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~~The Language of the Land:~~ Literature, Language and Cultural Hierarchy in Bengal, 13th-18th Centuries

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" *I have seen the face of Bengal; so the beauty of the earth I seek no more*", wrote Jivanananda Das, one of the most loved among modern Bengali poets in 19---. Jivananda Das's much quoted line is testament to a deeply emotional and personal attachment to the land of Bengal and its culture which has been a hallmark of people who self-identify as Bengalis, at least for the last one hundred and forty to fifty years . The centrepiece of Bengali culture was perceived to be its language and literature. One of the features of modernity is believed to lie in the clear and unequevocal association of a language with a region and the identification of that language as the "mother-tongue" of the people of that land who spoke it. The concept of a mother tongue with its intensely familial and biological resonances is typically traced back to the mid 19th century and to the writings of the authors of the German Romanticist movement . The notion of the mother tongue, heralded the inception of the inalienable connection between land language and people and modern theorists of nationalism identified language as one of the pre-eminent foundations of nationhood and peoplehood. In many different parts of the world as well as in the South Asian sub-continent, there are plenty of examples of language-centered movements and the assertion of languge and literature centered identities during the 19th and 20th

centuries. One can think of language centered movements in the Tamil region, contests between Urdu and Nagri in Northern India during the late 19th century and plenty of language-based movements in the 20th century , including the bhasha andolan in erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.

refer to Dipesh da's paper.

In the case of Bengal, a strong sense of identity rooted in the regional vernacular began to develop from the later decades of the 19th century and soon this language and its literature came to be seen as the most important manifestation and vehicle of a Bengali identity. The outpouring of Bengali literary creations strongly imbued with emotionalism and nostalgia became the defining features of Bengali literature during the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, peaking perhaps during the anti-partition Swadeshi agitation in Bengal at the turn of the 20th century. Jivananda Das's well-known line cited above serves as a reminder that such romantic , personalized conceptions of the land-language-people triad survived well beyond the early 20th century. Not only was Bengal hailed as the motherland ("ma", "janani"), she was characterized also as simultaneoulsy familal and divine. The physical landscape of Bengal comprised the body of "rupasi Bangla" and there are songs and poetry galore which eulogised her beauty [Satyendranath Datta, " *mukta benir Ganga jethaye mukti bitore range.....*"]. The language of this land was conceptualized as springing literally from the body of mother Bengal; it was the collective bond that linked together all those who were born to it and the vehicle of their collective pride, hope and aspirations [Atulprasad Sen, " *moder garab moder asha/a mori Bangla bhasha....*"]. In a haunting and poignant sonnet, the Bengali poet, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, ["*he Banga, bhandare tobo bibidha ratan.....*"] described Bengal 's language as "*ratan*" (i.e. gems / riches) which were to be found in the body of the motherland. He described how , misguided and "beggar-like", he had strayed away in search of other languages and literatures, but realizing his mistake, had returned to the Bengali language , the metaphorical "gems" on the lap of mother Bengal which were always available to her children and comprised therefore, their inalienable attribute. The sonnet ended with Dutt eulogizing the

newly discovered emotional bond to his mother tongue which he described as " a deep treasure-filled mine".

Yet, as scholars of languages and literatures have repeatedly emphasised, such conceptions of language as "mother tongue" and the deeply emotive and cultural values placed on vernacular languages as the foundations of imagined communities – of whatever kind - were modern phenomena for which exact precedents are difficult to find whether in the medieval period or, even, in the early modern era. Several literary scholars have commented on the disdain with which the vernacular language of the region was regarded by the most erudite intellectuals in Bengal, even into the earlier decades of the 19th century. As late as 1850, the annonymous author of an article entitled " Popular Literature of Bengal" which appeared in the Calcutta Review observed that " respectable natives do not read Bengali books.....the national literature really is contemptible". [1] Thus, the assigned function of Bengali as the the prime repository of the culture, values, sensibilities and identity of the Bengali people appears to have crystallized dramatically and quite rapidly in the later decades of the 19th century.

I use this stature of Bengali literature and languagein the late 19th and the 20th centuries as a comparative point from which to explore the status and cultural value attached to the vernacular language of this region during the medieval and early modern periods. There is a large body of scholarship on the role and function of language and literature in India during the 19th and 20th centuries and a more recent, burgeoning corpus of work about languages and literary cultures in pre-modern India which highlights in particular, the place of literature in the definition of culture, more broadly speaking. This paper aims at an overview of the cultural status of Bengal's vernacular language and literature during the longue duree of five centuries or so, from the 13th till the 18th centuries. An

(*) The thesis statement should be a bit more sharp

[1] "Popular Literature of Bengal", *Calcutta Review,* vol. 13, jan-June 1850, p. 257.

issue of particular focus here is the relationship between power and culture as exemplified by the relationship between literature and language on the one hand and political and cultural power on the other.

Bengali, the language associated with the geographical-cultural region of Bengal (now divided between the Indian province of West Bengal and the independent nation state of Bangladesh) belongs to the Aryan branch of the Indo-European family of languages . Typically, its lineage is traced to successive linguistic stages such as Prakrit, Magadhi, Ardha-Magadhi . It is generally believed that roughly between the 9th to 10th/11th centuries A.D. a regional vernacular, subsequently called Bengali, made an appearance as a language that was distinct but not unrelated to other branches or outgrowths from Magadhi and Ardha-Magadhi (e.g. Maithili, Oriya, Assamese). What probably lay at the root of this development was the growing distinction between the spoken language of a significant chunk of territory in Eastern India from the gramatically regulated, written form of Prakrit [2] "The Bengali language did not emerge fully formed as an infant from its mother's womb", observed Dinesh Chandra Sen in his foundational literary history of Bengali language and literature. [3] Standard literary histories of Bengali – and there is a rich and august body of such works - tend however to portray the impression that once born, the Bengali language embarked on a course of almost biological development through infancy, adolescence , youth and into final maturity with the development of a prose form of Bengali literature in the 19th century. A second common assumption is that Bengali was the "natural", given literary language of a well-defined territory called Bengal and it was (obviously) the object of affection/attachment of all segments of the population that resided in this area. This view in fact forms the most uncritically accepted assumption in standard literary histories of Bengali and grows out of the

[2] Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Banga Bhasha O Sahitya*, vol. 1, p. 15.

[3] Ibid, same page.

very common notion derived from the modern nationalist tendency to associate a single language with a single territorial unit. The factor that is usually insufficiently considered is that the development of Bengali over many centuries needs to be positioned vis- a vis a multi-lingual milieu in which several other languages were available for the composition of literary works, official and personal correspondence, scholarly treatises, proclamations of the government etc. The *Rajavali* by Mrityunjoy Vidyalankar composed for the Fort William College at Calcutta in 1808, provides a fascinating glimpse . for instance, of the multiple literary traditions: Sanskrit, Persian varieties of Hindavi etc. which left their mark on this text. The fact that Bengali did become a literary language therefore, involved a matter of conscious choice vis- a –vis the several other languages and literary cultures that flourished in Bengal from the 13^{th} to the 18th centuries. The following segment provides a brief background to the multi-lingual literary culture of Bengal vis- a vis which Bengali literature first made its appearance . Secondly, it discusses the general characteristics of vernacular literature during this period.

The Literary Cultures of Bengal: 13^{th}-18^{th} Centuries

The period chosen for study in this paper opens with the Turkish conquest of Bengal in 1206 C.E. The Turkish invaders brought with them important new cultural influences, but naturally did not enter a cultural milieu which was a blank. We need therefore, to go back to the period immediately preceding the establishment of a Muslim sultanate in Bengal to get a sense of literary developments in this part of the Indian sub-continent.

The reference to a "Gaudiya riti" or style of poetic composition by Sanskrit literary critics such as Dandin (late 6^{th}-early 7^{th} century C.E.) indicates that a distinct literary style of Sanskrit composition had come to be associated with the kingdom of Gauda (corresponding roughly to what later came to be called Bengal) well before the Pala-Sena periods (8^{th}-12^{th} centuries). Indeed, up till the 12^{th} century, Sanskrit

was the literary language of Bengal and its primacy as the medium of scholarly literature, public proclamations and courtly poetry under the Pala and Sena kings is beyond question. *From the 8th/9th centuries C.E. a large body of Sanskrit scholarly literature i.e smritis, grammatical works, commentaries on the shastras etc. was composed here , while the effusive prashatis in stone and copper plates testify to the use of "high" literary Sanskrit for public-proclamatory purposes. The Pala and Sena kings - particulaly the latter - presided over a literary salon which produced a rich output of Sanskrit kavya and was associated with famous names such as Jaydeva, Dhoyi, Sarana, Shridharadasa, Govardhana and others. As Jesse Knutson's important and very insightful study of the poetics of the Sena court demonstrates, this was a scenario in which kings , such as Vallala Sena and Lakshmana Sena, were poets as were their high officials, courtiers and close associates.*

Arabic and Persian were associated with Muslim rule and culture in India. As the work of Muzaffar Alam shows, the most significant expansion in the use of Persian and its diffusion to different regions within India occurred under the Mughals. One of the most important factors in explaining this phenomenon is the choice of Persian as the language of governance in Mughal India especially since the 16th century. During the next several centuries Persian literacy became common among Mughal nobles and bureaucrats , both Hindu and Muslim. In certain regions there emerged strong traditions of Persian literacy among communities with long traditions of scribal and other types of bureaucratic service such as the Kayasthas and Khatris in Northern India and the Punjab.

The use of Persian and associated with it, Arabic were known in Bengal since the 13th/14th centuries. But the currency of both was fairly limited: Arabic was used in inscriptions and other epigraphic materials attached to mosques and mausoluems, on coins etc. Persian too was used for royal inscriptions and similar other formal purposes. ~~As is well known, the Bengal sultans were actually much better known for their patronage of Bangla, the regional vernacular (this point has been discussed further below)~~

The much more significant spread of Persian in Bengal is associated with the Mughal conquest of this region in the late 16th century and the consolidation of Mughal authority in this area through much of the 17th century. The influx of large numbers of Mughal officials into Bengal from Northern India gave greater currency to this language as did its growing prevalence among the literate gentry and aristocracy of Bengal . The strongest tradition of Persian proficiency was to be found among Bengali Baidyas and Kayasthas – the two jatis most typically associated in this region with scribal and other forms of bureaucratic service. ~~Persian literacy was described as the "*jati vyavsa*" [Ram Ram Basu, *Maharaja Pratapaditya Charitra*, Serarampore, 1801] of the Kayastha community in particular~~. Historians of Bangla literature and Bengal's history usually ignore the influence of Persian in Bengal (this stems in part from the tendency in existing historiography to regard Mughal rule (but not necessarily Muslim rule) in Bengal as an alien, oppressive, exploitative entity which was not expected to generate any cultural consequences in the region) or saw it as a utilitarian language associated with career opportunities under the Mughal regime in Bengal. The utilitarian, practical dimension of Persian aided its diffusion- but I argue, that by the later 17th and the 18th centuries, it had also come to be seen as the language of refinement and high culture among a considerable section of the gentry and aristocracy. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, the great scholar of the Bangla language characterized the influence of Persian as merely lexical. I argue that for at least a couple of centuries , it enjoyed the status of a cosmopolitan language associated with Mughal and elite culture. Its virtual disregard in standard histories of Bangla literature from the later 19th century has a lot to do with the politics of culture and identity which had already begun to unfold from that time. The mention of Persian tarikhs by Mrityunjoy Bidyalankar points to its indispensability in composing an account of past kings of both India and Bengal. As noted above, Persian literacy had become especially common among the rajas and zamindars as well as the service gentry of the Baidya and kayastha jatis. Ram Ram Basu, the author of the biography of Raja Pratapaditya which was published in 1800 is a good example of this. However, the awareness of a "traditional" pandit such

as Mrityunjoy Bidyalankar about Indo-Persian Tarikh literature is extremely significant and suggests that intellectuals such as him lived in an environment in which Persian and its associated literary culture were important elements.

DISCUSS STATUS AND USES OF HINDAVI

Bengali was the language of every day communication and by the 15th 16th centuries, was used for epistolary purposes ; increasingly from the late 16th century onwards it became the languageof epigraphy in the innumerable brick temples that emerged all over Bengal from this time. Conventionally, the Sahajiya Buddhist Charyagitis, dated to the 10th-11th centuries [CHECK] are identified as the first sample of Bengali or "proto-Bengali" literature. A much more sustained production of written literature in the vernacular language of the region is noticeable from the 13th/14th centuries and this laid the foundations of what came to be characterized later as Middle Bengali literature. It seems clear that the rise of a written literature in Bengali had been preceded by a fairly vigorous tradition of oral compositions. Thus, the textualization of vernacular literary compositions denotes a major shift. As Sheldon Pollock observes, ".... The transition to manuscript culture [in South Asia] .....did far more to transform the practices of literary communication than did the transition to print culture.....". The new textuality "interacted with an orality that long remained dominant" [4] and as we will see below, played a critically important role in shaping the features of written vernacular literature.

Sheldon Pollock's magisterial and influential work posits that the period beginning from about the second millennium C.E. witnessed the unfolding of a process in different parts of the South Asian sub-continent, which he terms, vernacularization. At its core, it represented the "literization" of vernacular languages and their much greater use for purposes of state. This vernacular revolution , although not

[4] Sheldon Pollock, *Literary Cultures in History. Reconstructions From South Asia,* p. 21.

eaxctly uniform all over the sub-continent, shared certain common features, of which its association with a certain kind of polity is especially relevant here. In Pollock' hypothesis, the phenomenon of vernacularization refers to the emergence in different regions of South Asia, of regional polities, which were not only territorially limited compared to large, trans-regional empires such as those of the Mauryas and Gupta for example, but also in some ways, "conceptually" limited compared to the latter. In this perspective, the "rootless and placeless cosmopolitan Sanskrit" which had been deemed a suitable literary-cultural companion for the trans-regional empires was intentionally supplanted in the much more regionally bounded polities of the second millennium C.E. by the literization of local languages which were seen to be much more amenable for the construction and articulation of "local worlds". Bengal's vernacular revolution coincides more or less in terms of chronology with the wider vernacular moment in South Asia hypothesized by Pollock. The views expressed by Pollock and by Sudipta Kaviraj however, regarding the role of the polity in medieval Bengal in terms of fuelling the sustained production of vernacular literature from the 13th century onwards requires critical scrutiny. This point has been taken up in the segment below. For now, we need to sketch out the general outlines of the vernacular literary tradition which crystallized in Bengal and secondly,to examine the relationship of the Bengali literature with the older, trans-regional literary traditions which were current in Bengal during the medieval and early –modern periods.

Generally speaking, the subject matter of much of the Bengali literature produced during the 13th to 18th centuries reflected a preoccupation with ethical, moral, dharmic issues and values which were derived from established sources of religious and cultural authority such as the Puranas, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, accounts of the life of the prophet Mohammed, the biographical tradition that developed around the figure of Shri Chaitanya and other Vaishnava gurus . Much of this literature fits the rubric of what scholars of Bengali literature have described as *panchali sahitya* i.e. these texts were

primarily intended for performance and were sung or recited to audiences. The significance and implications of this feature have been discussed at greater length below. In this paper, my discussion of middle Bengali literature is primarily directed towards this type of performative panchali literature. Typically, Bengali Vaishnava literary productions are treated separately because of their connection to a religious-sectarian movement which is conventionally regarded as singular and unprecedented in terms of articulating a conception of the individual and his/her relationship with the divine as well as a somwhat different conception of society and relationships among various social groups. However, the performative/narrative aspects of certain types of Vaishnava literature – such as the poetry (padavalis) and song lyrics to be sure, but also, to some extent, versified hagiographies – such as the *Chaitanyabhagavata* for instance, or, the countless *Krishnalilas* which were composed during this period – can also perhaps be treated at a certain level as *panchalis* the verbalization of which and the hearing of which brought moral and religious virtue to both the singer/reciter and to the listener. Neverthless, Vaishnava literature does perhaps need separate treatment. In this paper therefore, I concentrate primarily on the other kinds of performative literature produced in Bengali between the 13th to the 18th centuries ; I refer to Vaishnava works only when they serve to illustrate a general point which they shared in common with other branches of middle Bengali literature such as the Mangalkavyas, Ramayanas, Pirkathas etc.

Bakhtin's famous hypothesis regarding a " a revolt of the vernaculars" vis –a- vis Latin in early modern Europe finds an echo of sorts in Sudipta Kaviraj's characterization of the emergence and consolidation of a Bengali literary tradition in terms of an "undeclared revolution" [5] against the more elitist Sanskrit. However, for the most part, Bengali literary narratives, very self-consciously and deliberately

[5] Sudipta Kaviraj, " Writing, Speaking, Being: Language and the Historical Formation of Identities in India" in Dietmar Rothermund (ed.), ----------, p. 35.

positioned themselves in a derivative relationship to Sanskrit literature to be sure, but also to Persian and to certain varieties of Hindavi, particularly Braj as well. The older, classical and prestigious literatures of Sanskrit and Persian functioned as ovearching templates which provided models in terms of idioms, allusions, vocabulary and reference points to the developing vernacular tradition. As will be illustrated below, many of the poets of middle Bengali literature were deeply conscious of practicing their creative craft vis- a- vis the presence of the "superposed" Sanskrit and Persian literary traditions ; many of them were also formally educated in and proficient with literatures in more than one language. Conscious endeavours to tighten the relationship of Bengali literature to Sanskrit was evident, almost from the 13th/14th centuries and may have attained a peak during what Dinesh Chandra Sen characterized as the "Pauranik revival" of the 16th century **[CHECK]**. The celebrated *Chaitanya Charitamrita* of Krishnadasa Kaviraja (17th century) is perhaps the best testament to the carefully preserved bond between Sanskrit and Bengali. As Tony Stewart describes this text, " its extensive Bengali narrative was hung on a scholastic framework of copious Sanskrit citation and quotation, a Bengali tale self-consciously shored with the authority of the Sanskrit classics" .[6] Yet another well-observed phenomenon of this type was evident again in the 19th century at the hands of pandit intellectuals such as Vidyasagar and others. The context of the 19th century program of "Sanskritization" was however different from the prior one. The superposition of Persian and Arabic vis- a vis Bengali literature gained strength particularly from the 16th century and probably crested during the 18th. As Suniti Kumar Chatterji demonstrated, there was a steady expansion in the use of Persian-Arabic vocabulary in Bengali literary compositions from the 15th century till the 18th. In both cases of superposition, the older, classical literary traditions were perceived to provide religious and cultural weight and prestige to a newer, younger literary tradition.

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[6] Tony K. Stewart, *The Final Word. The Caitanya Caritamrita and the Grammar of Religious Tradition,* New York, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 21.

Brajabuli

Although not to the same extent as Sanskrit and Persian,varieties of Hindavi, particularly the literary language termed Brajabuli [i.e. the buli/boli or speech of the Braj] also assumed the status of a superposed literature of sorts primarily in Vaishnava lyric poetry. Its presence and influence was also detectable in potery and song compositions produced and used by Bengal's aristocracy from the late 15th century till the late 18th century. Through its association with the Braj region which contained the most sacred sites of Vaishnavism, Brajbhasha had become the medium for Vaishnava devotional literature in regions as far apart as Gujarat, the Punjab, Northern India, Central India and also Bengal, Orissa, Asasam, Mithila and Nepal . Allison Busch has established the function of Brajbhasha as a vehicle of trans-regional courtly literature including, the Mughal imperial court and courtly circles from the late 16th century. Most Bengal and Bengali-centric scholarship explains the advent of Brajabuli literature in Bengal as a result of this region's intellectual and cultural connections to the adjoining kingdom of Mithila and defines it as a literary language based on a combination of Maithili and Bengali words. In Sukumar Sen's portrayal, it was almost coincidental that the popularity of Maithili poetry corresponded chronologically with a new wave of Vaishnava devotionalism and thus this " mischprache" as he calls it, became a much-beloved and remarkably long-lived medium for Vaishnava-themed poetry and song . Bengal's cultural connection to Mithila is beyond question. However, the wide use of Braj in both courtly and devotional circles in regions which are not likely to have had close contacts with Mithila raises doubts as to whether this can be seen as a complete explanation. A more complete explanation, in my perspective, would retain the influence of Mithila and Maithili on medieval Bengal, but would expand it to include the fact that this literary medium in Bengal was inspired by the devotional culture of Vaishnavism emanating from the Braj and by the currency it had acquired among political elites in Northern India . Over the many centuries of its use in Bengal, Brajabuli came to contain different types of Hindavi (Maithili and what Sukumar Sen describes as "oddments of Hindi and Brajbhakha") words

in combination with Bengal's regional vernacular, the proportions of these varying from poet to poet and over time.

The superposition of forms of Hindavi vis-a vis Bengal's vernacular in very specific types of literary productions underscores the point that variants of a vernacular – in this case, the language of the Braj region - could assume the form ofa trans-regional and almost classical literary medium in particular cultural contexts. Secondly it is a reminder that the consolidation of a regional vernacular need not be studied only in relation to region-specific developments . Political and cultural developments with trans-regional resonances could be equally relevant.

While the presence of forms of Hindavi within Bengal's vernacular literary tradition deserve due notice, Sanskrit and Persian had much greater weight as older superposed literatures. It would be misleading though to regard medieval and early modern Bengali literature as literal translations (in the strictest sense of the term) from materials which were in Sanskrit and Persian . These were actually adaptations into which local sensibilities and preoccupations were incorporated. Secondly, in much of this literature, the principal theme, plot etc. of the core narrative from which the vernacular adptation/re-telling was being effected was retained to some degree, but there were also omissions, modifications as well as the introduction of sub-plots, side-stories etc. which cannot be traced back to classics in Sanskrit or Persian and Arabic.[7] The Mangalkavyas are generally – and quite legitimately – regarded as vernacular Puranas. At the same time however, the Mangalkavyas were peopled by a large cast of human characters whose earthly trials and travails, aspirations and successes endowed a distinctive human as well as vernacular character to these narratives and distinguished them from the entire tradition of Sanskrit Puranas and Upa Puranas. The Mangalkavyas are also enlivened by vivid

[7] Dinesh Chandra Sen, *The Bengali Ramayanas,* Calcutta, Calcutta University Press, 1920 contains a detailed discussion of this feature.

decriptions of occasions such as weddings, banquests and other types of social gatherings together with detailed descriptions of the various types of food served , the clothes and jewelry worn by men and women. The lists of edible dishes served at such gatherings and the local customs observed atsuch events provided opportunities to incorporate regional culinary tastes, local tastes and customs regarding clothes, ornamentation etc. into these narratives and thereby to impart to them a distinctively regional, Bengali flavour. The same holds true for the many vernacular adaptations of the Sanskrit epics. To quote Dinesh Chandra Sen, "the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were Bengalicised rather than translated into Bengali". [8] A tradition of love stories involving human characters were adapted from Persian classics such as Laila-Majnun or, Awadhi narratives such as the Padmavat and rendered into Bengali and given local/regional Bengali touches of the type described above.

Neither can we conclude that literary-cultural influences were undirectional and flowed always from the "higher" , classicised traditions of Sanskrit and Persian towards the "lower" , more proletarian , vernacular sphere. The courtly classic *Gitagovinda*, whose lyrical verses took not only medieval Bengal, but many parts of medieval and post medieval India by storm, essentially represented the gentrification of what was possibly a non-Sanskritic/vernacular, folk tradition about the dalliance of the cowherd god Krishna with the gopis and particularly with Radha. As Sukumar Sen observed, a vigorous, earthy tradition surrounding Krishna and Radha was dressed up in much more sophisticated garb and then presented by Jaydeva before a courtly audience presided over by the Sena monarch, Lakshmana Sena. Chandidasa's *Shrikrishnakirtana* functions as a fascinating confirmation of the circularity of literary and cultural dialogue between the " high" and the "low" since it represented the re-packaging of Jaydeva's work for a much more proletarian and rural audience. Its frank and blunt sexuality for instance

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[8] Ibid, p. 66.

scanadalized and embarrassed early 20th century literary scholars when a manuscript of the *Shrikrishnakirtana* was discovered in a cowshed in the village of Kankilya, near Bishnupur in 1904.

In any case, the 13th/ 14th centuries witnessed the sustained growth of a written vernacular literature which had not been in evidence in the pre-existing Pala and Sena periods. The following sections probe the factors that lay behind this development.

The Political Revolution and the Vernacular Revolution

As seen above, Pollock's vernacularization hypothesis, posits that regional polities were a key factor in enabling the rise of written vernacular literature across many parts of South Asia . The Bengal polity is however excluded from this overarching scenario. Sudipta Kaviraj's view of all pre-modern polities – including the Bengal polity - as "spectacular" but, actually "marginal", forms the basis for his view that vernacular literization in Bengal had little or nothing to do with the polity. In Kaviraj's interpretation, the most important factor in the consolidation of a literized vernacular literature in Bengal was the Chaitanya-centered Vaishnava movement [CHECK]. While the significance of this devotional movement in stimulating the production of certain specific types of Bengali literature (i.e. biographies /hagiographies) in particular, is undoubted, this proposition cannot be deployed as a rationale for overlooking the connection of the medieval and early modern polity in Bengal to the production of vernacular literature. The nature of the modern state and the mechanisms at its disposal for manifesting its power cannot of course be projected backwards and applied directly to pre-modern polities. But, neither can a blanket assertion about the invariably "marginal" nature of such polities be given credibility. A growing body of scholarship on medieval and early modern India has of late underscored the function of such polities, particularly in terms of shaping certain cultural phenomena . Finally, it is true that Bengal's Vaishnavaism is conventionally studied without much attention to its political

implications and connections. But were this aspect to be studied thoroughly, the links of this devotional sect to different levels of the polity within Bengal as well as without, might shed light on a very significant dimension of it.

I conceptualize Bengal's polity from the 12th/ 13th till the late 18th centuries as a layered hierarchy which was presided over at the top by the most powerful potentate in the region. This potentate as well as those stationed at lower levels of the polity vis- vis him, wielded political and administrative power but, these were paired with the very important duty of practicing and preserving what happened at any given period to be the "mainstream" cultural and ideological underpinnings of the polity and of the communities affiliated to it. For certain stretches of time during the period studied here, the Bengal polity was also attached to extra-regional centres of political power, such as the Delhi sultanate and from the late 16th century, the Mughal empire. My argument here is that the political change in the early 13th century which installed a series of Indo-Islamic kings as Bengal's paramount rulers, helped to usher in a vernacular revolution. The view therefore about Bengal's political system being by and large irrelevant to the sustained development of vernacular literature needs to be revised.

The Sena kings who ruled Bengal prior to the conquest of this region by the Turkish military adventurer, Bakhtiyar Khalji, belonged to an early medieval, Indic milieu in which the culture of the royal courts was embodied by Sanskrit kavya which was produced and enjoyed at these sites. As Pollock has demonstrated, Sanskrit kavya was the literary, cultural and aesthetic complement to the mode of political power and Brahmanical kingship personified by the Senas and by regional rulers in other parts of the Indian sub-continent. This phenomenon, which can be traced back to Gupta and pre-Gupta times, reached a stronger, more intense form in the high mahakvya associated with the courts of Harshavardhana and Yashovarman in Kanauj in Northern India (7th/8th centuries C.E.) and with King Vikramaditya VI of the later Chalukya dynasty (11th century). Some of these monarchs – such as

Harshavardhana and Yashovarman – were poets themselves, or, at any rate, wished to be regarded as poets. Their courts were graced by literary luminaries such as Banabhatta and Mayura in the case of Harsha, Bhavabhuti in the case of Yashovarman and by Bilhana, Sriharsha and others with the later Chalukya kingdom. Why was kavya given so much importance and what function did it perform in the Sena polity as well as in the regional kingdoms of early medieval India, generally speaking?

As territorial kingdoms shrank and assumed the form of smaller regional states (i.e. they were smaller in comparison to the territorially larger and conceptually "universal" kingdoms of earlier eras such as the Maurya and Gupta empires for example) in different parts of South Asia around the turn of the second millennium, their rulers, assumed more and more grandiose titles (*rajadhiraja, maharajadhiraja* etc.) almost as a way of compensating for the smaller territories and populations over whom they ruled. As part of a wider process of readjustment in the organization of their kingdoms , *kavya* , among other things functioned as a mode of projecting royal power and authority in grandiose terms which often did not match up with the facts on the ground as it were. In the *kavya* anthology the *Saduktikarnamrita,* for example, a poem attributed to Sarana, refers to Lakshmanasena's actual conquests over ----------.

The Sanskrit literature current in Bengal from the 5th/6th centuries C.E. through the Pala and Sena periods has been noted above. The special salience of Sansrit kavya to the Sena polity is discussed here briefly. As Jesse Knutson's important and insightful study shows, this was a scenario in which the kings were poets as were their highest officials , courtiers and close associates - this raises the question about the political functions of Sanskrit kavya. As territorial kingdoms shrank and assumed the form of smaller regional states (i.e. smaller in comparison to the territorially larger and conceptually "universal" kingdoms of earlier eras such as the Maurya and Gupta empires for example) in different parts of South Asia around the turn of the second millennium, their rulers, assumed more and more grandiose titles (*rajadhiraja, maharajadhiraja* etc.) almost as a way of compensating for the smaller territories and

populations over whom they ruled. As part of a wider process of readjustment in the organization of their kingdoms , *kavya* , among other things functioned as a mode of projecting royal power and authority in grandiose terms which often did not match up with the facts on the ground as it were. In the *kavya* anthology the *Saduktikarnamrita,* for example, a poem attributed to Sarana, refers to Lakshmanasena's actual conquests over ----------. There are however, many more poems that extol Lakshmanasena's imaginary conquests over the Chola, Anga, Kuntala etc. kingdoms . These, conquests according to Knutson," belonged entirely to the realm of artful fantasy ..... [and] presents an official, public fantasy " [9]

Secondly, the heavy emphasis on the ability to produce and/or enjoy kavya – symptomatic in a broader sense of other refined and sophisticated enjoyments as well – underscores the importance attached to the cultural foundations of political power. The king and those around him were expected to embody the normative principles and practices that they supported as an indispensable aspect of the responsibility of governance. These included bravery in war, commitment to dharma (in accordance with the way in which dharma was understood and defined by a particular ruling circle), charity and generosity, proficiency in the arts of love and the potential to produce, support and appreciate high quality music, poetry etc. The image of the king as a *rasika* i.e. a connoiseur of the right aestheic qualities was of course a well-developed notion which can be traced back many centuries prior to the period being studied here. Thus Samudra Gupta, the conqueror par excellence and the prototype perhaps of the principal protagonist (i.e. the world-conquering king Raghu) in Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsam* was described as *"kaviraja"* (king of poets) in the Allahabad Pillar inscription and depicted playing a musical instrument on his coins. The Bengal sultan, ---------- was described by a contemporary poet as the "bee which enjoys the lotus representing all the fine arts" (*"sarva-kala-nalini-bhogita-*

[9] Knutson, "Consolidation of Literary Registers.....", p. 53.

mahakara") As V. Narayan Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam demonstrate in their study of the Nayaka kingdoms of Southern India , the image of the king as virile, virtuous and compassionate in the arts of war, love and governance and a *rasika*, an afficiando, of the finest types of literature, music etc. was alive and well in early modern South Asian polities as well. At a certain level, thus, Sanskrit mahakavya functioned almost as an "apparatus of state". (knutson).

The abrupt collapse of the Sena kingdom at the beginning of the 13th century brought about a significant reconfiguration of the literary-cultural universe of Bengal. As B.D. Chattopadhyaya, Pushpa Prasad and others have shown, Indo-Islamic rulers of the Delhi sultanate and of the various regional sultanates continued to use Sanskrit up to some extent on coins and inscriptions. For Bengal, we know that Bakhtiyar Khalji issued a coin bearing the Sanskrit inscription "*Gauda vijaye*" to commemorate his conquest of Bengal. The sultans of Bengal however, were less invested in the patronage of the type of Sanskrit mahakavya which had come to be so very closely associated with the Sena court. This should not be taken to mean that the enjoyment of Sanskrit kavya and/or their reading and circulation came to an abrupt halt in Bengal. The educated gentry and the political elites stationed at lower levels of the polity continued to support and encourage the study of Sanskrit and for many centuries, pandits based in Bengal produced countless tikas/commentaries on Sanskrit kavya. But, Sanskrit kavya was undoubtedly dislodged now from the sole pre-eminence it had enjoyed hitherto as the language of courtly literature, governance and public purposes . As seen above, Sanskrit enjoyed a long and venerable career in Bengal (right up to the 19th century) as the language of intellectual, shastric discourse, the language in which works on logic (navya nyaya) , grammar, medical treatises, smritis, philosophy etc. were composed. But, as Sushil Kumar De strongly emphasized, Sanskrit ceased to be the language of choice for expressive literature in Begal from the 13th century onwards. The language of choice for the composition of materials which touched upon different aspects of the human condition (

these included adaptations from the Sanskrit and Persian literature) was the regional vernacular, Bengali. As mentioned above, the Turkish conquest of Bengal was accompanied by the advent of Persian and Arabic to the region. Arabic was used primarily on coins issued by the Bengal sultans and for inscriptions attached to mosques and tombs; Persian took over the function of Sanskrit as the language of governance, the language of political elites clustered around the Sultan's court. Thus, the beginning of the 13th century witnessed a general "scrambling" of the literary environment of Bengal: it disturbed the status of Sanskrit, saw the introduction of Arabic and Persian for various public and state purposes and the rise of a written vernacular literature which was oriented to adaptations from trans-regional literary cultures with an emphasis on life-experiences of human beings.

As Knutson's work shows, a vernacular literary impulse had been evident in the high mahakavya produced in the Sena literary salon. But, the sustained development of written Bengali literature must be dated to the 13th/14th centuries and its connection to the inception of Indo-Islamic rule in Bengal cannot be treated as mere coincidence. The re-configuration of the literary-cultural environment of Bengal opened up some critical space for the sustained development of a body of literized vernacular literature whose growth occurred in a relationship of tutelage to mainly Sansrit and Persian. It is a well-known truism in literary histories of Northern India that Muslims (Muslim courtly circles as well as Sufis) pioneered the use of vernacular languages for the composition of literary works. As the well-known cluster of *premakhyanas* composed in Awadhi by Sufi authors in the 14th/15th centuries shows, there is indeed some truth in this view. At a certain level, thus, Bengal's vernacular revolution which occurred under its regional sultanate, fits this general truism. On the other hand though, the process of vernacularization was not restricted exclusively to regions where Indo-Islamic polities appeared in the course of the second millennium C.E. and was evident for instance in Southern India and even parts of Northern India [See R.C. Majumdar, *History of Medieval Bengal,* Pollock, Busch et al], such as the

kingdom of Gwalior ruled by the Tomar Rajputs [Allison Busch, "The Anxiety of Innovation"]. Regional specificities thus, need to be taken into account ; but, there is something to be said for the inception of Indo-Islamic polities on the one hand and the rise of vernacular literature on the other. Bengal is certainly a case in point, but, so is Gujarat under Muslim rule, first under governors sent from Delhi and then, from the ___ century, under autonomous sultans **[CHECK WITH SAMIRA's WORK] .** If, the Indo-Islamic presence is acknowledged to be an important factor – though not the only one – in strengthening the impulse towards written literature in regional vernaculars, then, the new distribution of literary labours among various languages needs to be identified as instrumental in stimulating the growth of Bengali and some other vernacular literatures.

A material factor whose role in the rise of written vernacular literature has not been considered at all so far, is the greater spread of paper and more particularly, the historical link between paper-making, Islamic military-political expansion and the spread of paper-use in these regions. This is also, incidentally, a pointer to the current (occasionally excessive?) preoccupation of historical and other related scholarship to cultural factors, to a point where even seemingly obvious material factors are left unexamined.

Brahmanization, Islamization and the Bengali Literary Tradition

In his "Notes to the Study of Grammar", Antonio Gramsci observed that, " Every time that the language question reappears , in one mode or another, it signifies that a series of other problems are beginning to impose themselves" Among typical problems identified by Gramsci was " ....the need to ....reorganize cultural hegemony". [10] Gramsci 's observation was in relation to Italy of his time. This

[10] Antonio Gramsci, " Notes to the Study of Grammar", cited by Jonathan Steinberg, " The historian and the Questione Della Lingua" in Peter Burke and Roy Porter (eds.), *The Social History of Language,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 206. I have used Steinberg's translation from the original Italian.

observation however, holds true to a significant extent about medieval Bengal . Thus, the reconfiguration of the literary-linguistic environment in the early 13th century of which the rise of written vernacular literature was a part, needs also to be positioned vis –a vis certain cultural -political processes which were operational in Bengal . These processes help us explore the political and cultural functions performed by middle Bengali literature.

A phenomenon of Sanskritic Brahmanization had been unfolding in Bengal for many centuries and can be traced back to at least the Gupta period. Brahmanization, here denotes a socio-political order grounded in the fundamental premises of Brahmanism i.e. the moral validity of a social order based on varnashrama principles, the primacy of Brahmans as arbiters of a moral-political order ,the tenets of which were most typically embodied in the Sanskrit shastras. Sanskritic-Brahmanism was also associated with notions of dharmic kingship , approved norms of social conduct and an entire range of practices pertaining to the household as well as to the samaj/community and cultural/social life. As the work of Herman Kulke and others have shown, Sanskritic-Brahmanization had functioned for centuries as an important mechanism for the consolidation of political authority via the formal apparatus of a monarchical state.

In Bengal, Brahmanism had been engaged in a prolonged tussle with Buddhism and Tantra – particularly the more "extreme" varieties of the latter – for quite some time preceding the inception of Sena rule. Local potentates (such as the probably legendary king Adisura) had typically spearheaded the agenda to implant a "purer", more robust form of Brahmanism here and to tame – and eradicate if possible – the more egregious varieties of Tantra and Buddhism. The association of the Pala monarchs of Bengal with Buddhism is of course well-known. But as Pala period inscriptions , sculpture etc. indicate, these kings were careful to maintain a tradition of land endowments to Brahmans, express respect for Brahmanical deities and Brahmanical shastras . In the words of the Munger copper plate inscription

dated to the reign of King Devapala (810-849 C.E.): *"..... Dharmapala, who, conversant with the precept of the sastras, by restraining those who swerved from the right course , made the castes conform to their proper tenets."*

The Sena dynasty was far more aggressive in their championship of Brahmanical Hinduism and in their proclaimed opposition to both Buddhism and Tantra. The strongest evidence of this comes from the project of social engineering engaged in by Vallalasena and Lakshmanasena , particularly the former. This took the form of authoritative readjustments of varna/jati hierarchies in Bengal and the clearer demarcation of certain high-status lineages as "kulinas" or elites within the jati-based social order. In the period following the Turkish conquest, Brahmanism identified Islam as its dangerous and subversive opponent ; it also at times included among its antagonists the more pronouncedly jati-neutral, proletarian varieties of Bengali Vaishnavism as well. Puranas supposedly composed in Bengal , such as the *Brihaddharmapurna* a as well as the Kulagrantha corpus provides abundant evidence to confirm this point.

The type and content of the literary narratives composed in Bengal during the middle period of its vernacular literary tradition indicates that at least one very important impetus behind it was derived from the interest in disseminating and strengthening the regional variety of Brahmanism, The very many eulogies or "mangals" of various deities, the vernacular recastings of the great epics and vernacular re-tellings of the life and exploits of Krishna served this function. But, of course, as cautioned above, the vernacular Puranas also served as vehicles within which were nested tales of human adventure, romance, trials and tragedies which appealed to the emotions and lived experiences of ordinary men and women. The Turkish invasion may well have strengthened and energised the Brahmanical impulse to reach out to lower levels of Bengal's society and as Sukumar Sen and much more recently, Jawhar Sircar, have maintained, this endeavour adapted a vernacularized form and idiom.The vernacular

Krishnalilas, Mangalkabyas, the Bengali Ramayanas and Mahabharatas need to be positioned vis- a vis this context. Gangetic Bengal was the bastion of this region's Brahmanical civilization; away from the Ganges valley, in the hilly and forested fringes and margins, the nexus between the cultivation of Sanskrit and Bengali literature and its link to the formal consolidation of political power and inevitably, cultural power as well by local kings was particularly noticeable from the $14^{th}/15^{th}$ centuries onwards [CHECK]. Here too the expansion of kingly power and the formal apparatus of rule in these little kingdoms was implicated with the principles of Brahmanism. Thus the Malla rajas of Bishnupur , the Koch kingdom (Kamta) under Raja Bishwasimha and his successors, in the kingdoms of Tripura, Kachar and even Kamarupa, the careful cultivation of Sanskrit and Bengali literature was symptomatic of a deeper process of the entrenchment of more formal modes of state and social organization.

In the post-Sena period, local rajas and potentates assumed the cultural functions of Brahmanical kingship and assumed responsibility for the regulation of the Brahmanical social order.[11] As I have shown elsewhere, most local Hindu potentates were associated with the administration of various sultans as high officials and courtiers. [12] In a way, thus, the Indo-Islamic sultans of Bengal and subsequently, the Mughals and their successors provided the enabling conditions without which high status Brahmanical aristocrats would not have had the material-financial resources to support and regulate the regional Brahmanical order. It is important though to remember that such championship of regional/local forms of Brahmanism was counter-balanced by the adherence of high-status Hindu gentry and aristocracy to certain aspects of Islamicate – particularly Persianized culture.

Direct support for the production of Bengali literature, much of which was adaptations of the Puranas and the Sanskrit epics was not restricted to Hindu potentates alone. High ranking Muslim officials of the

[11] K.Chatterjee, "Kings, Communities and Chronicles: The Kulagranthas of Bengal", *Studies in History,* 2005.

[12] K.Chatterjee, " Scribal Elites in Sultanate and Mughal Bengal".

sultanate also extended their patronage to the poets and authors of such literary works [13] and there is a strongly entrenched view among scholars of Bengal's history and literature that the pre-Mughal Bengal sultans, particularly the independent sultans of this region i.e. the later Ilyas Shahi kings and the Hussain Shahi monarchs were literally the architects of Bengali literature in its early phase. The succeeding Mughal regime – particularly, high ranking Mughal officials are usually not associated with having espoused aspects of Bengal's regional culture, including its vernacular literature. All these points have been explored further below. We need to note here however that despite some scholarly views to the contrary, [14] it is impossible to identify a consistent and deliberate policy both among the Bengal sultans and the Mughal provincial administration here of trying to disrupt the region's Brahmanical society and culture. There are instances of the despoliation of Hindu temples particularly in the early years of the sultanate; there are scattered references to efforts by officials of the sultanate to destroy the jati status of specific individuals who had fallen foul of the sulatanate's government (the latter point in particular needs much greater study and analysis) But, these are greatly counter-balanced by the quite remarkable involvement of upper-class, high status Brahmanical lineages with the sultanate's government and with the material rewards and social prestige earned by these families from their associations with the ruling power. Bengal's kulagrantha corpus, representing the direct endeavour to maintain a Brahmanical social order, does not mention efforts by the Sultans to involve themselves in regulating the regional Brahmanical order and its hierarchies ; neither did these kings choose to selectively elevate a particular Brahmanical jati vis- a vis others . In these respects, the Mughal regime in Bengal appears to have followed the precedent set by the preceding Turkish , Afghan and other Muslim dynasties who had ruled over this region for several centuries prior to it. These features of Bengal's

[13] Roy, *The Islamic Syncretist Tradition,* pp. ___.

[14] E.g. R.C. Majumdar, *History of Medieval Bengal*

history, pose a contrast to some other pre-modern Indian polities, the Maratha polity for instance where the government in power quite deliberately promoted the political and material power of the Chitpavan Brahmins vis-a vis other Brahmin jatis of Western India and also played a pretty direct role in regulating the Brahmanical social order of that region. Finally, Brahmanism with its emphasis on the maintenance of social hierarchies, acceptance of monarchical authority and a matrix of mutually related social and cultural duties and responsibilities between the king and his subjects on the one hand and among various social strata on the other, ~~was~~ may have been seen by the different Indo-Islamic regimes that ruled Bengal as a force that could help rather than hinder them in consolidating their power.

~~The segment above on Sanskrit literature produced in Bengal referred to a range~~ The corpus body of Sanskrit Puranas and Upa-Puranas as well as Smriti treatises and a large body of genealogical literature that was produced and disseminated in Bengal from before the 13th century and right down to the end of the period chosen for study in this paper. These represented the scholarly, textual complement to the Brahmanical process in Bengal. There is nothing to suggest that the composition of smriti and other types of Shatric literature in Bengal suffered a decline with the advent of the sultanate and then of Mughal rule. On the contrary, ~~we know about~~ as seen above the honours showered on well-known Sanskrit scholars and pandits by some of Bengal's Muslim rulers. ~~The famous Brahmin scholar Bachaspati Mishra~~, the author among ~~other things of the treatise called the~~ *Smritiratnahara,* was honoured by Sultan Jalaluddin , the son of Raja Ganesh and according to Sukhamoy Mukhopadhyaya, ~~given the titles of~~ "Roymukut" (i.e. "King's crown") and "Pandita Sarvabhauma" ("pandit of the entire realm") by Sultan Ruknuddin Barbak Shah. In the introduction to ~~his commentary~~ on the *Amarakosa,* Bachaspati Mishra ~~described how he had been publicly honoured~~ by the king : he was given gifts of jewels studded with flashing gems, ~~umbrellas and a horse; he was made to sit upon an elephant and water from a~~ container

made of gold was sprinkled over him (this ritual was called kanakasnana).[15] In his *Padachandrika*, Bachaspati Mishra described his sons as the "supreme gems among the ministers of the king" ("*nripamantri-mauli-manayah")*. Even if we discount some of these praises as the natural exaggeration by a parent, the fact that one of his sons held the title of Biswas Roy suggests that they probably held very high offices in the administration , most likely of Barbak Shah.[16] Another Sanskrit scholar of great stature, Vidyavachaspati, was described as a pandit, the "dust of whose feet touched the crown jewels [on the head of] the Lord of Gauda" ("*Gauda-kshitipati-shikha-ratna-ghristhanghri-renur-vidyavachaspati")* . The " Gauda-kshiti-pati" in this case was Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah (----).[17] Under the nawabs of Murshidabad, we know of close links between Nawabs Murshid Quli Khan (approximately 1700-1719) and Ali Vardi Khan (1740-1756) with Vaishnava theologians; Ali Vardi Khan was particularly close to the Vaishnava guru and Sanskrit scholar, Radhamohana Thakura. There are also references to Ali Vardi offering patronage to Sanskrit scholars such as Baneshwara Vidyalankara and the famous Jagannatha Tarkapanchanana. These examples attest to the supportive role played by Bengal's Muslim rulers to Sanskritic-Brahmanical scholarship.

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[15] Sukhomoy Mukhopadhyaya, *Banglar Itihaser Du'Sho Bachar: Swadhin Sultander Amal,* pp. 26-27, Suresh Chandra Bandyopadhyaya, *Samskrita Sahitye Bangalir Dan,* Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, Calcutta, B.S. 1369, pp. 145-146. Bandyoapadhyaya does not include Sultan Barbak Shah among the royal patrons of Roymukut Brihaspati and only mentions Suktan Jalaluddin as a patron this pandit. Mukhopadhyaya's much more detailed analysis suggests that both sultans offered patronage to Roymukut Brihaspati at different times in the latter's career. For my purposes, it is less important to ascertain whether one or both sultans had been patrons of this pandit & much more important to determine that a Sanskrit pandit was shown such honour by any one, or more than one, of the sultans.

[16] Mukhopadhyaya, *Swadhin Sultander Amal,* pp. 34-35. Titles such as "Khan", "Mullik", "Biswas", "Roy' etc. were typically assigned by the sultans to high-ranking Hindu officials. See, J.N. Sarkar, *History of Bengal,* Abdul Karim, Banglar Itihasa: Sultani Amal, M.R. Tarafdar, *Hussain Shahi Bengal* & Kumkum Chatterjee, " Scribal Elites in Sultanate and Mughal Bengal", forthcoming in Rosalind O'Hanlon (ed.), *IESHR* special issue on Scribal Cultures

[17] Bnadyopadhyaya, *Samskrita Sahitye Bangalir Dan,* pp. 79-80.

Specific genres of Middle Bengali literature can also be represented as functioning as important components of Islamization in Bengal. As the work of Richard Eaton for instance has demonstrated forcefully, "Hindu" and "Muslim" may very well not have functioned as fully operational terms in a rigid theological sense, particularly among the rural proletariat of certain parts of Bengal. But, it is also true that these terms were ploy valent and depending on the specific context, could denote ethnic, cultural and yes, religious differences as well. This biographies of the Prophet, Bengali renderings of classic work s of Persian literature such as the poetic works of Nizami, the love stories of Yusuf-Zulekha, Laila-Majnun and others thus certainly functioned as vehicles of Islamization in Bengal. Here too, the patrons, authors and audiences of these narratives were participants in a milieu in which narratives which had roots in Sanskrit/Brahmanical classics also circulated; they were thus conversant and familiar with the vernacular puranas and panchalis as well. ~~As seen above, works on Islamic theology, commentaries etc. in Arabic and Persian were also produced in Bengal and such endeavours~~, often received support from the sultans and ~~their nobility~~. Muslim Bengali literature, therefore served as the vernacular complement of the former.

Panchali Literature: ~~Patrons~~, Audiences, Scribes and Authors

The content, form and social context of middle Bengali literature confirms the points made above about the historical reasons behind the sustained use of Bengali as a language of literary production from the 13th century C.E. The very term/s used to describe this literary corpus i.e. panchali, vratakatha etc. underscore the fact that these written texts had a very strongly co-existing oral and performative dimension to them as well. These narratives were primarily intended to be recited and/or sung to audiences . In many cases, painted scrolls or *pats* were used as backdrops /illustrations; in cases, puppets too were used to enact the events being sung/recited by the performer. According to Sukumar Sen, the almost –mythical poet Badu Chandidasa, the author of the landmark work known as the

Srikrishnakirtana may have been a poet-composer cum puppeteer at the same time. Therefore, by their very nature, the impetus to disseminate the ideas, values and issues embodied in such compositions lay behind the choice of form in these compositions. Manuscripts of panchali literature contain references to the ragas to which these verse-narratives were to be sung. Almost the entire body of vernacular Bengali lit. produced during these centuries was in verse . Verse – particularly rhyming verse – is pleasing to listeners, lends itself better to oral performance and is also easier to commit to memory. Paradoxically though, part of the impetus behind the textualization of these compositions which had a powerful oral/vocal aspect to them, came from the need of troupes of performers (*gayens)* to have on hand, written versions of these materials which they could use. The experience of listening to recitations or to the singing of panchali literature as part of an audience also served to create and reinforce a sense of community grounded in common literary-linguistic-cultural tastes and sensibilities. This particular feature i.e. the collective/communal participation in singing and recitation of "*Panchali-Puranas*" as an 18th century author of a Dharmamangala text desc ribed them, continued into the age of print in Bengal. In the mid-19th century, the author of an article published in the *Calcutta Review* observed that it was very common to see that in the evenings, when the day's work was done, groups of poor, labouring men would gather around a person who could read aloud to them from a *panchali* or from the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata.* [18]

Neither was such a practice confined only to the proletarian classes. According to the *Seir Mutakhirin*, the household of the Nawabs of Murshidabad included story-tellers; Some scholars have also mainatined that these nawabs enjoyed having the Puranas read out to them. Although not supported by strong evidence, it may well have been a credible practice in the 18th century. As the remeniscences of Rabindranath and his sister Swarnakumari Devi (an author of considerable contemporary reputation

[18] "Popular Literature of Bengal" (anonymous author), *Calcutta Review,* vol. 13, Jan-June 1850, p. 257.

herself) show, such singing- reading sessions were equally common in wealthy households in the late 19th century, particularly, among women. Rabindranath described domestic s essions where he and his siblings read out the Bhagavata and other texts (including often their own literary creations) to his mother and other female relatives. Swarnakumari Devi referred to Vaishnavis who visited the women of the household and regaled them with recitations and songs from the rich Bengali Vaishnava literary corpus.[19] The practice of reading aloud canonical literary-cultural works has been immortalized also in a well-known essay by the Bengali litterateur ~~Sayyid Mujtaba Ali~~ S. Wajed Ali in the 20th century [CHECK].[20]

The type of people who were the listeners of this type of literature, were drawn – depending on the particular work and the literary register (i.e. "high" versus "low") in which it was composed – from the entire spectrum of society: pancahalis such as the Ramayanas, the Mangalkavyas, the pir kathas etc. were heard and enjoyed by very ordinary people as well as the more respectable, affluent, literate people of the localities where they these were performed. The latter were often the patrons of the poets and authors who authored these texts. We know of panchali performances in humble, rustic settings [**NEED concrete examples**] as well as in the sabhas and darbars of local rajas and other elites. Two of the best known Mangalkabya narratives i.e. Mukundaram Chakravarty's *Chandimangala* and Bharatchnadra Roy's *Annadamangalkavya* were supposedly performed for the first time at the sabhas of their respective patrons i.e. Raja Bankura Roy of Brahmanbhum in Midnapur, in the case of the former poet and Raja Krishnachandra Roy of Nadia, in the case of the second. The travel narrative known as the *Tirthamangala* was composed at the behest of Joynarayan Ghoshal[CHECK] by Bijoyram Sen "Bisharad" in 1769/70 A.D. It was performed at the sabha of the Ghoshal family at their palace in

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[19] Rabindranath Thakur, "Jivansmriti" in Rabindra Racahanavali, vol ____, Swarnakumari Devi, " Amader Grihe Anahpur Shiksha O Tahar Samskar" in Brojendranath Bandyopadhyaya (ed.), *Sahitya Sadhak Charitmala,* vol.2, p. ____.

[20] ~~Sayyid Mujtaba Ali, *Deshe Bideshe*~~ ? S. Wajed Ali, Bharat baesha

Bhukailash, in the vicinity of Calcutta. The sabhas of these elites certainly included the officials, courtiers, friends, kinsmen and associates of these rajas. The *Annadamangalakavya* names the officials and kinsmen who comprised the court of Raja Krishnachnadra Roy. My surmise is that panchali performances also often included ordinary *prajas* of the raja - the very logic of much of pre-modern Bengali panchali literature in terms of their form, features etc. was grounded in the assumption that there was an audience which included ordinary people (more on this point below).

It is important to remember that though it may not have been the principal reason, written texts of this literature also abound. These have been found (as expected) in libraries and manuscript collections of the elites and apart from performance purposes, were also obviously used for silent, individual reading. But, what is actually remarkable is that the relatively large numbers of Bengali literary manuscripts "dsicovered" in the later 19th and 20th centuries points to the much larger involvement of relatively ordinary, humble people with written literary texts in their capacities as readers, owners and scribes. As Juthika Basu-Bhaumik's study of the colophons of Bengali manuscripts shows, people of relatively low jati backgrounds (tanti, mali, dom, bagdi, karmakar, kumbhakar, napit etc.) figured often as owners as well as scribes of literary texts.

[[Thus, the scribe who copied a version of the Ramayana in 1685 Saka described himself as Ishwari Das of the Kaivarta jati [Basu-Bhaumik, p. 53], in the year 1189 B.S. Mohanlal Rajak , a resident of Radhanagar commissioned a written copy of a work entitled 'Gurudakshina" from a certain Bancharam De, [p. 53], Shah Muhammad, a Muslim scribe, made a copy of the "Sundarkanda" of the Krittivasi Ramayana in Saka 1631 [p. 53] in 1778, a certain Ramnarayan Gop transcribed Gangadas Sen's " Devjani Upakhyan" [p. 53].]]

People of low –status backgrounds were also often owners of such manuscripts. As the internal evidence from middle Bengali literature shows, a network of schools and educational institutions (tols, chatushpathis, madrasas etc.) existed all over Bengal for the purpose of imparting the most basic kind of education as well as much higher levels of scholarly training. Ordinary, non-elite people must have acquired basic reading and writing skills at village-level pathshalas. Given this historical scenario, it is perhaps not surprising that when in the late 19th/early 20th centuries, scholars such as Dinesh Chandra Sen, Nagendranath Basu and others began an intense search for extant Bengali manuscripts, very many of them were discovered in peasant households. Women also functioned as scribes. This was certainly true of women of aristocratic backgrounds - we know, for example, that Pattamahadevi Dhwajamani, the consort of the Malla king ____ of Bishnupur made a copy of the Vaishnava work *Premavilasa* authored by Nityananda Dasa. Women from Vaishnava households in general tended to be much more literate compared to others.

As noted above, there is a widely held view that the sultans of Bengal and their officials were directly involved in providing patronage and encouragement to poets and authors who wrote in the vernacular. As Dinesh Chandra Sen wrote, "....We believe that the Muslim conquest of Bengal elevated the fortunes of the Bengali language". [21] Other eminent scholars of Bengal's history and culture – such as Sir Jadunath Sarkar, Abdul Karim, M.R. Tarafdar and Richard Eaton, for example, also support this point of view. The particular sultan who is conventionally hailed as the most remarkable in this regard is Hussain Shah. This hypothesis however, generated a scholarly controversy which can be traced back to over a century ago. The controversy revolves around two principal issues: first, whether it is at all credible to attribute the patronage of vernacular literature to Muslim rulers and second, arguments among scholars regarding the identification of specific sultans as the direct patrons of specific poets and

[21] Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Bangabhasha o Sahitya,* Calcutta, The west Bengal State Book Board, 2002, vol. 1, p. 127.

writers.[22] The latter trajectory of this debate is somewhat less important for this paper for two main reasons: given the difficulty of ascertaining the correct dates and chronology of literary manuscripts of the pre-print era, it is often impossible to determine with complete certainty the royal patrons of particular medieval poets. Secondly, this paper is a general overview of the development of Bengali literature and thus, the focus is less on a specific sultan, and much more on a long period of time from the 13th till the 18th centuries. The first branch of this scholarly controversy is however directly relevant for this article.

Caught up with this branch of the debate is the question of the very nature of Muslim rule in Bengal and more specifically , whether the Bengal sultans were inclined to be tolerant and supportive towards non-Muslim subjects . Perhaps the strongest refutation of the view that neither Hussain Shah nor any of the other Bengal sultans were supportive of Bengali literature and that they were generally tolerant and eclectic in religious and cultural matters has been advanced by R.C. Majumdar. [23] Majumdar's expressed view that in medieval and early modern Bengal, " the Hindu and Muslim communities resembled two strong-walled forts standing side by side"[24] perceives "Hindu" and "Muslim" communities as undifferentiated, homogeneous entities and the only examples of community in pre-modern Bengal (distinctions based on wealth, education, professional ffiliations, cultural tastes etc. are deemed to be totally irrelevant); it also rules out any voluntary cultural interactions between the two communities that he identifies. A wealth of existing research makes it unnecessary for me to engage in a detailed

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[22] See for example, Sukhamoy Mukhopadhyaya, *Banglar Itihaser Du'Sho Bachar* ; also, Abdul Karim, *Banglar Itihasa: Sultani Amal.*

[23] R.C. Majumdar, *History of Medieval Bengal,* Calcutta, G. Bhardwaj and Compnay, 1974.

[24] Ibid, p. 196.

refutation here of Majumdar's characterization of Bengal's Muslim rulers. [25] But there are other scholars – Sukumar Sen and Sukhamoy Mukhopadhyaya for example – who (unlike R.C. Majumdar) do not rule out the possibility of the Sultans being supportive of Bengali literature; their point is that there is not enough evidence to support the direct patronage functions of many of the sultans who are hailed for their support of various Bengali narratives. This part of the debate touches upon the politics and pre-modern conventions of including eulogies and praises of current kings in literary compositions by medieval and early modern poets. This topic is discussed below with reference to Bengal.

Indeed, poetic convention in pre-modern South Asia dictated the mention of contemporary kings and emperors even if no immediate connection existed between a poet in question and a royal personality. Thus, eulogistic and poitive references to kings and sultans by poets cannot always be regarded as evidence of the direct involvement of the royal court in vernacular (or any other) literary productions. [26] There are plenty of examples from pre-modern Bengali literature where poets referred to kings partly because of convention and partly as a way of delineating the time-period of their lives and of situating their personal selves within social and political institutions such as the family, the jati-based samaj, the kingdom ruled by the contemporary raja and so on. One of the most often cited lines in support of the

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[25] Appropriate examples of such literature include, Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretist Tradition in Bengal,* Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier,* Richard M Eaton (ed.), *India's Islamic Traditions*, K. Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal,* " Scribal elites in Sultanate and Mughal Bengal" (forthcoming) and " Goddess Encounters: Mughals, Monsters and the Goddess in Bengal", unpublished paper etc. There is also a large body of recent scholarship which has demonstrated the creative interactions between Indic and Indo-Islamic traditions. Representative examples include, David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (eds.) *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia,* Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2000, Cynthia Talbot, " Becoming Turk the Rajput Way: Conversion and Identity in an Indian warrior Narrative", *Modern Asian Studies,* _____, etc.

[26] See in this connection, Allison Busch, " Brajbhasha Poets at the Mughal Court", *Modern Asian Studies*, 2010, p. 282 and particularly, footnote 38.

Bengal sultans' encouragement of vernacular poetry is from VijayGupta's Manasamangala , composed in the late 15th century [CHECK] does appear to suggest this:

> *" Sultan Hussain Shah stands very high among kings [nripati tilaka]/ The king is as resplendent as the morning sun and like Arjuna in battle / He rules over the world by the prowess of his arms /Under the king's rule the subjects are happy/.....[my home is] Mulk Fatehabad.....[?] / The Ghaghar river flows in the West and in the East the Shandeshwar river/ in between the two is [my]village Phullasri where very many pandits live".*

This is just one among very many other references to various Bengal sultans in eulogistic terms in Bengali poetry as well as in Sanskrit works and in Sanskrit prahastis . Similar eulogies to kings – even distant emperors based in Delhi – occur in literature composed in Mughal Bengal without any suggestion that these writers had ever had any direct relationship with these potentates. ~~Sometimes t~~he identical or similar adjectives were deployed in these eulogies – The Mughal emperor Akbar was described as Arjuna by Dwija Madhava, author of the M*angalchandir Geet* in the late 16th century; Krishnaram Das, author of several Mangalkabyas in the late 17th century, chose to compare the emperor Aurabgzeb to the epic hero Rama. Thus there may indeed be reasons to be careful about establishing a direct connection between what may be fulsome praise for a king which is grounded merely in poetic convention. I however argue here that one cannot also brush away ***all*** references to kings and sultans by poets as merely expressions of literary convention. As we will see below, there are counter examples of eulogies to kings which are far more specific and concrete .

One such example comes from the famous *Shrirama Panchali* of Krittivasa Ojha (by far the most famous of many Bengali Ramayanas) which is dated to the _____ century. Krittivasa gave a detailed and vivid description of his visit to the court of the king he called "Gaudeshwara" because he wanted to receive recognition from the king for his erudition and poetic ability. The vivid, awe-struck descriptions given by Krittivasa regarding the court of the king and the protocol and rituals that were followed

before, during and after he was allowed access to the king, follows remarkably closely, the descriptions of the sultan's court as well as courtly protocol as found in the eye-witness reports of the Chinese visitor Ma –Huan (15th century), members of the very first Portuguese mission sent to the Bengal sultan's court (1521)[27] and by Sanskrit and Persian scholars in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. [28] Krittivasa also named the various courtiers and officials who were present at the place at the time of his visit. There is (as usual) a controversy about whether the "Lord of Gauda" of whose court, Krittivasa gave such a vivid description, was Ruknuddin Barbak Shah, or, Hussain Shah. But, through painstaking research and corroboration from other contemporay sources, Sukhamoy Mukhopadhyaya has identified most of the courtiers mentioned by name by Krittivasa. In his view, many of them served Barbak Shah and some also served Hussain Shah. Thus, references such as the one in Krittivasa's Ramayana cannot be dismissed as convention only. There are other similar examples where the historical identity of a raja or a nobleman associated with the sultanate and the recipient of fulsome praises by a medieval poet can be corrobated by other sources. An excellent example is furnished for instance by the references to Rasti Khan, probably titled Paragal Khan and his son, Chuti Khan or Gavur (?) Khan in the vernacular Mahabharatas by Kavindra Parameshwara and Srikara Nandy (could have been the same person) in the late 15th –early 16th centuries. Paragal Khan was in charge of governing Chittagong; his son, had distinguished himself in the successful military thrust launched by Sultan Hussian Shah's government into Tripura.

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[27] Genevieve Bouchon and Luis Filipe Thomaz ed. & trans., *Voyage dans les deltas du Gange et de l'Irawaddy: Relation Portugais Anouyme,* Paris, Centre Culturel Portugais, 1988, pp. 321-322, cited in Eaton, *The Rise of Islam, p. 65.*

[28] See Sukhamoy Mukhopadhyaya, *Banglar Itihase Du-Sho Bachar;* Sureshchandra Bandyopadhyaya, *Samskrita Sahitye Bangalir Dan*

There are other complementary factors that ~~in my view~~, strengthen the case for characterizing the autonomous Bengal sultanate as supportive of Bengali literature ~~as an aspect of the region's culture~~. During the rule of the later Ilyas Shahi and Hussain Shahi kings, a regional mode of Islamic architecture was developed in Bengal through royal patronage. This style of architecture, among other things, drew upon features of Bengal's domestic architecture (e.g.. the curved roofline of the type of huts in which ordinary people lived). This was a marked contrast to the predeliction of the pre-Ilyas Shahi Bengal sultans whose grand, larger-scale mosques were modelled much more on the classic style of mosque architecture developed in thecore area of the Islamic world i.e. the Middle-East . As the description of the ceremony staged at the sultan's court to honour the scholar Vachaspati Mishra, mentioned above shows, these Indo-Islamic kings also adopted certain rituals associated with Hindu kingship. The kanakasnana ritual for example was known to be followed at the court of the King Prataparudradeva in adjoining Orissa. From about the mid 14th century, the Bengal sultans also strengthened their ties with local society by recruiting larger numbers of local Hindu elites as high officials and courtiers. Sukhamoy Mukhopadhyaya remarked that this may have been a policy impelled by the practical necessity of recruiting educated and competent people as officials and nothing more should be read into it. Abdul Karim rebutted this with the counter-argument that there was no dearth of talented and educated Muslim elites coming into Bengal from areas outside it and therefore, the region's sultans could have chosen to create a bureaucracy consisting mainly of such persons. Instead, they made a conscious choice to draw the region's elites (many of whom were Hindus) into the administration and this, by implication, indicates that the sultans were not averse to elevating Hindu elites to high positions and ~~secondly that they attached a high premium to associating their kingdom with a distinctively regional culture~~. The important point here is that no matter what the motivation, many eminent Brahmanical lineages described by the region's genealogical corpus acquired their material and political power via serving the sultanate and then the Mughal and Nawabi governments. I have discussed elsewhere the

social and cultural consequences of their professional interaction with these Indo-Islamic sovereigns.[29] In the light of these aspects of the Bengal sultanate, references to individual sultans and to their courtiers, vassals and high officials as patrons of literature cannot be made light of as merely conventional praises. The effusive praise for Bengal's sultans as promoters of Bengali language and literature and therefore of a distinct, regional vernacular culture also tends at times to eclipse the fact that, as seen above, they were also attentive to the promotion of certain types of Sanskrit scholarship and Persian –Arabic scholarship.[30] Thus, the encouragement of Bengali literature did not occur at the cost of Sanskrit and Arabic-Persian literature, but , rather, represented a newer trajectory of written literature.

The case for regarding the Bengal sultanate as a promoter of vernacular literature grows stronger when compared to the subsequent Mughal and Nawabi eras. I have not come across comparable eulogies in which the Mughal emperors and high Mughal officials serving in Bengal were invoked as patrons of poets and authors who wrote in Bengali. This in fact is one of the grounds for the emergence of a long held view that while the sultans of Bengal associated themselves with the region' s culture and were sympathetic to it, the Mughal regime and the Mughal successor state formed by the Nawabs of Murshidabad saw themselves as "outsiders" in Bengal and therefore remained aloof and indifferent to its vernacular culture. I have argued against this view elsewhere and believe that neither the Mughals nor the Nawabs of Murshidabad were as indifferent to the region's culture as is typically supposed. [31] Much more research is needed on this topic but for now, I offer, what is perhaps a provisional /partial

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[29] Kumkum Chatterjee, " Kings, Communities and Chronicles", " Scribal Elites in Sultanate and Mughal Bengal" (forthcoming).

[30] Eaton, *The Rise of Islam,* for e.g. emphasizes the patronage of "...popular literature written in Bengali rather than Sanskrit texts...." (p. 67) by the 15th and 16th century Bengal Sultans. See also, pp. 63-69.

[31] Kumkum Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History,* see chapter 7; " Goddess Encounters: Mughals, Monsters and the Goddess in Bengal", unpublished.

explanation for why the Mughal and Mughal- successor regimes in Bengal are rarely –if ever – invoked and thanked for their literary patronage by authors who wrote in Bengali, even by way of convention.

The Mughal polity, particularly from the late 16th century was associated with a Persianized political culture both at the imperial court and in its provinces. As the work of Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam has underscored, Persianization functioned almost as an instrument of the Mughal empire's political culture. Persian was certainly current for particular purposes and among certain segments of the population, in sultanate Bengal. But there occurred a much deeper and wider diffusion of Persianization in Bengal following the Mughal conquest of the region in the late 16th century and this continued for sure into the late 18th century. For a variety of political reasons, the Nawabs of Murshidabad also maintained a careful adherence to the Persianized political culture of the Mughal empire. These factors may help us to understand why there is little evidence of encouragement for vernacular literary production by the Mughal and later-Mughal regime in Bengal – this is not what these regimes may have wanted to be known for. Secondly, by the time of the establishment of Mughal rule over Bengal, a vigorous tradition of written Bengali verse literature was already well-established and flourishing. In the 14th/15th centuries, the phenomenon of literary, written Bengali was still a relatively new phenomenon - the demonstrated support for it by the Sultans and the seemingly public cultivation of it may have been perceived to be critically important for its development. That was not the case in Mughal Bengal.

Throughout the entire period surveyed here – including the periods of Mughal and Nawabi rule - the aristocracy and higher gentry of Bengal played a consistent role as supporters of Bengali literature as did high officials of these regimes. Many officials of the sultanate – such as Maladhar Basu alias Gunaraj Khan, Jashoraj Khan , Ramchandra Khan, (the title "khan" indicates that they were high officers of the sultanate) composed works such as the the *Shrikrishnavijaya*, Vaishnava padas and the

Aswamedhaparva of the *Mahabharata* respectively. Some of the most well-known Mangalkavyas were composed at the behest of local territoral rajas. The rajas of Bishnupur may have been patrons of several Dharmamangalakavyas; Shankar Chakravarty, possibly their court poet, composed a Bengali Ramayana which gained considerable currency as the "Bishnupuri Ramayana". Mukunda Chakravarty's *Chandimangala* was composed at the request of his patron, the raja of Brahmanbhum in Midnapur; Bharatchandra Roy's *Annadamangalakavya* was written at the command of his patron, the raja of Nadia. Raja Jashowanta Simha of Karnagarh, who also held a high office in Dhaka under the Murshidabad nawabs, may have been the patron of Rameshwar, author of the work entitled the *Shivayana* in the mid 18thcentury.

The following segment explores the value and weight attached to Bengali language and literature in medieval and early modern Bengal.

The Cultural Value of the Vernacular

As I indicated at the outset of the paper, the conventional view among literary scholars of Bengali is that this language was looked down upon by educated upper-classes in Bengal right up to almost the mid 19th century. Dinesh Chandra Sen cited the remarks of pandits who condemned Krittivasa and Kashiramadasa for rendering the Sanskrit epics into the profane vernacular. Sanskrit-proficient pandits also cursed those who heard the Puranas and the epics in Bengali to spend their after-lives in a hell called Rourava. Krishnadasa Kaviraj's *Chaitanyacharitamrita (* probably 1600 C.E.) attained a canonical status among Gaudiya Vaishnavas. But, Jiva Goswami – one of the group of famous theologians of Gaudiya Vaishnavism – reacted with outrage to the fact that Gaudiya Vaishnava theology had been committed to writing in Bengali and flung this work into the river so that the water could destroy it. There are uncannily parallel examples from other parts of India, of vernacular religious texts being

thrown into the water so that they could be damaged and destroyed. As Pollock points out, literary references to the "drowned manuscript" trope reflects the outrage in certain circles not so much to the authority to "speak of the spiritual in the vernacular.....It concerns instead written vernacular literariness, an innovation that threatened an old economy of literary-cultural power based on Sanskrit ".[32]

The disdain of Sanskrit scholars and other erudite, high-status people for Bengali literature was paralleled by expressions of inferiority by poets who wrote in the vernacular as regards themselves, the languge that they used and sometimes, a segment of their audience as well. They also often suggested that they came from humble social and educational backgrounds. In a Chandimanagla narrative attributed to Manik Datta, the poet described how the goddess had appeared in a dream to him and commanded him to write about her exploits in the vernacular language. But he was unable to understand the "potha" (i.e. punthi /manuscript) she had left behind for him to use and had to resort to , " *Shrikanta pandit[who] helped [me] to read the book/ He explained the manuscript to me part by part*" [S.Sen, vol. 2, p. 450]. There is an abundance of such references in medieval and early modern Bengal literature by poets who emphasized their lack of what was understood as high-level scholarship. Pitambar,a protegee of the royal family of Kamta (Koch Bihar) described himself as "child-like" in his ignorance.[33] Ramdas Adak and Sitaramdas were both late 17th century composers of Dharmamangala narratives. Ramdas said of himself : " *I have not read the [right] books o Lord! and am also stupid/ I grazed cows in the woods as a companion of the cowherds".*[34] In a similar vein, Sitaramdas described

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[32] Pollock, *The Language of the Gods,* p. 312.

[33] S. Sen, vol. 2, p. 215. – Bangla Sahityer Itikasa, Vol 2, Calcutta, Ananda Publishers, 1999

[34] S. Sen, vol.2, p. 140.

himself as " *Iam inferior and very ignorant*". [35] Some poets also suggested that they wrote in the vernacular so the , "...ignorant people would understand." [36]

While some of these remarks were undoubtedly inspired by the literary convention that required poets to be modest and to make self-deprecatory statements, remarkably, these self-deprecations were couched in terms of inferiority vis-a –vis a the high- prestige languages i.e. Sanskrit , Arabic and Persian. This is clearly evident for instance in Madhava Kandali's Ramayana. Madhava Kandali was apprehensive that his attempt at rendering the epic into the *desi* language would be condemned by Sanskrit-proficient pandits. This is how he apologetically addressed his potential critics: *" If pandits are dissatisfied [with my work]/I say to them with folded hands/If you discover that I have omitted any [major]topic from the [original Sanskrit] text/only then should you censure me".* [37] Shah Mohammed Saghir, the author of a vernacular rendition of the story of Yusuf-Zulaikha expressed concern and shame for having rendered this material into Bengali.[38] Similar expressions were echoed among others by Sayyid Sultan (1550-1648) , author of the *Nabi Vamsa*, an epic account of several prophets, from Adam to Mohammed, and by many others. [39]

This brings us to the question of why poets chose to write in Bengali – apparently a language associated with low status people with very basic education only – and why their elite patrons, commisssioned such works from them. According to the rich internal evidence provided in this regard by middle Bengali literature, a predominant reason appears to have been the interest in ensuring that

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[35] S. Sen, vol 2, p. 143.

[36] This is from Ramchandra Khan's Aswamedhparva in Bengali.

[37] S. Sen, vol. 1, p. 111.

[38] Mohammed Enamul Huq, *Muslim Bangla Sahitya,* Dacca, pakistan Publications, 1965, p. 58.

[39] Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretist Tradition in Bengal,*pp. 68-69.

ordinary people , who did not understand either Sanskrit, Persian or varieties of Hindavi, should be able to understand and enjoy these literary classics. In his *Aswamedhaparva,* Shrikara Nandy , probably a protegee of Laskar Paragal Khan, the military commander of Chittagong, explained how his master, surrounded by courtiers and associates had listened with pleasure to readings from the Sanskrit Mahabharata and the Jaimini Samhita. But, at the end of it, he said:

" The Sanskrit [Maha] Bharat is not understood by everyone...../ Poets, listen to my request/ Propagate this story [katha] in the language of the land [desi bhase] ....."

Kavindra Parameshwara who rendered a part of the Mahabharata into Bengali articulated the same reason for undertaking a literary project in the vernacular language, as did Laskar Ramchandra Khan, a Kayastha and a military commander who had authored (yet another) Bengali Aswamedhaparva in the early 16th century. Similar processes were afoot in the 15th/16th centuries in frontier kingdoms at the margins of Gangetic Bengal i.e. in Kamta-Kamarupa, Kachar, Roshang and in the adjoining kingdom of Orissa. One of the earliest of the vernacular Ramayanas of Eastern India, was the early 16th century work attributed to Madhava Kandali. He claimed that his patron, the raja of Kachar had asked him to producea vernacular Ramayana that could be "understood by all" (*" sarvajana bodhe")* In the kingdom of Kamta (Coch Bihar), the poet Pitambar, who was a protegee of Samarasimha, son of Raja Viswasimha, declared that in the opinion of his royal master: *" The mysteries of the Puranas and other Sastras/ Are understood only by pandits and not by others/ For this reason [I want you to] transform the [Sanskrit] slokas/ and compose in the language of your desa a [vernacular composition in] rhyming verse ['payar']"* [40] A Brahman poet named Dwija Raghunatha took his vernacular *"Ashwamedha Panchali"* to the court of King Mukundadeva of Orissa and received permission to recite it there.

[40] S. Sen, vol. 1, p. 215. — Bangla Sahityer Itihasa, Vol I Calcutta, Ananda Publishers, 1999.

At the court of Roshang(Arakan) poets such as Daulat Kazi and in particular Alaol (one of the best-known poets of 16th century Bengal), undertook at the commission of the political elites there, the rendition of certain classics of Persian literature as well as Hindavi/Awadhi literature into the vernacular. Ashraf Khan, a high official (*'laskar ujir')*of king Thiri Thu Thamma or Srisudharma of Roshang, maintained a court where poets and scholars from different lands and different ethnic and religious backgrounds were welcome. In the words of DaulatQazi, Ashraf Khan heard the Hindavi tale of Sati-Mynah and said: *" Some people do not understand the Gohari language/ Say it in the language of the land [desi bhashe'] and set it to the metre [typical of] Panchalis ['panchalir chande'] / so that everybody can understand it and get great pleasure".* Daulat Qazi did not live to finish this poetic work; this was later completed by yet another talented poet-protegee of the Roshang court i.e. Sayyid Alaol. Alaol, whose own life-story resembles the type of romance-adventure which was so popular at royal courts of the late medieval-early modern period, was proficient in Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Bengali and Hindavi. He was the protegee of various powerful officials of the Roshang court and at their wishes, composed a number of works in the "desi" language. Best-known among them are his Bengali rendition of Malik Muhammad Jaysi's Awadi, Sufi romance, the *Padmavat* as well as Bengali adaptations of the works of Nizami Ghaznavi. Alaol described Nizami as : *".... the greatest poet [mahakavi] of the Persian language."* [Alaol, Haft Paikar, Intro.]; but he also stated unambiguously : *" Nizami's heavy words [ghor bakya] are hard to understand".* Alaol's reasons for undertaking these literary endeavours parallels the examples cited above. In Alaol's own words, one of his patrons, Magan Thakur, had said that the Padmavat, though full of "rasa" was written in the Hindustani style ["*Hindustani Bhave'*] which was not understood by very many people in Roshang. [S. Sen, vol. 2, p. 289]; Magan Thakur made a similar remark about Persian: *" Not eveybody [here] understands the Persian style [bhava]*". –[Sen, vol.2, p. 294].

These cases underscore the multiple and inter-linked literary-cultural streams – Sanskrit, different varieties of Hindavi, Persian etc. - that converged on royal and aristocratic courts and the perceived importance of cultivating the *desi bhasha* which was used and understood by the vast majority of subjects. Thus, various poets involved in these endeavours referred to how they were asked to not only to render the "classics" into Bengali, but also to abbreviate the classics so that it would be easier for audiences to make time to hear them. Paragal Khan for instance, had apparently asked for a shorter, vernacular version of the *Mahabharata* so that he could hear all of it in one day. Madhava Kandali explained in his vernacular Ramayana that he had retained only the core or "*sara*" of the Sanskrit classic and had omitted what he considered the less important materials. He compared the "sara" that he had retained to the process of churning milk and obtaining from itm, the sara i.e. the purest substance which was ghee. [41] The contrast between the Sanskrit classics and their vernacular versions was also expressed as a contrast between materials that were organized in the form of slokas (no doubt also heavily embellished with ornate/complex alamkaras which made meanings difficult to comprehend) on the one hand and materials that were in the form of much simpler metrical (*payar*) verse. In fact very often, the literary forms i.e. *sloka* and *payar* were used to designate Sankrit and the vernacular respectively , thereby reinforcing the point made above that the process of vernacularization was largely driven by considerations of listening-pleasure and comprehensibility. As discussed above, these priorities were grounded in the less tangible though important processes of Brahmanization and Islamization.

The characterization of the process of vernacularization as a "popular" phenomenon i.e. a phenomenon in which the tastes, likes/dislikes of ordinary people acted as the primary driving force has encountered strong opposition. Pollock and Shantanu Phukan have argued by and large for a view in which "literature" in pre-modern milieus is essentially a sphere of culture reserved for the elites and therefore,

[41] S. Sen, vol. 1, p. 111.

it is not valid to conceive of courtly and other elites undertaking a project of vernacularization out of an "egalitarian sensibility". One of the factors behind their scepticism about identifying something akin to a liberal- democratic, proletarian sensibility, among elite patrons of vernacular literature is rooted in the argument that the "people" did not comprise a meaningful category of social, cultural and political analysis prior to probably the 19th century in the South Asian context. As is well-known, best-known theorists of nationalism have identified the nation-state as an entirely modern form of community, the foundation of which was comprised of "people" and their culture,of which vernacular language occupied a critically important position. As Peter Burke writes, in the modern nation state, "the everyday language of ordinary people" came to be recognized as one of the foundational elements of a national community. Language , thus was "nationalized" and became "an instrument of the cult of the nation". [42] *In the Indian context, Pollock, Sumathi Ramaswamy and Phukan have quite rightly warned against the trap of projecting the language/people/nation nexus backwards to pre-modern periods.* This warning is important – the challenge however lies in defining the place occupied by language and literature in medieval and early modern societies.

In modern forms of nationalism, the "people" are the nation, in pre-modern polities – typically,a monarchy – "the body politic was inscribed on the king's own body". [43] Loyalty to the monarch and the moral-cultural norms he/she represented created a shared connection among subjects of the former. *While I acquiesce to the point that one cannot conceptualize vernacular language and literature as the repository of national culture for medieval and early modern times,* Iam not comfortable with the notion

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[42] Peter Burke, *Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 160.

[43] Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution,* p. 1. For an excellent discussion of the symbolic role of the king in representing the kingdom, including the subjects who lived within it, see cynthia talbot, _____.

that pre-modern rulers were impervious to their subjects and in fact, could afford to be so. It is not necessary to reiterate here at length that in all Indic and Indo-Islamic political traditions, the good, ideal monarch was supposed to look to the welfare of the subjects , care about them, govern in accordance with moral principles and promote what was considered the right kind of culture in a specific time and place. The commissioning of vernacular versions of the Puranas (i.e. the Mangalkavyas), the Ramayana and the Mahabharata certainly fits under such a conception of monarchical duty. Practically also, it is impossible to believe that pre-modern rulers were uncaring about whether their subjects had a positive view of them or not.Thus, pre-modern rulers endowed lands, built temples, mosques and schools, constructed gardens and tanks for the use, utility and pleasure of themselves, but also of their subjects. I situate the patronage of vernacular Bengali litertaure by Bengal's rulers, from the 13th till the 18th centuries alongside such activities. The poet Alaol had prepared a Bengali rendition of Nizami's *Sikandarnama* at the request of Majlis Navaraj, probably a high official or a nobleman of the kingdom of Roshang. In Alaol's words, this is what his patron,Majlis Navaraj had said about his reason for commissioning a vernacular adaptation of Nizami's *Sikandarnama*:

> *"the fame that comes from constructing mosques and tanks is confined to one's own country [nija deshe] only/ But books are read aloud with respect far and wide".* [S. Sen, vol. 2, p. 297]

To discount the importance given by rulers and elites of medieval and early modern polities to the need to esposuse particular forms of culture – of which literary expression was certainly an important component – is to deny the salience of the cultural foundations of power. This subject, which has been theorized by among others, Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieau and Foucault clears a path for understanding the "vernacular moment" in Bengal's history.

Phukan has explored the gendered as well as rural/urban, domestic/non-domestic aesthetics inherent in literature as well as different registers within literary traditions with a great deal of sensitivity. He

however suggests that the choice of a particular literature or language – particularly by pre-modern elites – was dictated exclusively by aesthetic considerations and completely dismisses the validity of what he terms the "functionalist" argument. Not identical, but related to this is Pollock's hypothesis that " popular intelligibility" could not have been the driving force behind vernacularization since " the purpose of popular communication can hardly have been served by literature.....whose very intelligibility pre-supposed a solid grounding in Sanskrit lexicon, syntax, metrics and rhetoric." [44] *Pollock's remark was made with Kannada literature in mind. For Bengal, it is indeed true that not just Sanskrit, but Persian-Arabic and varieties of Hindavi too upon occasion functioned as "superposed" traditions vis –a vis which middle Bengali literature crystallized and it is a stretch to believe that all segments of the "people' would be familiar with these. However, different literary registers existed within all vernacular literatures.* [45] *Thus, the Mangalkavyas of Krishnaram Das, composed in the late 17th century were considerably less sophisticated than the Annadamangala of Bharat Chandra Roy composed in the mid-18th century. Even within a literary tradition thus, there were materials more easily understood by people with little or no formal education compared to others. The discussion above about the relationship of Bengali panchali literature to the processes of Bhahmanization and Islamization in Bengal compels a modification of Phukan's point that for pre-modern elites, only aesthetic reasons dictated their choice of literature. This is not to suggest that aesthetic factors were irrelevant – what it means is that only aesthetic factors do not explain "intentional language change" in all cases.*

Implicit in the positions of Pollock and Phukan discussed here is the premise that elites and non-elites in pre-modern times inhabited separate literary and cultural spheres . While the existence of different cultural spheres and cultural tastes is undeniable, there may have existed a stratum of what I describe

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[44] *The language of the Gods in the World of Men, p. 426.*

[45] See article by Jnanabrata Bhattacharya for a discussion of "high and low literary registers within Bengali.

as "shared culture" between the elites and ordinary people. The idea of shared culture does not indicate that different cultural spheres marked by quite different tastes and sensibilities did not exist. I do not also suggest that class, caste, gender and other variables did not find reflection in the literary-cultural environment, or, there existed a "common culture" which tied together the elites with the proletarian people in pre-modern Bengal and it was destroyed by the advent of colonialism. [46] My use of the idea of shared culture merely draws attention to the fact that the edges of these cultural spheres could and did intersect at certain points, producing in some areas, a blurring of these different spheres. Thus, as in the case of the Mangalkavyas, these verse narratives were often enjoyed by audiences made up of very ordinary people as well as by the aristocrats and the gentry who typically commissioned them. An aristocrat such as Maharaja Krishnachandra of Nadia was the patron of the poet who composed the vernacular *Annadamangalkavya* for him; the same raja, extended his patronage to Sanskrit scholars and pandits who authored erudite treatises on various types of shastras. Sumanta Banerjee's work explored how the Bengali aristocracy and gentry, up to even the early 19th century enjoyed watching performances such as khemta, kheur etc. together with people who with supposedly less sophisticated tastes than them. But, this need not mean that this represented the sum total of the Bengali upper classes' cultural tastes. To try to frame this in terms of contemporary life, it is possible to envisage a person, who in a certain mood and certain circumstances may watch (and even perhaps enjoy) a Bollywood potboiler movie and in another place/time and mood, may watch and enjoy an art film.

We can thus posit political, cultural and yes, aesthetic reasons too for the sustained consolidation of middle Bengali literature during the five centuries or so before the establishment of colonial rule.

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[46] For a classic statement of an idealized, romanticized view of Bengali literature cutting across class, caste, religious divides, see Dinesh Chandra Sen. This view was influential and was accepted in varying degrees by more recent scholars. See e.g. article by Jnanabrata Bhattacharya, _____.

Although not the only source of patronage, rulers and potenates positioned at different levels of the polity played a considerably important role in its development. However, vernacular literature and language did not attain the status of the primary well-spring of a Bengali identity as it was to do from the late 19th century onwards. What then was the cultural status and value assigned to Bengali literature and language during the 13th to 18th centuries? Although there is some evidence for its use in the pre-13th century period, the greatest currency of the term "Bengal", meaning a particular region (rather than one sub-region out of many within what later came to be called Bengal), occurred from the 13th/14th centuries . Indo-Islamic chroniclers used this term in this sense; Mughal histories and administrative documents referred to Bengal as a distinct administrative entity within the empire. The Portuguese, whose presence here can be charted from the 15th century also used the term "Bengalla" to denote an entire region. It is harder to provide a clear answer as to whether there existed a conception of Bengal as a cultural entity. The Chinese diplomatic visitor Ma –Huan, who came to Bengal in the early 15th century observed that "the language in universal use is Pang-Kie-Li (Bengali)...." ; the Portuguese referred to this region's vernacular as the "idioma Bengalla". Among the inhabitants of this region writers such as Sayyid Sultan, Shaikh Muttalib and some others referred to the vernacular language as "Banga bani" and "Banga bhasha". [47] There are also clues that other languages , such as Hindustani were associated with areas outside Bengal. Thus, some sense of a connection between the land of Bengal and the vernacular language was in evidence during the period being surveyed here. At the same time though, there are plenty of counter examples where the region's vernacular was merely called "bhasa" (language), or "desi bhasha" (language of the land) without either the land or the language being specifically named. Bengal's vernacular was also often called "Prakrit"; sometimes called "Gaudiya bhasa" , with the adjective Gaudiya probably invoking the regional kingdom whose capital had been at

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[47] Roy, *The Islamic Syncretist Movement in Bengal"*, p. 79.

Gauda. The upshot therefore is that a tentative sense of a connection between the vernacular language and the land of Bengal had come into being between the 13th -18th centuries. However, it was neither as clear or as strong a conception with biological and emotional resonances as the imagined connection in the 19th/20th centuries among land, language and people. Lisa Mitchell's recent study shows the processes by which the Telugu language went from being a regional medium of communication in the period prior to the 19th century to being recognized as the "mother tongue" of the Andhra or Telugu region and being the primary marker of the identity of the people of this region. In Mitchell's words, Telugu went from being a "medium" to a "marker". Bengali too went from being a "medium" to a "marker" , but in the former condition, it was not conceived of as being empty of cultural and aesthetic value.

Despite a relatively vague sense of its connection to the land of Bengal, despite the disdain of Sanskrit – proficient pandits, despite the fact that it was not grammaticised by speakers of this language, a conception regarding a somewhat continuous Bengali literary tradition seem sto have been in place by the 15th/16th centuries to be sure and it grew stronger in the succeeding centuries. Thus authors of Dharmamangalakavyas paid homage to Mayura Bhatta, believed to be the first poet to have composed a mangala geet in honour of Dharma Thakura; authors of pre-18th century Chandimangalakavyas acknowledged Manik Datta as a sort of "adi kavi". By the mid-18th century, Bharatchnadra invoked Mukunda Chakrabarty as a landmark author of the Chandimangala genre and in Raja Prithvi Chandra's *Gaurimangala* (1811) referred to a an entire range of panchali literature as the precedent that he sought to follow in his own composition. The Vaishnava literature of Bengal – padavalis, hagiographies etc – was also deemed to comprise a literary tradition with various sub-fields and sub-specialties. To pick on example from Bengali padavali literature, at least since the 17th century, Bengal's Vaishnavas were engaged in creating anthologies of padavalis that were current in their circles. One of the earliest

of such pada collections may have been Narahari Chakravarty's *Gita Chandrodaya* of the 17th century ; it was followed by very many more in the 18th, including the well-known *Pdamrita Samudra of Radhamohana Thakura* of the early 18th century and the *Padakalpataru* of Radhamohana's disciple, Gokulananda Sen around the mid 18th century. [48]

Apart from identifying an incipient literary tradition, the creators of this literature also voiced quite clearly, the specific qualities and attributes they associated with this language. From as far back as the 15th-16th centuries, poets who composed verse narratives in Bengali shared the unanimous view that although disdained perhaps by Sanskrit- proficient intellectuals, this was the language which they associated with what they almost always described as "rasa" i.e. something that gave pleasure and enjoyment, something that touched the emotions and the hearts of its listeners and readers. There are instances where these authors quite explicitly made unfavourable comparisons between Bengali on the one hand and Sanskrit and Persian on the other hand, on this ground. The suggestion almost always was that Sanskrit was difficult to comprehend; Persian was "karkash" i.e. difficult/harsh; when the question of varieties of Hindavi came up – such as Gohari - the same feelings were expressed i.e. it was not as easy to understand as the regional vernacular, which people understood most easily. Bharatchandra Roy, the author of the *Annadamangalkavya,* and the son of a landed aristocrat was, by the standards of his time, a sophisticated and highly educated person who knew Sanskrit, Bengali, Hindavi, Arabic and Persian. In his well-known kavya, he created an (an imaginary) scene in which the Raja Man Singh, the Mughal mansabdar engaged in a conversation with the Mughal emperor at the imperial court in Delhi. Bharatchandra, knew well that this conversation would not be conducted in Bengali, but he chose not

[48] Sukumar Sen, *A history of Brajabuli Literature Being A Study of the Vaishnava Lyric Poetry and Poets of Bengal,* Calcutta, Calcutta University Press, 1935, pp. 4-5.

to compose this section in the languages which he felt would be more appropriate for the following reason:

" I[realize] that the conversation between Man Singh and the padshah/should be described in the/ Arabic, Persian and Hindustani [languages] which I have studied/But these [languages] are hard for people to understand/ They do not provide enjoyment and do not have rasa/That is why I have decided to say it in bhasha intermixed with yavani [words]".[49]

Thus, Bharatchandra, a sophisticated man from a very elite background and someone who had cosmopolitan tastes, clarified that the need to write certain types of narratives in the vernacular sprang from the need to make these comprehensible and enjoyable for who were not as well educated, nor a polyglot as he was. Bharatchandra, also, in the approved manner of "traditional" scholars in early modern India, looked to the body of Sanskrit literary theory to provide a rationale for his decision to prioritize the "rasa" which most people found so easily in the vernacular as opposed (in this case) to Arabic, Persian or Hindustani. *" The ancient pandits",* he wrote, *" have said/ [that] no matter what the language [used], the most important thing about kavya is that it should be replete with rasa".* [50]

Conclusion The single most important factor that determined the status of Bengali literature during the 13th to the 18th centuries was the multi-lingual milieu of medieval and early modern Bengal and the simultaneous currency there of multiple literary traditions, each intended for a specific function, a specific "domain" of life and culture. ~~In his *Lipimala* which Ramram Basu had composed as a primer to~~

[49] Brojendranath Bandyopadhyaya and Sajanikanta Das (eds.), *Bharatchandra Granthabali,* p. 303.

[50] Ibid, same page.

~~teach conversational Bengali to newly-arrived officials of the East India Company to Bengal, the character of the munshi, informs an Englishman, of the various languages he knew.~~ Even into the 18th century, Sanskrit dominated the study of the shastras and the composition of commentarial literature on them. Persian was the language of state and as I have indicated elsewhere, had also become a language that the aristocracy and gentry in Bengal cultivated since it had come to be associated with courtly society and the culture of the political elites. Braj, commingled with Bengali became a mainstay of Vaishnava padavali literature and also possibly for other types of compositions read and authored by Bengal's aristocracy. Bengali literature had to make room for itself vis-a- vis all these other literatures, certain types. and it did so by forging a niche for itself and by becoming the medium for the production of expressive literature~~ for several centuries~~.

The enthronement of this vernacular as the premier language (in cultural terms) of Bengal and the investment of a very much greater cultural value to it from the 19th century, was the result of a range of historical changes . Bengali literature, concommitantly, acquired a very elevated place as the repository of the specific sensibilities of those who spoke it. The decline of the late Mughal successor state of the nawabs of Murshidabad , the advent of the EIC's colonial state and the range of political and cultiural changes brought about by all these developments brought about a significant rethinking and re-shuffling of the different literatures and their cultural uses and values. The prestige and status of Persian declined precipitously with the demise of the late Mughal state in Bengal and the political-cultural order which was associated with it. From being the language of civilite and sophistication of courtly and upper class society, Persian became, in the words of Suniti Kumar Chatterji, only an element in".....the sppech of Musalman Bengalis" [Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language,* p. 206]. The prestige of Sanskrit remained – it may even have received a boost thanks to the admiration of Sanskrit-oriented orientalism of English scholar-officials. Despite its continuing prestige though, there

~~also occurred a pretty radical~~ re-evaluation of its role and function in intellectual and professional life. It is true, that in the 19th century, as part of the project to equip Bengali to function as the language for modern expression, there was yet another phase, when pandit-intellectuals such as Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, made a concerted effort to further tighten the relationship between Bengali and Sanskrit. But, it is important to recognize that this was still part of the effort to purify and classicize Bengali and to equip it for a career as a medium of modern intellectual and literary expression. Sanskrit itself, began to resemble a venerable and much-invoked ancestor whose suitability for contingent, modern needs was however dubious. Public figures such as Raja Rammohan Roy and later in the 19th century, Bholanath Chunder, gave expression to such doubts [CHECK]. The region's vernacular also now came to be deemed in many quarters to be more than fit to function as the medium of expressive literature (particularly, prose literature) to be sure, but also, as the medium of modern intellectual and scientific enquiry. Some of the most eminent intellectuals of the late 19th century – such as Rabindranath and Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose for example – upheld such views. In other words, the division of labour as it were among multiple languages – Sanskrit for shastric purposes, Persian for matters of state and Bengali for expressive literature in verse – which had been initiated since the 13th century Turkish conquest was now being swept aside to make room for the view that a single, defined territory had a single languge i.e. its vernacular, its mother tongue. Bengali, thus emerged as the queen of languages in Bengal, from the latter part of the 19th century. The rapid currency and expansion of English among the Bengali literati complicates this scenario. Like Persian, English too had started out as a language of government and for gentlemanly career prospects. It soon ceased to be just these utilitarian things and instead came to denote for many middle-class colonial Indians, a critically important medium through which to access "modern" (especially) philosophy, science, politics and literature. As Partha Chatterjee shows, emphasizing "difference" was an important feature of anti-colonial nationalism and to the Indian/Bengali nationalist literati it was not always palatable to give English the cultural and emotional

value as its own mother tongue. Thus, Bengali acceded to a very special place as the language which embodied the unique sensibilities of the Bengali people.