch 1853). It is possible, therefore, that Bharatchandra's strategy of ignoring the nawabs was, in part, a response to his patron's cool relations with Murshidabad. Second, it is not impossible that Bharatchandra held the nawabs at least indirectly responsible for his personal problems deriving from the loss of his patrimonial estate to the raja of Burdwan. Under the administration

of the Murshidabad nawabs, some large zamindaris, such as Burdwan, grew in importance and size because of the regime's deliberate policy of supporting some specially large zamindars (Sarkar 1973; Ray 1979; McLane 1993). Emboldened by the support of the nawabi regime, the rajas of Burdwan made significant territorial acquisitions during the eighteenth century, and there is no evidence—either in this narrative or elsewhere—to suggest that the nawab tried to curb the strong-arm tactics of the Burdwan zamindars.

The loss of these family estates inaugurated the beginning of a difficult period for Bharatchandra, personally as well as for his family. For Bharatchandra, it entailed leaving home and beginning a quest for powerful patrons, from whom he hoped to secure some sort of financial help that would enable him to support himself and his family. At one stage during the unsettled phase of his life, Bharatchandra received much-needed help from a Maratha official based in Cuttack at Orissa. It is perhaps not irrelevant that in his magnum opus, the *Annadamangal*, Bharatchandra depicts the Bargis as a people chosen by the god Shiva through whom Bengal would be punished for the sinful actions of its nawab, who had plundered the abode of Shiva, that is, Bhubaneshwar, the principal city of Orissa (Bandyopadhyaya and Das 1369 B.S., 23–24). It should be pointed out that despite Bharatchandra's efforts to depict the Bargis in a positive light, he also describes—sadly and regretfully—the destruction and suffering created in Bengal by the Bargi incursions.

The Man Singh-Bhabananda-Mughal emperor (identified here as Jehangir) episode in the third part of the *Annadamangal* represents the climax of the poem, both for its Puranic as well as its temporal theme. According to this narrative, Raja Man Singh was sent to Bengal to vanquish the recalcitrant Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore,⁹ but he was unable to achieve success until he became a worshipper of the goddess. But it appeared as if the goddess was not content with merely converting one of the most powerful *mansabdars* in the Mughal empire to her cult—the poet shows the goddess pitting her strength against that of the Mughal emperor at the imperial court in Delhi. The success of the goddess in compelling the Mughal emperor to acknowledge her greatness (shown in a most extraordinary passage in the poem that describes the ritual worship of the goddess being celebrated with great pomp and ceremony at the Mughal court in Delhi—the Mughal emperor also orders all citizens of Delhi to worship the goddess in their homes) was intended to prove beyond any doubt that despite the political power and prestige of the emperor as political

⁹According to Mirza Nathan, author of the seventeenth-century work *Bahristan-i-Ghaibi*, who participated personally in the Mughal campaign against Pratapaditya in 1612, the commander of the Mughal forces was Islam Khan, the then Mughal *subahdar* of Bengal, and not Raja Man Singh, as represented by the *Annadamangal* (see Sarkar 1973, 247–72). Ramram Basu's *Raja Pratapaditya Charitra* (1801) also depicts Man Singh as the vanquisher of Pratapaditya. It would be interesting to explore the emergence of a tradition in Bengal representing Man Singh as the conqueror of Pratapaditya. However, such an exploration is beyond the scope of the present article.

overlord of the subcontinent, the goddess's divine power was far superior (Bandyopadhyaya and Das 1369 B.S., 303–21).

This segment of the *Annadamangal* also marks the climax of the temporal theme of the work. In Bharatchandra's depiction, Raja Man Singh offers to take Bhabananda Majumdar to the imperial court at Delhi in order to try to secure for him a *farman* from the Mughal emperor, confirming his enjoyment of zamindari rights over his estates (Bandyopadhyaya and Das 1369 B.S., 298). It is unusual in Mangalkabyas of earlier periods to depict their mortal heroes being rewarded or elevated to high office by a more powerful human figure. Here Bharatchandra reveals his clear understanding of the political hierarchy of eighteenth-century India—the bestowal of a zamindari title directly by the Mughal emperor, the undisputed political overlord of the Indian subcontinent, together with symbols of rank that accompanied it would enhance and reinforce the legitimacy and status of the Nadia rajas within Bengal. This incident in the poem also demonstrates the sanctity attached to the *farman*—the written document embodying the Mughal emperor's grant of the zamindari right to Bhabananda.

In fact, in the poem, Bharatchandra paints an extraordinary scene in which the *farman* itself is given a ceremonial welcome by the friends and family of Bhabananda upon the latter's return from Delhi (Bandyopadhyaya and Das 1369 B.S., 239). To my knowledge, the older Mangalkabyas did not usually show this kind of awareness of the Mughal empire, the Mughal *padshah*, or Mughal administrative documents, such as the *farman*, in quite this manner. Finally, the grant of the *farman* by Emperor Jehangir to Bhabananda provides the poet with an opportunity to thumb his nose, so to speak, at the Murshidabad nawab, thereby expressing his aristocratic patron's (and possibly his own) animosity toward his immediate political superior. There is perhaps a kind of malicious enjoyment implicit in the section in which Bharatchandra shows the raja of Nadia making arrangements to send a copy of the *farman* to Murshidabad (Bandyopadhyaya and Das 1369 B.S., 328).

In both of these works, the features noted earlier are integrated into a broader interpretive perspective grounded in sequences of events. These events, in turn, are linked to causal explanations, and both narratives fit into an overarching worldview that situated itself deliberately in a Puranic format. Within this Puranic format, however, the actual hard political realities and contingencies of eighteenth-century Bengal—whether from the perspective of a raja's *sabha* or from that of the nawab and those around him—needed to be made comprehensible, lodged in a format and communicated in a mode that was acceptable and comprehensible to ordinary people. The latter were, after all, the ultimate constituents from whom both the raja of Nadia and the nawab at Murshidabad sought the legitimacy that both urgently needed. The *itihasa* tradition and, more particularly, the Puranic tradition, as noted earlier, was characterized by an impulse to constantly change and recast itself in order to keep

abreast of current times. From this angle, the shifts and new features that appeared in the *Annadamangal* and the *Maharashtrapurana* conformed to the inherent characteristic of the *itihasa*/Purana tradition. I argue that the idiom in which the vernacular *itihasa* tradition represented by the Mangalkabyas sought to make space for the political issues of the time mirrored or reflected the ways in which a morally sanctioned, Islamicate structure of layered rule and overlordship associated with the Mughals inflected the presentation of political morality among the rajas and landed magnates of Bengal. As depicted in the *Annadamangal* and the *Maharashtrapurana*, this affected the attitudes of the gods and goddesses as well.

The following section seeks to contextualize these features of the two texts under discussion here in terms of a Persianized political culture associated with the Mughal empire.

HISTORICIZING TRANSGRESSION

Existing literature for the most part depicts Mughal rule in Bengal (including its lineal descendant, the state founded by the nawabs of Murshidabad) as a violent, oppressive, “foreign” regime that exploited the region materially (see, e.g., Raychaudhuri 1969, 81–88; A Chatterjee 1967, 249). Sir J. N. Sarkar’s famous tribute to the blessings conferred on Bengal by Mughal rule is well known. But even Sarkar agreed that the positive benefits were accidental by-products rather than the deliberate results of Mughal policy (Sarkar 1973, 216–28). The picture that emerges of the Mughal state in Bengal is essentially that of a ruthless military-cum-revenue-extracting apparatus that oppressed the region’s rajas and zamindars. The cultural dimension of the Mughal presence in Bengal usually gets overlooked and neglected in this literature.¹⁰ After all, what cultural legacy could possibly be associated with an alien revenue-extracting machinery? The following segment seeks to modify this received picture and to illustrate the salience of a Persianized Mughal political culture in Bengal, particularly among the aristocracy and gentry of the region.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were turbulent periods in the history of Bengal and, more generally, in large parts of eastern India. The Mughal conquest of Bengal in the late sixteenth century was a checkered and uneven process, and much of the seventeenth century was taken up by arduous Mughal efforts to consolidate their power over this region. The political costs of integration into the Mughal system were felt foremost by the rajas and chieftains of the area, who had enjoyed considerable latitude during the last days of Afghan hegemony in Bengal. They managed to be a thorn in the side of the Mughals as long as they could, but eventually they succumbed

¹⁰A notable exception to this trend is Richard M. Eaton (1994).

to Mughal military might (Sarkar 1973). The reminiscences of Mirza Nathan, a military official who participated in the Mughal campaigns against refractory zamindars in the eastern part of Bengal during the later seventeenth century, are a revealing testament to the violence and terror unleashed by the imperial military machine in these parts. The destruction of Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore, one of the Barabhuysians of Bengal—an event that forms the final segment of the *Annadamangal*—is testimony to this process. The eighteenth century turned out to be no less eventful for the region. The weakening of Mughal central authority encouraged the emergence of regional states in different parts of India. In eastern India (Bengal, Bihar and Orissa), Murshid Quli Khan became the architect of a Mughal successor state that was autonomous for all practical purposes but claimed political and ideological affiliation with the imperial center at Delhi. The brief tenure of this regime was marked by considerable turbulence, too: several political coups (1726, 1740, 1756), a series of devastating and destructive raids carried out by the Maratha Bargis in the 1740s, and rebellions among the Afghan soldiers of the nawab's army in 1745 and 1748. The compulsions of building a strong and viable regional state were manifest most of all in continuing pressure exerted by the Murshidabad regime on Bengal's zamindars (Sarkar 1973; Karam Ali 1992; Datta 1963; K. Chatterjee 1996, 31–37).

Many zamindars, including the rajas of Nadia, were not exempt from these pressures, which, in practical terms, translated into “practices of draconian severity and bestial torture” (Sarkar 1973, 410). Several of the rajas of Nadia—Maharaja Krishnachandra Roy, the patron of the *Annadamangal kabya* among them—had been brutalized and humiliated several times by the ruling regime on charges of failing to meet the nawabs' revenue demands. Naturally, this was a huge affront to the prestige and standing of the rajas of Nadia, who possessed one of the larger zamindaris in western Bengal, and to their self-proclaimed posture as the leaders of Brahmanical society in Bengal. The *Annadamangal kabya*, composed at the behest of Maharaja Krishnachandra by his court poet, himself the son of a recently dispossessed landed family, can perhaps be seen as a narrative that sought to function as a response to the political and cultural crises affecting the raja.¹¹ It attempted to reinforce the raja's status and place amid the fast-paced political changes affecting Bengal, as well as the web of complex alliances and loyalties that had come to characterize the political configuration of eighteenth-century India. This project was most urgent vis-à-vis the Nadia raja's immediate constituency (i.e., his courtiers, protégées, kinsmen, and the bulk of his subjects), the expected audience of a Mangalkabya performance.

The *Annadamangal* sought to accomplish this task by highlighting the fact that the rajas of Nadia held territorial authority by virtue of an authorization

¹¹For an insightful discussion of Maharaja Krishnachandra of Nadia and his attempt to articulate a novel concept of kingship and religion, see David L. Curley (2002).

from the political overlord of the subcontinent—that is, the Mughal emperor. The legitimacy and sanctity of their position was strengthened by the fact that they were the especially chosen favorites of the goddess Annada—a condition that also unquestionably established their roles as the upholders of virtue and dharma. This endeavor attempted to preserve untarnished the claim of the Nadia rajas to be the leaders of Brahmanical society (and particularly of *kulin* Brahmin society/*samaj*) in Bengal—a claim that was intimately intertwined with their self-image.

Though the practice of harsh brutality by the Murshidabad nawabs toward zamindars who were revenue defaulters is true, the implicit and explicit view upheld in most of the existing literature about the distant and cold relations (amounting almost to alienation) between the nawabs and the bulk of zamindars in Bengal may not be completely valid. Despite revenue pressures and indignities suffered at the hands of the *niabat*, there may have never been a total rupture in relations between the two. According to the Sanskrit genealogy of the rajas of Nadia, entitled the *Kshitishvamsavalicharitam* and composed probably in the earlier part of the eighteenth century, even these rajas, no strangers to rough treatment at the nawab's hands, recounted with pride the instances of cordiality and honor shown to them by the nawab (Pertsch 1853).

During the troubled times of the Bargi invasions, some zamindars reportedly withheld military assistance to Ali Vardi Khan; but others—the raja of Bansberia, for example—offered spirited resistance to the Bargis. In fact, the oft-cited formulation of the Calkins thesis, that is, the Murshidabad nawabs made deliberate efforts to establish a firm base of support for their rule by forging a triangular relationship with zamindars, military aristocracy, and bankers (Calkins 1970), is correct overall. Calkins's formulation, however, completely overlooks the Murshidabad *niabat*'s practice of reaching out to a large range of middle-level, literate gentry families, many of whom benefited handsomely from their association with various levels of the nawabi government (see, e.g., Basu 1801; Gupta 1964; N. Bandyopadhyaya 1910–11). Some among such gentry also took an active part in the defense of the realm against the marauding Bargis. There is no direct evidence to suggest that Gangaram, the author of the *Maharashtrapurana*, composed it at the behest of the nawab or that his intention in authoring it was to “whitewash” the nawab and the nawabi government. But, on the other hand, it is indeed the case that persons of the social/professional background of Gangaram benefited from nawabi rule. Also professional, educated persons like Gangaram and others approached the Murshidabad *darbar* for purposes of career advancement, as well as for the support of scholarly/poetic careers (see, e.g., Ghose 1901; Ghatak 1930; Bidyalkar 1940).

Some among them, such as Narasimha Basu (author of an eighteenth-century *Dharmamangal*), had jobs that involved close interaction with the

Murshidabad *darbar* (S. Sen 1405 B.S., 2:155–58). A large body of evidence confirms the support provided by the Murshidabad nawabs to such persons, as well as to communities of Vaishnavas and other groups not conventionally associated with this regime. Neither was such support sporadic and incidental. The rulers in question often entered into stable and long-term relationships with religious sects and organizations, with Brahmin scholars and poets, because their talents and skills were valuable assets and because they helped to deepen the support base of this kingdom (Ghatak 1930; Bidyalankar 1940; Tribedi 1306 B.S.). Thus, perhaps it is not untenable to suggest that the *Maharashtrapurana* might embody the effort of a segment of the Bengali gentry to rationalize, through the language and idiom of the well-known and well-liked genre of the Mangalkabyas, the position and powers of the nawabs of Bengal in the political geography of eighteenth-century India and perhaps to position the nawab as an ethical ruler who had been especially singled out for divine favor.

Indeed, the nawab was particularly hard-pressed in the 1740s. The devastating Bargi raids added a new horizon of difficulties to the preexisting problems facing his government. The Bargi invasions shook the material and moral underpinnings of this regime to an extent that is perhaps not entirely appreciated and cast doubts on Nawab Ali Vardi Khan's legitimacy as a ruler. Thus, ruling circles around the nawab—which, I argue, may well have included some gentry elements such as Gangaram—felt the urgent need to assure the subjects of the kingdom about the political and moral legitimacy of Nawab Ali Vardi Khan's reign. The *Maharashtrapurana* may have functioned as a vehicle for this endeavor.

Another factor that helps us to historicize and contextualize the newer idioms noticed in the *Annadamangal* and the *Maharashtrapurana* is the currency of a Persianized Mughal political culture in Bengal. The slow diffusion of Islam and Islamicate culture in Bengal over several centuries had already introduced certain elements into the cultural life of Bengal: the crystallization of cults of worship around composite new deities such as Satya Pir/Satyanarayan, the emergence of a cluster of Pir or Ghazi Mangals (narratives centered around the miraculous powers of *pirs*) (Asim Roy 1983; Eaton 1993; Stewart 2004), the growing use of Persian and Hindusthani words in Bengali literary texts, and the development of a genre of love stories following the precedent of North Indian *dastans* and *qissahs* (Hansen 1988; Pritchett 1991; Stewart 2004). But closer integration into the Mughal imperial system and, more particularly, the emergence of a regional nawabi that asserted its autonomy and yet attempted to preserve and further refine Mughal governmental institutions served to strengthen the diffusion of Persianized/Mughal (rather than merely Islamicate) political culture in Bengal during the eighteenth century. I have argued elsewhere that the Murshidabad regime and its ruling class sought deliberately to represent themselves as the heirs to

a Mughal political culture that they kept alive and further refined (K. Chatterjee 1996, 1998).

A Persianized political culture had held sway in courtly and elite circles of what is described as the “Eastern Islamic world” for many centuries. Associated with the use of the Persian language and literary culture in elite, courtly society, as well as with certain modes of deportment, aesthetic tastes, and styles of governance (Hourani 1991, 48; Browne 1969; Hovhannisian and Sabagh 1988; Subrahmanyam 2004, 45–79), it had come to represent, as Subrahmanyam terms it, “a yardstick and a measure of civilization” (2004, 78). It represented what Marshall G. M. Hodgson famously described as an aspect of Islamicate civilization that was associated with, but nevertheless distinct and separable from, the Islamic religion (1974, 1, 59).

A Persianized political culture had certainly become an attribute of the Mughal imperium, as it was also an attribute of the Delhi sultanate and regional sultanates in the Deccan and elsewhere within the Indian subcontinent. As Muzaffar Alam’s work shows, the Mughal empire went much further than previous regimes within India in promoting the diffusion and strengthening of a Persianized political culture to different parts of the empire (Alam 2003, 191–98; 2004, 115–33). The adoption of Persian as the language of administration probably played the most potent role in the transmission of a Persianized political culture among the various regions of the Mughal polity. The use of the Persian language for official, governmental purposes was known in Bengal during the reigns of its pre-Mughal, Muslim sultans (twelfth to late-sixteenth centuries) (Tarafdar 1965, 264–66). But a stronger and much more vigorous Persianized culture associated primarily with the Mughal imperial system and its political traditions gained currency there particularly during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries (Sarkar 1973, 223–24; Eaton 1994, 165–79).

A Mughal/Persianized courtly culture in Bengal was evident in lifestyles, modes of attire, and literary tastes, particularly among the military and administrative elites and other *darbar*-oriented people during this period. Some of these features spilled over into those segments of gentry society that were associated with governmental and political circles (K. Chatterjee 1996, 1998). Other features—such as the impact of Persian administrative vocabulary, such as the terms *subah*, *pargana*, *bakshi*, and *hasil*—became even more widespread in this region through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Chatterji 1926, 201–8). But the one factor that played an especially potent role in the dissemination of Mughal political culture was the Persian language and, related to it, Persianized intellectual culture.

The Bengali territorial nobility and gentry of the Mughal and nawabi periods embraced a Persianized culture during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in particular because it provided them an affiliation with the most prestigious imperial tradition currently prevailing in the subcontinent. Possibly,

the single most important manifestation of this trend was seen in the proliferation of the Persian language and Persianized education among them. Many among the literate gentry and zamindari class embraced education that involved familiarity with and fluency in Persian, Hindusthani/Nagri, Oriya, and Bengali (often in addition to Sanskrit) (S. Sen 1405 B.S., 2:155), in part because it provided access to jobs in the bureaucracy (see Alam 2004). Bharatchandra Roy received formal training in Persian (Bandyopadhyaya and Das 1369 B.S., 25), as did many other persons of middle-class gentry backgrounds during this period. Persian literacy became especially common among Bengali Kayasthas and Baidyas (these two *jatis* were particularly associated with scribal, clerical jobs and other literate occupations, such as the practice of medicine, since at least the medieval period in Bengal) during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The extent of it is proven by the fact that in his biography of Raja Pratapaditya, which was published by Fort William College in 1801, Ramram Basu describes Persian proficiency as the *jati vyavasa* (hereditary occupation) of Kayasthas (1801, 5). Bengali Brahmins, too, were participants in this Persianized culture. In the late sixteenth century, Jayananda, the author of the *Chaitanyamangal*, recorded his outrage and disapproval of the fact that Brahmins had taken to wearing socks, familiarizing themselves with the use of weaponry such as the cannon, and were reading Persian *masnavis* (Jayananda 1994: 135).¹² Many other instances of Persian proficiency among Brahmins can be found during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The same period witnessed the proliferation of schools in which Persian was taught to boys of respectable gentry families. Very often, such schools were maintained by local zamindars and were found to be especially clustered in areas with heavy concentrations of gentry families (see, e.g., Basu 1801, 46). The currency of Persian had become so common among the gentry and territorial magnate class of Mughal and nawabi Bengal that teachers of Persian were often Hindus, usually Baidyas and Kayasthas. Bharatchandra Roy, author of the *Annadaman-gal kabya* discussed here, received training in Persian from an instructor named Ramchandra Munshi (Bandyopadhyaya and Das 1369 B.S., 25).

But the acquisition of Persian was not confined to utilitarian reasons alone. Persianization had come to be associated with intellectual and cultural refinement and sophistication. By the early part of the eighteenth century, certain types of narratives associated with the courts of landed magnates (e.g., the Sanskrit *Kshitishvamsavalicharitam*) were referring to Persian as a *shastra* (*parasika shastram*) (Pertsch 1853), that is, not merely an utilitarian tool that was necessary to maintain revenue accounts and other items of public record but

¹²My reading of these lines in Jayananda's *Chaitanyamangal* is in agreement with the reading of the same lines by Mohammed Enamul Huq (1957, 42) and Momtazur Rahman Tarafdar (1965, 265); however, J. T. O'Connell (2004, 417) disagrees with this reading.

a formal, intellectual discipline. Mastery of this discipline was also deemed to be one of the essential attributes of a Hindu raja. Hindu zamindars of the eighteenth century sought to convince their subjects of their cultural and intellectual refinement by stressing their achievements in appreciating and composing Persian and Hindusthani poetry, skills in Persian calligraphy, and so on (see, e.g., Basu 1801, 61–63; Shastri 1899, 13; Pertsch 1853). Although not easy to document, there are also scattered references in late nineteenth-century Bengali sources about the existence of Persian biographies and chronicles of prominent rajas of the two earlier centuries and possibly a period preceding that. Ramram Basu refers explicitly to Persian accounts of Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore; there also existed a Persian biography of Raja Rajballabh, one of the most eminent noblemen of mid-eighteenth-century Bengal (Basu 1801, 3–4; Anandanath Roy 1314 B.S., 111). Libraries maintained in the palaces and mansions of Bengal's elites were also stocked with Persian literature. The library in the Calcutta mansion of Maharaja Nabakrishna Deb was reputed to have a large and impressive collection of Persian books (Aloke Roy 2003, 110–11). The library of the nawabs of Murshidabad contained copies of very many classics of Indo-Persian literature, including a copy of the *Timurnama*, which had been copied in 1000 Hijri, and two volumes of the *Akbarnamah* in the handwriting of the great Abul Fazl himself (P. Majumdar 1905, 80–89). The most typical image of Bengal's territorial aristocracy depicted in later literature is that of bitter enmity toward the Mughals. Yet as Basu's biography of Raja Pratapaditya shows, they were not necessarily enemies of the Persianized culture that had come to be associated with the political elites who formed part of Mughal courtly society, both at the imperial capital in Delhi and in the regional courts in the provinces (Basu 1801, 61–63).

An important component of the Persianized political culture was embodied by the Indo-Persian *tarikh*, the tradition of composing chronicles about the reigns of kings and emperors. With roots in the classical traditions of Arab and subsequently Persian historiography (Rosenthal 1968; Gibb 1982), the practice of composing *tarikhs* was introduced into India through Turkish military conquests in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the *tarikh* tradition had been in use in the South Asian subcontinent for many centuries (Hasan 1968; Hardy 1982; Mukhia 1976; Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam 2001, 209–23) and had undergone shifts and changes in response to different historical situations and contexts within India, as well as different regional contexts within the subcontinent. Some of the most characteristic features of the mature *tarikh* tradition were to be seen in the use of the Persian language, a preoccupation with mechanisms and institutions of political power as manifest through policies, actions, and calculations of rulers, nobles, and other governmental functionaries. Actually, underlying the preoccupation with modes of governance was a much more serious interest in ethical and moral principles. Many

of the landmark works of the Indo-Persian *tarikh* tradition, for example, Abul Fazl's *Akbarnama* or Badauni's *Muntakhab-ut-tawarikh*, exhibited these general features (Hardy 1982; Hasan 1968; Mukhia 1976), as did the cluster of *tarikhs* composed in Bengal, such as Ghulam Hussain Khan Tabatabai's *Seir Mutaqherin* or Karam Ali's *Muzaffarnama*, in the declining days of the Murshidabad *niabat* during the later decades of the eighteenth century (K. Chatterjee 1998).¹³

The process just described—that is, the assimilation of aspects of a Persianized political culture by the gentry and aristocracy of Bengal—allowed them to claim membership in the Mughal imperial tradition, which transcended the locality and commanded a glamour and legitimacy that was unparalleled at the time. It was reminiscent of Phillip B. Wagoner's (1996) description of the role played by Islamicate culture in the Vijaynagara court.

As noted earlier, the central issues in both the *Annadamangal* and the *Maharashtrapurana* revolve around questions of virtue, sin, and the necessity of forging a mode of ethical conduct among all types of people—but particularly among local lords and the various hierarchical layers of political authority positioned above them. The specific issues that are highlighted in the *Annadamangal* and the *Maharashtrapurana*—that is, the moral and political consequences of disloyalty to overlords, the gravity of failing to discharge revenue and tribute obligations, and the importance of rewarding political loyalty through duly authorized offices, titles, and material perquisites—are articulated in these narratives through the idiom of a Persianized Mughal political culture.

It is important to remember, though, that the currency of a Persianized culture in Bengal did not mean the jettisoning of the region's own vernacular cultural traditions, even among those segments of society that were most affected by the Mughal political culture. Thus, Mangalkabyas in the classic mode (as well as other *panchali*-type literature), betraying none of the *tarikh*-like features noticed in the two texts studied here, continued to be produced throughout the eighteenth century and later. Also, if a “new” Persianized cultural identity had crystallized among the Bengali gentry of the eighteenth century, it represented an important but a single dimension of their political-cultural identity. An equally significant dimension was constituted by their conscious display of loyalty to and adherence to Brahmanical-Sanskritic traditions. Therefore, it is important not to exaggerate the Persianization of political culture in Bengal but to see it in perspective.

¹³Paradoxically enough, as Sir J. N. Sarkar points out, no Persian *tarikhs* were composed in Bengal during the heyday of Mughal or nawabi rule (1973, 501–2). An expanded discussion of the Persianized *tarikh* tradition in Bengal is contained in Kumkum Chatterjee, “The Cultures of History in Early Modern Bengal: Persianization and Mughal Culture in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” book manuscript in preparation.

CONCLUSION

This paper started out with the aim of demonstrating that, contrary to certain strands of scholarly opinion on the subject, the endeavor of writing about past events in early modern Bengal was not necessarily formulaic or unchanging. The two Mangalkabya texts studied here illustrate how a contemporary Persianized political culture associated with the experience of Mughal rule colored the representation of political morality among players in a multilayered political system that began with the local rajas and zamindars of Bengal and culminated at the apex with the Mughal emperor as the paramount political overlord. The characterization of early modern (or earlier) historiography as unchanging stems perhaps from an insufficiently nuanced understanding of the notion of tradition. Long-standing traditions embodied in the Mangalkabyas, for instance, certainly preserved a fidelity to traits that had come to be associated with it and that, in fact, gave it the character of a tradition. Yet as the *Annadamangal* and the *Maharashtrapurana* demonstrate, these “classic” traits could be interwoven with features deriving more from a contingent and contemporary political and cultural context.¹⁴

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¹⁴In this context, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s *The Invention of Tradition* (1993) is also relevant.

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