

**Agrarian Expansion and Social Resistance in the Rarh
Region: A Study of Mukundaram's Chandimangal
(Late sixteenth and seventeenth century)**

*Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfilment of the requirement
for the award of the degree of*

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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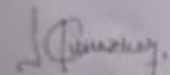
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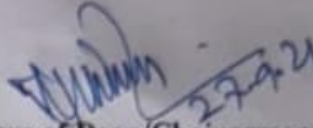
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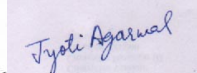
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Date of Submission	28th September, 2021
Name of Degree	M.PHIL in Medieval History
Subject Key Words	Rarh; Chandimangal; Resistance; Agrarian expansion; Mangal Kāvya
Coverage(for time periods or spatial regions only)	Western Bengal (late sixteenth- seventeenth centuries)
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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. S. Gunasekaran, for his constant guidance in the course of my work. Throughout the duration of my M.Phil, he had time and again given me numerous comments, suggestions and critical remarks without which this work would not have been possible. His support, kind words and encouragement has been a great motivation during these trying times of pandemic. I am hugely indebted to him.

I am thankful to the entire faculty members of Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, who have helped in shaping this study with their guidance in various ways since the master's days and discussions on various topics inside and outside the classroom. I would like to specially thank Prof. Najaf Haider for his encouragement during the seminar papers and when I first discussed the topic of study with him. I would also like to thank Prof. Ranjeeta Dutta for her guidance as my research advisor. I am grateful to Prof. Rajat Datta, Prof. Pius Malekandathil, Prof. Joy Pachuau and the entire medieval history faculty for guidance through the years that inspired this study and this work would not have existed if not for their support.

I am also thankful to the administrative staff of CHS office, who have been so kind, patient and helpful during the time of the pandemic. I would like to especially thank Lateef Bhai's Canteen staff for all their kindness and the uncountable numbers of chai whenever I needed it the most. I am also grateful to Ashish Da's photocopy shop at CHS for making resources a lot more accessible.

I am grateful beyond words and cannot imagine this research without the unconditional support of my friends, Manan, Tavishi, Lyimee, Mannat, Mihira, Apurva, Puneet, Soumya, Aiman, and Akash , who have selflessly been there for me in all thick and thins. Further, I am greatly moved by the constant support of my friends at CHS, Zainab, Noble, Surbhi, Chandrabhan, Rushnae, and Jayati who have sat down with me for countless discussions, given me comments and helped me structure the arguments.

I owe this work of research to the memories of my grandfather, Kashilal Agarwal, who has motivated me to embark on this journey of academic research since I was a child. Lastly, I cannot be thankful enough to my parents for helping in every possible way and providing me with great strength and encouragement throughout my academic career and beyond. I especially want to thank my sister, Sweety, and brother, Rounak, for all the emotional and mental support during the difficult times and for being a great source of inspiration in organizing this work.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction- Agrarian Expansion and Social Resistance in the Rarh Region:

A Study of Mukundaram's Chandimangal

An Introduction

Medieval Bengal, even before the Mughal rule, was always identified as being in possession of the most fertile land because geographically it lay in the delta created by the three great rivers- the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna. Adequate rainfall and the prevalence of warm temperatures further made this region ideal for the growth of agriculture. With the Mughal conquest of Bengal in the Sixteenth century, the waves of the early modern world economy started moving forward towards India through a globalized maritime system resulting in rapid commercialization and agrarian expansion in India. The insistence of the Mughal state was not on the possession of the land but on the expansion of area under cultivation. Forest clearance and land reclamation became an important part of the agrarian expansion. Pastoralism was made to shift towards sedentarisation over the period of time as gradual decline and transformation of pastoral activity created conditions for surplus production. Agrarian expansion disturbed the tribal based economy and their social life in these frontier zones. And due to the vast ecological and geographical diversity of the subcontinent the functioning of the economy at these frontiers became very indigenous in nature, the relationships that developed were complex and too distinct to be generalized. Physical settings and environmental factors crucially affected the nature of socio-economic developments of these regions. Mughal states undertook flexible measures in their

agrarian governance in order to manage the geographical diversities. And in the case of medieval Bengal, this flexibility can be witnessed in the integration of the local chiefs in the administration.

Before the Mughal conquest of Bengal, a large number of autonomous chiefs or tributary *rajas* emerged in the forest and hilly regions. These chiefs mostly emerged from the indigenous tribes such as *Munda*, *Bhumij* or low castes like *Goala*, *Bagdi*, *Mal* and others. They ruled independently at the time of political vacuum which was created before the Mughal intervention in Bengal. Mughals in the sixteenth century accommodated these frontier chiefs through their administrative system. However, there originated a new right by merging existing powerful rural aristocracy and other superior elements within the villages, those exercising these rights are often termed as Zamindar. These frontier princes were given the status of the independent *Peshkash* (tribute) paying Zamindar. These Zamindar had the right to collect rents of lands and other taxes at their own discretion. More or less, Mughal authority did not interfere in the internal affairs of these principalities and provided a certain level of autonomy to these Zamindars to administer at local levels.

Due to its extremely heterogeneous society with immense political, social and cultural diversities, medieval Bengal saw a complex institutional and political interaction between the state and the new forces emanating from expanding agrarian economy. With the armed retainers and its local customary rights, Zamindars often turned up as a subversive element in the whole political structure. They often maintained dual relations with both state and the local population. As Zamindars were the powerful local elements, they were used by the rulers for the collection of revenue from the peasantry or in assisting the *Jagirdars* for the collection of revenue. But on the other hand, these Zamindars also formed ties of loyalty with the local agrarian communities by using their clan and caste appeals. Caste played a major role in determining the superiority of the

Zamindars. Apart from being the state functionaries, Zamindars were responsible for the administration of the area under their jurisdiction.

Therefore, according to Eaton, “With agricultural advancement towards the forested land and changing relationship of Mughals with the countryside, Bengal from the sixteenth century onwards possessed not one but several frontiers, each moving generally from west to east. One of these was the political frontier, which defined the territories within which the Bengal sultans and governors of the Mughal Empire minted coins, garrisoned troops, and collected revenue. Second, the agrarian frontier, where land formerly forested fell under plow. It provided a basis for newly emerging agricultural communities. And third was the religious frontier, where Brahmanical ordered communities interacted with the communities saturated with cult based on forest divinities.¹” All three frontiers remained interrelated and overlapped with each other. This interaction between the delta’s agrarian, political, and religious frontiers thus formed one of the important themes of Bengal’s history.

In my work, I have used the word ‘Agrarian Frontier’ for this overlapping frontier zone as this interaction was majorly a result of agrarian expansion happening in the region. The Agrarian frontier was different in characteristics in the sense that delta’s cultivated land from the forested region or previously uncultivated lands, or slightly penetrated, through means of agriculture and agrarian society interacted.² Changing agrarian relations became the center of interaction of communities inhabiting these frontiers. The Rarh region of the western Bengal was one of such frontier zones.

¹ Richard Maxwell Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 37.

² *Ibid.*, 40.

The Rarh Region lies between the western plateau and the highlands (bordering Chota Nagpur plateau) and the Ganges Delta. It comprised the territories of the present-day districts of Burdwan, Birbhum, Bankura, Howrah, Haora, Hooghly and Medinipur. Many medieval texts have mentions of the Rarh region, the thirteenth century chronicle *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* by *Minhaj-i-Siraj* defines Rarh (Rāḍha) as the section lying to the west of the Hooghly-Bhagirathi Rivers.³ The sixteenth century *Digvijay Prakash* suggests that Rarh was located to the north of the Damodar River and the south of the Gauda Region. The Rarh region of Bengal was separated from the eastern part of ‘Bengal’ by the river Bhagirathi or Hooghly. Therefore, Rarh region can be suggested as a densely forested land and all along the forested frontiers of the western Bengal, situated far north of the Ganges valley, families of local chieftains—usually of very low-status backgrounds and according to some scholars, of *adivasi* or tribal backgrounds—were emerging out small as territorial principalities such as Birbhum, Mallbhum, etc.

Literature Review

Studies of the Agrarian history of Mughal India

Medieval Indian agrarian history has witnessed a vast scholarship. It has been a subject of rigorous research from multiple viewpoints. From the late nineteenth and early twentieth century attempts were made by colonial writers to produce a history solely committed to the company’s expansion in India. These works focused on the administrative evils of pre-colonial Muslim rule. William Irvine’s *The Army of Moghuls* (1903) and H.M Elliot’s work titled *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians: the Mohammedan period (1867-77)* being on the forefront. Further, H.F Blochhman shifted the focus on military aspects, administration patronage, and cultural

³ Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society* (Delhi: Manohar, 1979), 47.

movements, however motives remained the same. W.H Moreland in his *Agrarian System of Moslem India* (1929) was one of the first to have attempted to cover the field of the Mughal agrarian system. Moreland in his works attempted a comparative analysis between Mughal and British rule from an economic standpoint, and noted the poor administrative practice and living conditions of the peasants under Mughals than those under the British rule.⁴ In 1924, Sir Jadunath Sarkar in his five-volume work 'History of Aurangzeb', based on Original sources (1912-24) slightly shifted the focus to the religious policies of Aurangzeb and eventual fall of the empire. The claim by early writers was contested by a group of liberal-nationalist historians like - Ram Prasad Tripathi, Parmatma Saran, Ibn Hasan, attempted to argue that peasants had well developed property rights, that reasonable limits existed to the extent of revenue collection, and the Mughal rule had within its institutional structure checks and balances.⁵ Further, S Nurul Hasan and Satish Chandra, in *Essays in Medieval Indian History and Religion, State and Society in Medieval India* with their seemingly bend towards Marxism, critiqued Sarkar's representation of Aurangzeb as a religious fanatic and focused largely on the multilayered rural middling groups which he termed as primary and intermediary Zamindars, rather than simple opposition between the state and the peasantry as proposed by Sarkar.

From late 1950s onwards, scholars from Aligarh Muslim University took over the liberal-nationalists counter to Sarkar and Moreland with their more apparent Marxist approach. Irfan Habib's *The Agrarian System of Mughal India* (1963) linked Mughal historiography with the Marxist perspective. Colonial historiography relied heavily on Marx's idea of 'Asiatic mode of

⁴ W.H. Moreland, *The Agrarian System of Moslem India: A Historical Essay with Appendices* (Low Price Publications, 1990), 67.

⁵ Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Writing Mughal World: Studies on Culture and Politics* (Permanent Black, 2012), 15.

production’ when attempting to examine Indian economic history. The concept of “Oriental Despotism” put forward the idea that the ruler was a despot who owned all land and that the peasants actually paid rent instead of taxes, essentially implying that the economy was static and unchanging. However, it has Irfan Habib’s *Agrarian System of Mughal India* (1963), published more than thirty years after Moreland’s work, which ignited debates and serious scholarship on the medieval Indian economic system. Habib, although coming from a strong Marxist standpoint, differed strongly from Marx’s own conception of Indian society. His most influential argument has been that the village – admittedly a distinct economic and social unit – was highly stratified not only economically but also socially. This argument brought a major change in the way the medieval Indian rural society was previously perceived – as an egalitarian structure with no private property. While there was economic differentiation – amongst peasants and landowners as well as individual petty production – caste consolidated social differentiation. He highlighted that the rural population was under varied forms of subjection, which could not be put into neat categories of ‘serf’ or ‘feudal’. He emphasized the primacy of peasant production, which was another major historiographical breakthrough.

Irfan Habib’s *Agrarian System of Mughal India* and his subsequent works like *Cambridge Economic History of India*, *Essays in Indian History* etc. have been seminal in understanding medieval Indian economic history. His work deeply impacted Marxist historiography. In his subsequent essays, he also highlighted the limitations of Marxist historiography, emphasizing the need to reject the idea that every social order is created exclusively by internal contradictions in the previous one only when it is at its most developed form.⁶ This ‘law of uneven development’⁷

⁶ Irfan Habib, “Problems of Marxist Historiography”, *Social Scientist* 16, no.12, (Dec., 1988): 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

– that the unilinear development from slavery to feudalism to capitalism is not universal and that different regions in different periods developed at different paces – is his critique of the feudalism debate.

The feudalism debate, which started with Harbans Mukhia, raised important questions regarding the characterization of the medieval Indian economic situation. In his ‘Was there Feudalism in Indian History?’ he criticized R.S Sharma’s thesis of feudalism in Indian society developing out of administrative and political changes. He instead tried to explore feudalism as an economic category and whether it was applicable at all in the Indian case. When examined in this sense, questions on the nature of peasantry – free or dependent-, nature of exploitation, nature of the production process become extremely important. He contended that there was no external control on the peasants’ production process; the peasant was free in the economic sense in that he fully controlled the production process, participating in it with his own tools and labor.⁸ The question of his mobility still remains as Mukhia argues that there was no developed land or labor market, hence the peasant was economically immobile rather than legally. According to Mukhia, there was free peasant production in terms of the peasant’s full control over the production process and lack of dependence on anyone higher up in the hierarchy. But he agrees that the caste system maintained economic and social disparities especially by making landless agricultural labor available for cultivating the lands of big landowners.⁹ Highlighting the main features of the Indian economy – high fertility of soil, free peasant production and low subsistence level of the peasant – he argues that India’s economic and social history has been relatively stable. In that sense then, any conflicts of the peasantry with the state over appropriation of surplus was merely an imbalance in the

⁸ Harbans Mukhia, *The Feudalism Debate*, (New Delhi, India: Manohar, 1999), 58.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

relatively stable agrarian system. The peasantry seldom reacted violently to the state's intrusions and when it did, these instances of violence were localized. Thus, there was no possibility for acute social tensions and whatever conflicts occurred in pre-colonial India were conflicts over the distribution and redistribution of surplus and not over the means of production itself.¹⁰ Thus, Mukhia situates agrarian conflicts, oppositions and resistances outside the production process. According to him, the production process by itself was stable and balanced. All social tensions were resolved within the system.

This article was one of the first to systematically critique Sharma's celebrated thesis and created ripples in the academic world. T.J Byers came out with a special issue of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* co-edited with Harbans Mukhia recording responses to Mukhia's article by six other historians. Mukhia released his *The Feudalism Debate* in India containing a compilation of responses to his article and his own further response to them in 1999. Thus, the period between 1981 and 1999 saw intense debates over basic questions regarding the medieval Indian economic system. Mukhia himself moved away from a strictly Marxist standpoint previously propagated by Sharma etc., which looked at the political specificities of surplus appropriation and non-economic coercion, to an alternative perspective which focused on interactions between factors like ecology, technology and social organization of labor utilization.¹¹ He even critiqued Habib's argument of a 'medieval Indian system' as an empiricist and descriptive rather than an analytical category.¹² Habib had argued that the peasant was more like a 'semi-serf' as they were immobile and could not just leave their land. Mukhia instead argued that the peasant was completely free and could not

¹⁰ Ibid., 58.

¹¹ Harbans Mukhia, "Peasants Production and Medieval Indian Society", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*.12, no.3, (1985): 240.

¹² Ibid., 250.

be called serf or semi-serf if there were only legal restrictions on him, not economic.¹³ Mukhia accused Habib of assuming that the peasantry had no agency and was only silently suffering through the state's exploitation.

It is quite evident from the above exercise that I have attempted to link the study of the agrarian relations in the larger study of the agrarian system. The point of indulging in the discussion over how scholars have sought to examine the medieval Indian rural society and the agrarian system is that any discussion about the social history and nature of conflicts, oppositions and resistances in an agrarian society cannot be had without discussing how agrarian system has been studied in the past. In this sense, the historiography of the agrarian system becomes important to discuss before embarking upon the historiography of one's specific region and time period.

Rural society and medieval frontiers:

As seen in the previous section, Agrarian history in India is often associated with the state authority and political dynasties. Major concern of agrarian history in one way or another is always connected to the state. It is true that state and agrarian society interact historically but these studies showed agrarian communities as moving in history in reaction to the state policies imposed on them, acceptance or resistance. The characteristics of rural life are shown as opposite of that of urban life. As David Ludden points out, they are not shown as makers of history rather as inhabitants of history.¹⁴ Generalizations about agrarian communities, without consideration of the historical context in which they exist, always lead us to accept misconceived notions about agrarian culture.

¹³ Ibid., 251.

¹⁴ David Ludden, *An Agrarian History of South Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 46.

To broaden this perspective, I will discuss Marc Bloch's idea of studying a rural society. Bloch's, *French Rural History*, is a work concerning historical sociology, focusing mainly on the fundamental problems of French agrarian history, from the early medieval period till the French Revolution.¹⁵ Moving away from the facts and dealing with the actual problems, an attempt was made to know the rural mentality through their own lenses. It is a study of medieval agricultural organization which deals with real men, real fields, and real economic conditions instead of being too engrossed into the origin and definitions of the agricultural institutions of the past. His work started with discussing the main stages in the occupation of the soil, starting from the Neolithic agrarian settlements (this period rested on occupation of a soil far from the exploitation) till agrarian revolution (land settlement patterns were now relational and cannot be seen in isolation). He discussed the characteristics of agrarian life all through these periods. He discussed various words in the French agricultural vocabulary, types of crops grown, change in the cultivable crops and goods with change in the socio-economic factor, market and economic factors, talks of agricultural regimes, different types of social, physical, environmental barriers affecting the agricultural regime, communal obligations differed for people from different communities and regions, over different time period. His work provided a detailed picture of various land relations existing in different centuries by situating it within the larger European context. This book revolutionized the study of agrarian history. This study used archaeological topographical, legal, statistical and literary evidence into an integrated pattern. Bloch in his work prioritized the formulation of the problem rather than looking for the solution. In order to grasp a larger picture of the agrarian society he proceeded from known to unknown, started reading history backwards.

¹⁵ Marc Bloch, *French Rural History: An Essay on its basic Characteristics*, trans. Janet Sondheimer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), xiii.

In Indian context, such wide scope study of the agrarian system has been done by Irfan Habib in his 'Agrarian system of Mughal India'. But when comparing his work with Marc Bloch's work, Habib produced broad generalized details of the agrarian society based on state produced sources. Habib in this work produced agrarian history from the state's perspective and focused on the imperial or state influences on the rural society and not vice-versa. This work largely escaped the local experiences of imperial sovereignty. It was this isolation of state from social forces and overlooking the extent of their interconnectedness between the state and society, that Farhat Hasan¹⁶ criticized in his work *State and Locality*. He critiqued the earlier Aligarh historians that to understand domination as one-sided allows for only a one-sided view of power. And the agency of the dominated/subaltern is as much a factor as the oppression of the power holders. He discussed Foucault's strategic approach to power that power is always relational in nature and it should be deciphered in a network of relations constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess. Power is capillary in nature; it comes from below. It needs to be studied as situated within an arena of social conflicts and struggles, within the context of a political and symbolic contestation between the power holders and subordinate social groups.

Mughal's political domain was quite diffused and deeply rooted, not just by the elites but also by the subaltern elements. These subordinate groups were quite resilient and offered stiff and continuous opposition to the Mughals. State was continuously molded by the struggles and accommodations that took place in the multiple arenas of the society. Therefore, insights from social anthropology are needed to understand the lower rungs of society. Neither state nor society

¹⁶ Farhat Hasan, *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572-1730*, (Foundation Books, 2006), 56.

could be studied in isolation with one another. To Foucault there exists a 'perpetual battle' between the dominant and dominated social groups. Resistance operates politically on the frontiers of the structure, both between the state and local elements, and amongst the local elements.

When we say amongst local elements, it implies between cultivators and those living in forests. According to Jos Gommans¹⁷, There existed a 'complementary opposition' between the agricultural communities and other local pastoral tribes. The forested areas were never totally isolated socio-economic entities and their distinctiveness from agrarian societies did not prevent them from interacting with it. Therefore, 'frontiers' also emerged as an overlapping area in which two different ways of life encountered each other, both opposing and complementing each other. And metaphorically, there existed limits to the state power in frontiers.¹⁸

Lastly, conceptualization of agrarian communities in India can never be proper without taking into consideration the 'caste system'. The connection between caste and power is slightly complicated. Any power appropriated in the economic and political sense is directly or indirectly related to one's position in the caste hierarchy. Caste as a source of power for some and powerlessness for others is best seen in terms of the divisions it creates. From the inequalities perpetuated by the caste system rose situations of power and powerlessness within rural society. Caste also constituted the backdrop for inter-relationships within rural society. Irfan Habib, in this context, pointed out all kinds of relationships-exploitative, egalitarian, conflict ridden or consensual, were mediated by caste, though not necessarily constrained by it. It has been shown how caste ties roused rural

¹⁷ Jos J. L. Gommans, "The Silent Frontier of South Asia, c. A.D. 1100-1800," *Journal of World History* 9, no. 1 (1998): 20.

¹⁸ Pratyay Nath, *Climate of Conquest: War, Environment, and Empire in Mughal North India* (India: Oxford University Press, 2019), 73.

society to collective action.¹⁹ According to Burton Stein, it is through blood ties, religious ideology and sectarian organizations that local lineages of peasants extended their scope and maintained their local-centeredness along with being part of the larger formation.

Agrarian Conflicts and Social Resistance:

The agrarian society in the late medieval north India, late sixteenth and early seventeenth century did develop a degree of self-consciousness as a class and its conflict with the state did betray a certain class character. The folksongs and folktales popular among the rural communities since the medieval times have all the ingredients with which to construct a definite agrarian class ideology that included conceptions of economic interests, social ethics and relations with the ruling class. Also helps us to understand the different ways in which the state intervened in the socio-cultural and economic lives and the ways in which these communities responded to these interventions. Furthermore, it also discusses how caste consciousness in a stratified society is entrenched in its class consciousness. How there also remained certain limits to the complete realization of the potential of agrarian class struggle against the state. Underlying class and caste consciousness motivated these struggles. It is important to examine the nature of agrarian conflicts and resistance and how these conflicts gave various communities space to negotiate with the socio-economic and political changes occurring during any particular time period.

For a period like the Seventeenth century, considering the nature of sources available, it is not easy to recover the 'unwritten history of resistance'. We have the disadvantage of having to rely exclusively on archival sources, which are essentially official records. Any account of the everyday

¹⁹ Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556-1707* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 202.

variety of resistance, based on such archival sources, cannot have the kind of depth and scope that is possible in a study based on field work. What the available sources render possible is a discussion of the ways in which agrarian communities resist the exercise of power, prior to and apart from those occasions when they rise in rebellion. These less confrontational ways of protest have received little attention in medieval Indian history.

Therefore, broadening the horizon of resistance is important for writing their history. Documentary evidence of everyday forms of resistance are sporadic in nature. Violent and confrontational forms of resistance have received more than their due share of attention by medieval Indian historians. It is, therefore, important to focus on the 'non-confrontational' forms of resistance. James Scott termed such forms of resistance as 'everyday resistance'²⁰ Marc Bloch's treatise on feudalism, did refer to the everyday variety of resistance. He focused on the 'Passive resistance' on the part of peasantry as the only force which could counterbalance the abuses of power by masters.²¹ Georges Duby and Rodney Hilton further discussed everyday forms of resistance. Their work explicitly explains the range of actions, right from "quiet pressure" to open rebellions and elaborated upon the pressure tactics used by peasants.²²Rebellions and revolts, since they are flashier, are understandably more noticeable. Given the nature of historical sources, these are undoubtedly better documented than the everyday variety of resistance. From being centered on revolts and rebellions i.e. resistance that was confrontational and violent, the literature on resistance has evolved and matured over the years.

²⁰ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University Press, 2008), 17.

²¹ Marc Bloch, *French Rural History: An Essay on its basic Characteristics*, trans. Janet Sondheimer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 169.

²² Rodney Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381* (London: Routledge, 2003), 35.

Everyday Resistance' as a theme, remains by and large unexplored in medieval Indian history. Resistance, therefore, has to be acquired from works on agrarian systems, the system of peasant production, studies of institutions and a large body of regional explorations.

In the Agrarian system of Mughal India, recklessly exploited peasantry is categorized as either resulting in flight or rebellion. Refusal to pay land revenue is treated by Habib as "the classic act of defiance" by peasants.²³ Though complaints by peasants are mentioned, the focus unquestionably is on flight, which according to Habib, was the peasant's first reaction both to famine as well as oppression, and armed resistance, which he treats as the embodiment of peasant anger and desperation. Habib does not feature non-confrontational resistance by peasantry in much detail.

In The Peasant in Indian History, Habib cites evidence of peasants uprooting crops²⁴ and trying to delay or refuse payments.²⁵ In *'Forms of Class Struggles in Mughal India'*, the focus again is on armed resistance. Habib writes of the range of resistance, right from passive to armed defiance, but apart from armed resistance, the other variables in this range do not hold his attention for long. Harbans Mukhia on the other hand,²⁶ explores the notion of everyday resistance in two essays *Was There Feudalism in Indian History?*²⁷ and *Peasant Production and Medieval Indian Society*²⁸ Both these books were published before Scott's work. Resistance is understood as being both silent as

²³ Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556-1707* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 32.

²⁴ Irfan Habib, "The Peasants in Indian History", in *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception* (London: Anthem Press, 2002), 36.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁶ Irfan, Habib, "Forms of Class Struggle in Mughal India", in *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception*, (London: Anthem Press, 2002), 18.

²⁷ R S Sharma, "How Feudal was Indian Feudalism", *Social Scientist* 12, no.2, (1985): 225.

²⁸ Harbans Mukhia, "Peasant Production and Medieval Indian Society." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 12, no. 2-3 (1985): 232.

well as overt. The importance of the "silent, struggles inherent in the daily toil on the field"²⁹ has been underlined. It has been argued that peasant resistance assumed various forms, depending on the production system. Lethargy, carelessness, haggling over payments, concealment, petitioning, threats to give up cultivation, violent upheavals- have all been conceded as possibilities. Succession from one form of resistance to another has been observed. It has been suggested that tensions were generated at "multifarious joints".³⁰ Mukhia has argued that the peasants accept only a part of the alien ruling class ideology. He has clearly visualized the peasantry as possessing a certain amount of power and a considerable degree of dynamism, notwithstanding the fact of their exploitation. We have comments from historians conceding to the possibility of the passive, everyday variety of resistance.

EJ Hobsbawm talks about the peasant's awareness of their subalternity.³¹ He wrote of passivity as "the normal strategy of the peasantry"³² and of slowness, imperviousness and stupidity as being "functionally useful"³³ Hobsbawm visualized peasants as being capable of working the system to their minimum disadvantage.³⁴ He thus captured the very essence of the notion of 'everyday resistance'. In James Scott's book, 'Everyday forms of resistance' is cogently defined. Our understanding of resistance is broadened to include real and token resistance, masked and unmasked resistance, routine and extraordinary resistance, resistance in thought, resistance in behavior and resistance in the daily toil.³⁵

²⁹ R S Sharma, "How Feudal was Indian Feudalism", *Social Scientist*, no.12, (1985): 270.

³⁰ Harbans Mukhia, "Peasant Production and Medieval Indian Society." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 12, no. 2-3 (1985): 245.

³¹ EJ Hobsbawm, 'Peasants and Politics', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 2, no. 3 (1973): 150.

³² *Ibid.*, 28.

³³ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁵ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University Press, 2008), 17.

According to Scott, the everyday form of resistance revolves around constant struggle between a class and those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them. Most of the forms of this struggle do not take the form of collective outright defiance. Here he had in mind the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth.³⁶ These ‘Brechtian forms’³⁷ class struggle has certain features in common. They require little or no co-ordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms. To understand these commonplace forms of resistance is to understand what much of the peasantry does 'between revolts' to defend its interests as best it can.³⁸

For any study of the resistance, analysis of consciousness of the subordinate class is important to understand the extent to which elites are able to impose their own image of a just social order, not simply on the behavior of non-elites, but on their consciousness as well.³⁹ The hegemony of elites on the social and religious ideologies, creates a ‘false consciousness’⁴⁰ among the subordinates.

False consciousness has been classified by Scott through two theories, thick and thin theory. Thick theory- convincing subordinate groups by the superior that the social order within which they live are natural and inevitable. How did the subordinates question the idea of hegemony and naturalization? If we assume that the inevitability of domination will have approximately the same status as the inevitability of the weather for a peasant. Then there is evidence that traditional

³⁶ Michael Adas, “From Foot Dragging to Flight: The Evasive History of Peasant Avoidance Protest in South and SouthEast Asia”, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 13, no.2 (1986): 202.

³⁷ A style that relies on the audience's reflective detachment rather than emotional involvement.

³⁸ David Arnold, “Gramsci and Peasant Subalternity in India”, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 11, no. 4 (1984): 160.

³⁹ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University Press, 2008), 39.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

cultivators actually attempt to de-naturalize even the weather by personifying it and developing a ritual repertoire designed to influence or control its course by wearing charms, amulets, or reciting magic formulas. And when these efforts failed, traditional cultivators even cursed the weather but they didn't confound inevitability with justice.⁴¹

On the other hand, thin theory⁴² assumes that the absence of any alternative social arrangements automatically produces the naturalization of the present. While they might hate presents as well. However, to this, Scott argued that while the dominated groups might have difficulty imagining other arrangements, they certainly have no trouble imagining a total reversal of existing distribution of status and rewards. The theme of the world upside down existed in nearly every major cultural tradition in which inequalities of power, wealth and status have been pronounced. These are present in the hidden narratives from the fantasy life of the subordinates and not merely the abstract exercises. These are embedded in the ritual practices and they provided the ideological basis of many revolts. Second imagination was the negation of the existing pattern of exploitation and social degradation. And imagining a utopian order where they imagined the absence of all distinctions.

James Scott also explains how Resistance is reflected as a thought or a symbol. Resistance is not just limited to the collection of individual acts or behaviors. The symbols, the norms, the ideological forms they create constitute the indispensable background to their behavior. The act and thoughts of resistance are never in isolation with each other, rather they are in constant communication- in constant dialogue. No adequate details of a peasant rebellion can be gathered

⁴¹ Ibid., 78.

⁴² Ibid., 80.

without viewing some knowledge of the shared values, the ‘offstage’⁴³ talk, it is important to analyze the consciousness of the peasantry prior to the rebellion. It is therefore important to refer to the intentions, ideas and languages of these subordinate classes. This type of analysis can be manifested in Marc Bloc’s *French Rural History*.

Absence of everyday forms of resistance from historical records is a conscious attempt on the part of the state to silence the voices of insubordination. The historical records and archives are both resolutely centered on the state’s interests, never mentioning rural society except when their activities were threatening. Agrarian classes did not appear as historical actors. Power relations affected the discourse of these classes in any agrarian society. Subordinates in the large-scale structures of domination have a fairly extensive social existence but outside the immediate control of the dominant. It is in such a sequestered setting where, in principle, a shared critique of domination may develop.⁴⁴ They create and defend a social space against structural kinship where offstage dissent to the official transcript of power relationships are voiced. The forms of resistance are varied and are firmly embedded in the cultural and historical settings. It is therefore important to read, interpret and understand the often fugitive political conduct of subordinate groups. They create their own transcript, and it is by comparing these transcripts with the public transcripts that the resistance to domination can be understood through a different lens.

Hegemonic public conduct and backstage discourse, which cannot be spoken to the face of the power; who are the audience for these performances? These resistance narratives germinates.at the social sites. Ideological resistance can grow best when they are shielded from direct surveillance - these patterns of disguise ideological insubordination are somewhat analogous to the patterns by

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ James C Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance* (Yale University Press, 1990), 11.

which peasants and slaves have disguised their efforts to thwart material appropriation of their labor, their production and their property. For example, Poaching, foot dragging, pilfering, dissimulation, flight. These forms of insubordination can be called as the ‘Infrapolitics of the powerless’.⁴⁵ How these transcripts take advantage of the anonymity of the crowd.

Therefore, the official transcripts provided an incomplete picture. Even if there is any presence of subordinate groups, the scripts are mediated by the interpretation of the dominant elites. Another problem was the prevailing illiteracy among the subordinated groups. Records are always kept by the elites. One of the major reasons was the efforts of the subordinate groups to conceal their activities and opinions, which might expose them to harm. They often avoided detection of their ideological and material resistance (they don't appear in the archive). There always existed strategic appearances that elites and subordinates alike ordinarily inserted into the public transcripts.⁴⁶

Like the traditional Marxist approach, domination is for material appropriation and remains the site for exploitation and resistance. However, the lenses are much wider. This process of appropriation unavoidably entails systematic social relations of subordination that impose indignities of one kind or another on the weak. Resistance then originates not simply from the material appropriation but from the pattern of personal humiliations that characterizes the exploitation. Dignity at once is a very personal and a very public attribute.⁴⁷The audience before whom the indignity is most damaging (they are important as they also form the social source for one's self-esteem?) These are mostly one's closest family, friends, peers, clansmen, co-workers

⁴⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 88.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 112-113.

etc. and particularly their own subordinates. That is where hidden transcripts emerge and a partial refuge to humiliation is obtained.⁴⁸

Another question then arises: who were the carriers of these transcripts? Much of the resistance to the dominant culture took the form of religious heterodoxy and heresy. What Max Weber termed as 'pariah-intelligentsia'⁴⁹ should not be overlooked. This group directly depends on the patronage of the lower class public to make their living. So they convey the cultural message that is not at odds with that of his public.

Since we know that dialogue never remained unidirectional, therefore, there were constant attempts of abolishing these sites by the state. Several measures were adopted to de-alienate them from each other through language and caste barriers, appointing spies, recruiting administrations from the marginal classes, increasing the dependency of the subordinates on superiors. Similarly, there also exists a reciprocal resistance from below. Solidarity among subordinates also involved conflicts at some level.

Gramsci defines agrarian society as the living force, politically as well as socially and culturally. Any study of the agrarian system demands close scrutiny and careful analysis, through understanding its historical specificity and the subaltern consciousness revealed in popular beliefs and folklore. Peasant culture and society were a crucial element in the control that was exercised by the rulers over the ruled. Popular beliefs were, accordingly, far from being 'something negligible and inert within the movement of history'. Gramsci held that popular ideas had as much historical weight or energy as purely material forces.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 119.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 126.

Gramsci criticized Marxists for their only belief in the pure form of revolutions. According to him, it was the task of the intellectual to unravel the complexities and to 'translate' into theoretical language the elements of the historical life' and to search out the subaltern initiatives. Even if these beliefs and consciousness might not be objectively correct but these were forms and expressions of the life of the masses. He acknowledged that the understanding of subaltern history was restricted due to the paucity of the source materials from the viewpoints of the subalterns themselves. Gramsci regarded popular belief as being largely derivative from ruling class/superior culture, and thus constituting one of the principal props for class hegemony and subordination. Subalterns might receive their culture from the hegemonic discourse but they make it their own by impregnating it with non-hegemonic values or by selecting some aspects and rejecting others. Reverting to the more economically deterministic Marxism, since consciousness was the product of material conditions, subaltern ideology, as represented by religion, was necessarily consistent with, or appropriate to, subalterns' own material existence, reflecting the needs and aspirations of the peasants; own way of life rather than that of the hegemonic classes. Religion, therefore, for the subalterns was a 'specific way of rationalizing the world and real life', it provided the general framework for the real political activity among them.

Folk or popular culture is the property of a social class or strata whose social location generates distinctive experiences and values, and these shared characteristics appear in their ritual, dance, drama, dress, tales, religious beliefs and so forth. This can also be seen as the riposte of official or dominant culture (symbol of cultural dignity) through their own. Their cultural expression involved multivalent symbols and metaphor which provides it a disguised form. There is subtle use of symbols through their subculture (dress, rituals, songs etc.), intended for a particular group of audience. Excluded audiences may grasp the hidden seditious message but they cannot directly

react to it because that sedition is clothed in terms that also can lay claim to a perfectly innocent construction.

Notes on sources, Research questions and Research methodology-

For the sixteenth century onwards, despite the availability of extensive and significant records of Mughal rule, mostly written in the form of ‘chronicles’, i.e. *Tarikh*, memoirs, genealogical accounts, court chronicles, biographies, hagiographies and travel accounts. There is a lack of sources on the agrarian society and social history aspects of Bengal frontiers. Mirza Nathan's *Baharistan-Ghaibi* is a political history and hardly throws light on the frontier rule of Bengal. So, in order to study the socio-religious and economic aspects of the agrarian frontiers of Bengal, Bengali literature of the Mughal period has been utilized by various scholars. Mangal-Kāvya formed one of the most important literature to be utilized for this purpose. Here, in this paper, I will use a sixteenth century Mangal-Kāvya text narrative titled ‘Chandimangal’. This text could be analyzed to study the social, political and cultural realities of the late sixteenth and seventeenth century Rarh region of the Western Bengal.

A Mangal-Kāvya is a narrative poem about a lesser known non-Brahmanical deity who establishes his or her cult among the humans. The Mangal-Kāvya is distinct in both content and style, and is derived from many different influences, both religious and social. The Chandimangal of Kavikankan Mukundaram Chakravarti was written in the latter part of the sixteenth century. Mukundaram's Chandimangal is not wholly original work, nor is it the first Mangal-Kāvya written about the goddess Chandi. However, Mukundaram's work was one of the most popular versions

over time. It also has left its mark on a number of other genres, including Muslim texts, suggesting its wide popularity during the time. The large volume of handwritten manuscripts was found in the Bengali-speaking areas (West Bengal, Bangladesh, and parts of Assam) and there have been numerous print editions published from the nineteenth century onwards. For my research, I have chosen to Utilize and translate the 1975 Sahitya Akademi version edited by Sukumar Sen as my main source and will consult the translated version by Edward M. Yazijian wherever particularly significant. The Chandimangal is divided into two khandas, that is, Akhetik and Banik Khanda. I will analyze only the Sathapana and Akhetik khanda for this paper. Sathapana contains a short biographical sketch of the author and a description of the benefits accrued from listening to the narrative and a short summary of the stories. This section of the text is a rich source for studying the sixteenth century Bengal as Mukundaram describes in vivid length the social, political and economic details of the time. Akhetik Khand is a story of low caste Hunter Kalketu, who establishes a new Kingdom of Garhjat with the blessing of Chandi, his war with the King of Kalinga and Kalketu's victory.

The first person to suggest a genre of Mangal-Kāvya as an object for literary study was Dinesh Chandra Sen⁵⁰ in his influential *Bangabhasa o Sahitya*, first published in 1896. Two recent essays about Dinesh Chandra by Bengali historians can help us to see how his very particular version of 'romantic nationalism' made Bengali literature an 'archival resource with which to remake society' by uniting past and present and elites and common folk in a 'continuity of emotional experience'.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Dineshchandra Sen, "The Folk-literature of Bengal", *History of Bengali Language and Literature* (Aparna Book Distributors, 2007), 20.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

In both his *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, and especially in his *Bengali historical synthesis Brhat Banga*, Sen sought to restore appreciation of traditional Bengali culture in general, and not just appreciation of traditional literature. Thus, Sen's work must be placed in the context of other efforts to recover, collect, translate and publish Bengali folklore, and to recover Bengali folk art more generally; with regard to Bengali visual arts his references to E.B. Havell are particularly interesting.⁵² Sen's descriptions of 'mangal-gan', narrative songs performed by village singers, stressed links between epic and puranic stories in Sanskrit literature and the specifically Bengali narratives of 'Hindu' poems devoted to Siva, Manasa, Candi and Dharma, the principle narratives of Mangal-Kāvya. He believed that the manuscripts of these narratives preserve traces of an ancient Bengali oral and folk literature, formed over centuries in an intimate and natural relation between village singers and their audiences. His discussions of the genre display a nationalist's admiration for the unifying potential of a literature into which are gathered 'expressions of all the poetry of the race' from 'a remotely ancient past'.⁵³

According to Asutosh Bhattacharya the history of the Mangal-Kāvya starts approximately from the thirteenth century CE, a time that roughly coincides with the decline of Buddhism and subsequent rise of brahmanical religion, and the arrival of Muslim rule in Bengal. David L. Curley in his immensely important book, *Poetry and History: Bengali Mangal-Kāvya and Social Change in Precolonial Bengal* (2008) defined Mangal-Kāvya as a genre of —"narrative poetry, composed, as far as we know from surviving texts, during the period of the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries." Over the centuries there have been Mangal-Kāvya written about many deities, both Indo-Aryan and indigenous such as: Siva, Manasa, Candi, Dharma Thakur, Sitala etc. Several

⁵² Ibid., 18.

⁵³ Ibid., 19.

scholars such as T. W. Clark⁵⁴, Ralph W. Nicholas⁵⁵, Tony K. Stewart⁵⁶, Clint Seely, Edward C. Dimock⁵⁷ etc., and of course, there are many Indian scholars working upon the field like Mandakranta Bose, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gautam Bhadra and many others have defined Mangal-Kāvya as fictionalized epics, distinct in both content and style, and it is not derived from any one tradition; it is a synthesis of many different influences, both religious and social.⁵⁸ Mangal-Kāvya is generally considered to be a narrative poem that tells the story of a previously unknown deity who establishes his or her cult among humans and demonstrates his or her powers in order to ensure the wellbeing (mangala). Most Bengali scholars have described the genre of Mangal-Kāvya by means of didactic purposes: they explain and justify the worship of a particular deity. But there also exists a secondary plot function, by means of which protagonists of that deity become involved in this-worldly problems, and then are restored to situations of proper order. What may be more interesting to historians are the ways the protagonists' problems are described, they provide a window on patriarchal, political, economic and social conflicts, and sometimes plots of Mangal-Kāvya allow their divinities to provide solutions which involve changes in this-worldly institutions.

⁵⁴ T. W. Clark, "Evolution Of Hinduism In Medieval Bengali Literature: Siva, Candi, Manas A." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 17, no. 3 (1955): 504. He suggested that the Mangal-Kāvya texts were composed in chronologically distinct stages. The 'rude and popular' narratives of earlier phase were gradually replaced by more 'learned and puranic' narratives. This was the work of Brahmin thinkers who 'interpreted the popular material as they found it, in terms of orthodox metaphysics'.

⁵⁵ Ralph W. Nicholas and Ronald Inden, *Kinship in Bengali Culture*, (The University of Chicago Press, 1977): 154.

⁵⁶ Tony K. Stewart, "Texts in History: The Determinations of Readings and Their Texts", *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 18, no. 1 (1985): 10. Stewart suggested that the fictional narratives of the Mangalkavya texts indicate the possibilities of action that could have been contemplated, and the identities imagined within the discursive space of literature.

⁵⁷ Edward C. Dimock and T. W. Clark, *Bengal; Literature and History*, (Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1967), 109.

⁵⁸ Gautam Bhadra, "The Performer and the Listener: Kathakatā in Modern Bengal", *Studies in History* 10, no. 2 (1994): 250.

Many Scholars have utilized Mangal-Kāvya as a source for studying the history of the medieval Bengal, but there is dearth of scholarship when it comes to using Mangal-Kāvya as a literary genre offering detailed and reliable pictures of a lower-class social world, reflected in the activities performed by the main characters, and bring up a remarkably realistic depiction of everyday life, conflicts and resistance into the highly stylized world of conventional literature. The social context of the Mangal-Kāvya underscores their amazing versatility in terms of the ability to forge connections among different groups in society, both elite and plebeian. The authors, singers, patrons, and audiences of Mangal-Kāvya spanned a spectrum of social groups and classes. All the way from powerful *rajas* and Zamindars to the humble and marginal people of rural society. Characters belonged to different strata of society including the people from lowest rung, king, tributary chiefs, subordinate landlords, merchants, Brahmans, traders, agricultural labor, domestic servants, cowherds, hunters etc. those from the lower rungs occupied important positions. The congregation of such widely divergent characters and the description of their exploits, values and aspirations in the Mangal narrative poems makes them a veritable source of social history.

Further, Mangal-Kāvya narratives are a composite art form and place a great premium on the art of ‘storytelling’ and ‘listening’. Margaret A. Mills in her models for the portrayal of interactive oral narrative performance from the medieval and modern periods, described Mangal-Kāvya as the ‘Illocutionary or pragmatic convergences’⁵⁹. According to her, these are votive or ritual narratives expected to have pragmatic effects in the lives of both tellers and listeners. If these narratives did not speak to the experiences of tellers and listeners, why would they be remembered, told or listened to? For this purpose, through this study, my attempt will be to locate the social and

⁵⁹ Margaret A. Mills. “How Stories Lodge in Lives”, *South Asian History and Culture* 8, no. 4 (2017): 419.

cultural background of the author of the Kāvya and locate where the locus of authority lies. How the author wanted to create something new, used this performative genre to make stories relevant to the place and the time in which he lived. Second, religious performances offer an ideal medium for communication in traditional societies. These religious performances take place in a public location and are capable of reaching a diverse social nuclei. Secondly, due to their religious character they are able to overcome many of the usual limitations of social differentiations. Mangal-Kāvya as one of these performative texts became an effective medium of mass communication in the medieval period. Many of the dissent groups made use of this highly effective channel of mass communication. Therefore, there will be an attempt to read Mukundaram's Chandimangal within a wider framework that is sensitive to the fears, struggles, wants and hopes of disadvantaged groups as these are experienced in their daily lives, away from the spotlight of modern-day politics and resistance ideology. Lastly, deconstruction and contextualization of the narratives within the scope of time, region and issues discussed above would be supported by *Tarikhs* and other Mughal autobiographical accounts composed in the region in Persian language around this time period will be utilized; travelogues, memoirs and orientalist writings, census reports, gazetteers commenced in the nineteenth Century, provides considerable political, social, cultural and ideological background of the rural society of our concerned time period. Other literary sources composed in different regional and Indo-Persian languages between the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries will also be discussed for fuller exploration of the tendencies in the early modern literary cultures. Vaishnava hagiographical accounts containing itineraries of the saints, such as *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, and the Persian accounts of the Mughal officials campaigning in Bengal, such as *Bahristan-i-Ghaybi* and *Riyaz Us Salatin* by Ghulam Hussain Salim Zaidpuri, temporally overlapped with the sixteenth and seventeenth

century Mangal-Kāvya. Two chronicles from the Mughal court refer to Bengal- Nizamuddin Bakshi in *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* and in Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari*, is a valuable source of Bengal's social history. Information on administrative units, land-revenue, agricultural conditions, etc., towards the end of the sixteenth century are provided in great detail.

Chapterization-

As already discussed above, in this chapter the attempt was to introduce my research topic followed by a discussion of geographical region and time period to be examined. Second section deals with historiographical review of broader themes concerning- studies of the agrarian history of Mughal India, Rural society and medieval frontiers, Agrarian conflicts and social resistance. Following which, a section on research problems, approaches and methods, where I have briefly introduced my source and how it has been utilized in the past and what are my research objectives for utilizing the source further. Last section discusses the division of chapter of this work.

In the second chapter, this research aims to analyze Mukundaram's autobiographical introduction and situate his narrative within the historical developments of the time. First section of this chapter will deal with brief historiographical review and methodology for using autobiography for constructing the past. How they might help us to see not only into particular events but into the larger cultural and social and even political processes of a moment in time. In the second section, I will discuss the author and his patronage in the context of political geography of the sixteenth century Rarh. Third section will be a discussion on various viewpoints on why Mangal-Kāvya texts were written? And an attempt to see Chandimangal as different from other texts of this genre. Last section deals with when was text written?

In the third chapter, an attempt is made to understand the different agrarian aspects and relations as reflected in the Chandimangal. First section of this chapter deals with broader understanding of the rural administration of medieval Bengal. Second section deals with the administration of Zamindari lands. How officials were appointed at the local levels and it emerged out of a closely knit caste structure at the village levels. Third section deals with the projection of agrarian aspects like agrarian expansion, land grants and newly emerging agrarian relations, exertion of superior rights on lands, rights on land followed naturally from their participation in the reclamation of forest and the establishment of villages on the reclaimed lands. In the last section, extension of the land grants to the newly cultivated regions led to the interaction between the forested and agrarian communities. How this interaction at various levels was manifested in Mukundaram's Chandimangal.

In the fourth chapter, this study aims to locate everyday forms of resistance in the Medieval Rarh through an analysis of the Mukundaram's text. In the first section, there are several incidents pointed out with Mukundaram both subtly and directly in his narrative poetry which project resistance of various forms and at varied settings. Resistance existed at so many levels. In this chapter, my attempt is to trace the resistance taking on the part of the local chiefs towards the larger Mughal rule. Resistance, conflicts and negotiations among the state appointed agrarian officials, land grantees and locally appointed officials, peasant resistance to the other superior land rights and exploitation, resistance between local agrarian and forested communities. Lastly, social resistance including caste and gendered forms.

Concluding chapter aims to discuss the research questions that I proposed in the beginning of this study, both answered and unanswered in the chapters mentioned above. To sum up, I will discuss the further scope of this research.

CHAPTER 2

Social Context of Chandimangal: Author, Audience, and Narrative

Pattern

Introduction

Mukundaram's Chandimangal starts with his detailed biographical sketch where he describes the troubled times in which he lived. Mukundaram attempted to describe, depict or project himself as he was at the time of the composition of the text. Through this section, he is attempting to depict himself in the making or what happened around him over that time. While his narrative cannot completely be free of biases, he may have misremembered or had his facts or dates misinterpreted, but he aims to provide a historical framework about a true picture. Therefore, Mukundaram's account holds an important position among other historical writings of the time as Mukundaram is both the investigator and subject of investigation. His description of the origin of the text is a rich source for writing any social history of the concerned period and region.

Therefore, following Margaret A. Mills's model of describing Mangal-Kāvya narratives as a composite art form, placing great importance on the art of 'storytelling' and 'listening'. My attempt in this chapter will be to read Mukundaram's account as a social site, located within an embedded social environment of which it is a product and in which it acts as an agent. I attempt to contextualize Mukundaram's life within the social structure in which he lived. It can be of utmost historical importance to understand the larger cultural and social and even political processes of a moment in time. In this chapter, I am viewing the text as a biographical description rather than

merely as a work of religious literature. I have tried to locate Chandimangal text concerning two frontiers, for it was composed in a little kingdom which lay between the Muslim Sultanate of Bengal and the usually forested tracts of Rarh, which is situated between the western Bengal delta, and between a center of Brahmanical culture, and the wild forest and ‘tribal’ peoples of the Chota Nagpur plateau. Lastly, to answer if Mukundaram’s Chandimangal can be seen as a historical self-portrait, composed in retrospect. Can Mukundaram’s description be viewed as an autobiographical account? These are some of the questions I will address in the subsequent section which will be followed by a brief discussion on how autobiographies has been viewed as a tool for history writing by the scholars.

Autobiographies have been treated as individualistic, rather biased, accounts. Our reading of these texts has heavily been influenced by the colonial gaze. The postmodernist understanding of history rests largely on the fact that the reality of the past lies in the historian’s construction of the past and interpretations by the historian and though this school of thought has faced criticism, it has opened up the arena of historical investigation. Thus, historical inquiry can no longer be confined to merely archival documents or chronicles but now encompasses oral traditions, memory, and even biography and autobiographies. Most biographies and autobiographies were initially regarded as flawed because they were seen as panegyrics that praise the hero or the self rather than delineating historical facts of one’s life or events with impartiality and most often criticized for leaving out grey areas which could be important for reconstructing the period under question through the person better, and hence such works were looked down upon by academic scholars as not being matters for serious historical discourse.

However, the postmodernist understanding has made it possible to even bring autobiographies and biographies under the purview of serious historical investigation, as put by Kumkum Roy who

argues that it is important to shift away from the not very useful task of trying to dig facts from the text but more important to examine the strategies that underlay the composition of biographies and autobiographies and pattern them to reach multiple and varied interpretations of the past from such works. Such varied interpretations and constructions of the past based on examining the alternate strategies underlying the composition of such biographies and autobiographies can also qualify as a reality of the past or history, making the autobiographies– biographies themselves essential tools for constructing narratives of the past and determining what is a fact and what is not.⁶⁰

Gabrielle Spiegel talks of the ‘social logic of a text’, a concept which tries to bring together in a single framework a protocol for the analysis of a text’s social site. For her, the text is located within an embedded social environment of which it is a product and in which it acts as an agent. Even the language and purely aesthetic character of a work can be a mirror to the social world from which it emerges; to examine the language of a text itself with the tools of a historian within local social contexts, the varied systems of communication, networks of power can account for its particular semantic inflections, aiding in recovery of particular cultural meanings. Such an approach to understanding texts, according to Spiegel, allowed texts to grant us an access to the past. So, this is another methodological approach suggested by Spiegel which can be deployed to all texts even for autobiographies using the analysis of the language of the text to reach an understanding of the

⁶⁰ Vijaya Ramaswamy and Yogesh C. Sharma, *Biography as History: Indian Perspectives* (Orient BlackSwan, 2009).

social environment and cultural meanings within which the biography was located, allowing biographies to grant us access to the past and serving as historical sources.⁶¹

In this context, Alice Kessler Harris mentions autobiographies and biographies help to contextualize individual lives within the social structure in which individuals lived and can be of utmost historical importance to understand the culture and normative frameworks prevalent at the time when the subject of the autobiography or biography lived and the way they shaped the subject's own representation of self.⁶² Thus, studying the life story of an individual might be akin to studying the history of broad socio-cultural patterns of the period. E. P. Thompson suggested in his introduction to a biography of William Blake, take as our task that of "placing" the individual whom we wish to study. Our effort would then lead us to search for what Thompson calls "the nodal points of conflict": the tensions between our subject and the social/political world, the world of ideas that he or she encountered. Our object, as Thompson so succinctly put it, would be to explore "the way his mind meets the world."⁶³ The individual then turns into a "fact"-more complicated than most, but capable of illuminating the past in new and exciting ways. I think an individual life might help us to see not only particular events but into the larger cultural and social and even political processes of a moment in time. These are some of the ways in which biographies and autobiographies may contribute as sources of history.

Mukundaram's autobiographical prose in Chandimangal

In this section, I highlight how an autobiographical work could become a nuanced tool for historical analysis, helping us to look into the remarkable aspects regarding identity formation in

⁶¹ Gabrielle Spiegel, *The Past as Text: Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1999).

⁶² Alice Harris Kessler, "Why Biography?" *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2011): 626–27.

⁶³ E. P. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (New Press, 1994).

medieval India. An account of its origin, a detailed description of the circumstances under which the text emerged brings into light the poet's conception of why the text was important to him, and secondly the view of the political, social, and economic condition of Bengal in the second half of the sixteenth century. And lastly, I argue that Mukundaram's autobiographical note also provides a detailed picture of village life in the western parts of medieval Bengal, particularly of a Brahmin family dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. The following is the excerpt of poet's autobiographical account –

“Listen to the story of how the Goddess Chandika came to me in a dream, appearing in the garb of my mother. There was a virtuous ruler by the name of Gopinath in the town of Salimabaj. Lived in his district in Damunya village, tilling the land. It had been our family home for six or seven generations. The governor Raja Mansingh was magnificent! He hovered like a bee at the feet of Vishnu and was once the lord of Gauda, Banga, and Utkal. After Raja Man Singh's tenure, however, Mahmud Sharif was awarded control of the land (khilat) because of the tenants' misconduct. The chief minister at that time was a prince (Raijada) who harassed the merchants and was hostile to both Vaishnavas and Brahmins. His men measured the land from corner to corner with ropes. Land previously measured as twenty units was now assessed as only fifteen (15 kathas to a Bigha).⁶⁴ The authorities ignored the complaints of Raiyats (cultivators). The accountants became death personified, classifying barren land as fertile and taking bribes without giving anything in return. The moneychangers (Poddars) became gods of death (jam), assigning less value to our silver coins than they were actually worth (2 ½ annas less for a rupee). They took for themselves as interest, one paisa per day per rupee. Always angry revenue officer

⁶⁴ Twenty kathas makes one bigha

(dihidar) did not allow anyone to buy livestock or grains unless he received a bribe. Then our lord Gopinath Nandi was jailed, and we had no hope of salvation. There were spies (paedas) everywhere. The guards closed off all the gates to the town to prevent escape of raiyats. The people grew confused and exhausted. So they sold their cattle, produce and homes for a pittance, articles worth a rupee were sold at 10 annas. After planning our escape with Gabhir Khan, we left Daminya with my brother Ramanath. Shrimanta Khan of Chandibati village also helped us. It was during this journey that the goddess showed herself to me. When we arrived in Bhelinya a fellow by the name of Rup Ray robbed us of our money, but the oil presser (teli) Jadu Kunda took care of us. He sheltered and fed us at his home for three days. Afterwards we drifted down the River Murai and arrived in Bhutiya. From there we crossed the Darukosh sandbar and came to the town of Patuli where a man named Gangadas helped us. Parastar piloted the boat, avoiding Amodar village, and we eventually arrived at Kongchariyanagar. We bathed there without the benefit of all and only drank water, while the youngsters cried for rice. I bought the goddess sweets made from the stem of the water lily (shallok) and prayed with ally blossoms at an ashram on the far bank of a pond. I fell asleep at that spot, hungry, afraid and exhausted. It was at that moment that Chandi appeared to me in a dream. The Mother Goddess was most merciful and gave me the cool shade of her feet. She ordered me to write. With leaf and ink in hand, she personally wrote out songs in the form of several mantras for me. I've studied many of the mantras, but I have never heard the type of mantra that she instructed me to recite at all times. After receiving Chandi's command, we travelled down the River Shilai and ultimately settled in Arara. Arara is the land of Brahmins, and the Raja there is a Brahmin, an equal of the great sage Vyasa. After reading my poems. He awarded me a large amount of rice. That king. Bankura Ray. Is most honorable. He released me from all my debts and hired me as his son's tutor. His son Raghunath, distinguished

among his royal lineage, honors me as his guru. Raghunath has always taken care of me and Damodar Nandi, his interpreter of dreams. Raja Raghunath offered his patronage to me in perpetuity and awarded my singer, Vinaysundar the son of Vikramdev.

Blessed is Raghunath! His pedigree and conduct are both flawless. He has made the existence of this new Mangal-Kāvya possible”⁶⁵

৬

শুন ভাই সভাজন কবিষের বিবরণ
এই গীত হইল জেমতে
উরিয়া মায়ের বেশে আসিয়া শিরর দেশে
চণ্ডিকা বসিলা আচাৰিতে^১ ।
সহর সেলিমাবাজ তাহাতে সজ্জনরাজ
নিবসে নেউগি গোপীনাথ

⁶⁵ Mukunda Rām Cakravartī and Sukumar Sen, *Caṇḍīmāṅgala* (Kolkata: Sāhitya Akādemi, 2013), 3-4. Translation has been done by me and I have consulted Edward M. Yazijian’s translation wherever needed.

আড়রা ব্রাহ্মণভূম

ব্রাহ্মণ জাহার স্বামী

নরপতি ব্যাসের সমান

পাড়িয়া কবিব্বাণী

সম্ভাষিল নৃপমুনি

রাজা দিল দশ আড়া ধান ।

সুধন্য বাঁকুড়া রায়

খণ্ডাল্য^{২৭} সকল দায়

সুত পাঠে^{২৮} কৈল নিয়োজিত

তার সুত রঘুনাথ

রাজকুলে^{২৯} অবদাত

গুরু বালি করিল পূজিত ।^{৩০}

সঙ্গে দামোদর^{৩১} নন্দী

জে জানে স্বপ্নের সন্ধি

অনুদিন করিল জতন

নিতে^{৩২} দিল অনুমতি

রঘুনাথ নরপতি

গায়নেরে দিলেন ভূষণ ।^{৩৩}

বিক্রমদেবের সুত

গান করে অদভূত

বাখান করয়ে সর্বজন

তাল মানে বিজ্ঞ দড়

বিনয়সুন্দর বড়

নতিমান মধুরবচন ।

ধন্য রাজা রঘুনাথ

কুলে শীলে অবদাত

প্রকাশিল নূতন মঙ্গল

ঠাহার আদেশ পান

শ্রীকবিকঙ্কণ গান

সম্ভাষা করিয়া কুশল ॥

[Text images has been taken from Mukunda Rām Cakravartī and Sukumar Sen, *Caṇḍīmaṅgala* (Kolkata: Sāhitya

Akādemi, 2013), 3-4, pada 5 and 6 (first day)]

Patronage

By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Brahmans of Bengal represented a multi-layered and relatively diverse community comprising a number of smaller sub-groups. By this period, most well-established Brahman jatis with long traditions of literacy were already involving themselves in service to the sultanate, Mughal and Nawabi governments. However, other types of lineages were also being drawn into the orbit of scribal and military service during the same centuries. All along the forested frontiers or outer margins of Bengal, usually situated away from the Ganges valley, families of chieftains—usually of very low-status backgrounds and according to some scholars, of *adivasi* or tribal backgrounds—were carving out small territorial principalities such as Birbhum, Mallbhum, Karnagarh etc. These local chiefs in order to legitimize their rule often patronised scribal groups, mainly Brahmans and Kayastha. Therefore, we may locate these texts two frontiers, for it was composed in a little kingdom which lay between the Muslim Sultanate of Bengal and the usually forested tracts of Rarh, which is situated between the western Bengal deltas, and between a center of Brahmanical culture, and the wild forest and ‘tribal’ peoples of the Chota Nagpur plateau.⁶⁶

Mallabhum was one of the most famous principalities at that time. The Malla Dynasty was one of the oldest ruling chiefs of the region. They had a well-organized army and were great patrons of learning and culture. Though Malla raja assumed titles like ‘Ray’ or ‘Dev’ from the sixteenth century onwards, they are popularly believed to be *Bagdi* or *Mal* in origin, belonging to the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy of the time. In order to move up the caste hierarchy, Malla raja often

⁶⁶ Kumkum Chatterjee, “Scribal Elites in Sultanate and Mughal Bengal,” in *Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal*. (New Delhi: OUP, 2009), 6.

claimed to be the Kshatriyas or Brahmans. There are several legends through which Malla Rajas connect themselves with the Kshatriyas or Brahmans of Northern India.⁶⁷ The date when these legends were established is very difficult to locate and is altogether another discussion as many such stories were also prevalent in all parts of India among semi-aboriginal tribes who connected themselves with the Kshatriya ancestry.⁶⁸

Viewing this context, Chandimangal was written by Kavikankan Mukundaram Chakravarti. Mukundaram was patronized by the Raja Bankura Ray of Arara (Medinipur) and his son Raja Raghunath Ray. Arara is located in the Bankura District (Medinipur) of Bengal. Raja Bankura Ray was the 49th ruler of the Malla Dynasty.⁶⁹ Mallas of the Birbhum were never divorced from the main current Bengal's history. They have ruled the western tracts of Bengal from before the Turk conquest.⁷⁰ However, the historical documents and mention of the Malla rajas were found only from the sixteenth century onwards. When Man Singh (governor of Bihar) set out a conquest of North Orissa, Sultan Katly Khan Lohani (Pathan Sultan of North Orissa) attacked his son Jagat Singh. Raja Bir Hambir rescued him. Man Singh was very pleased with him and presented him

⁶⁷ "Raghunath Singh, the founder of the Dynasty of Bishnupur, derives his origin from the kings of Jainnagar near Vrindavan. The story of lineage goes like; The King of Jainnagar, being seized with the desire to visit distant countries, set out for purushottam, and on his way they passed through Bishnupur. While resting at one of the Halting places in the great forest of the country, his wife gave birth to a son; and the king foreseeing the difficulty of carrying a child with him, left the mother and her baby behind the woods, and went forward on his journey. Soon after the father had departed, a man from Bagdi caste saw the newly-born child, took him home and reared him till he reached the age of seven. Later, a Brahman of the place marked his royal descent and took him to his house and gave him the education of a warrior. Upon acquiring skills, he became the chieftain of Raja of Padampur and assumed the title of Adi Malla. One day Raja, attracted by beauty, put an umbrella on his head to protect him from the sun and rain. As per tradition, Brahmans of the region declared that since the Raja himself held the umbrella over him, the boy was destined to become the king'. Many similar versions of Adi Malla are available in various texts. [William Wilson Hunter and John Francis Rotton, *The Annals of Rural Bengal* (Smith, Elder, and Co, 1868)]

⁶⁸ RC Dutt, "The Aboriginal Element in the Population of Bengal" *Calcutta Review* (1882).

⁶⁹ Amiya Kumar Banerji, "Bankura" in *West Bengal District Gazetteer* (September 1968).

⁷⁰ L.S.S. O' Malley, "Bankura" in *Bengal District Gazetteers*, (Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1908), 77.

some land and helped him later when Pathans attacked their territories. The *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi*⁷¹, from where this account has been taken, refers to Bir Hambir (later assumed the title Bankura Ray) as the Zamindar of Birbhum. His semi-independent rule can also be confirmed from the mention in *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, the Zamindars of Birbhum and Vishnupur being protected by the dense forests, mountains and hills did not have to appear personally before the *Diwan* or *Subahdar* but sent their agents to carry on transactions on their behalf and used to pay, through them, the usual tributes, presents etc.⁷² *Akbarnama* mentions Hamir, the Raja of Mallabhum, was a powerful prince due to the grace of *Mrinmayi*. The goddess is said to have come in contact with the Raja directly. Originally the goddess lived in the forests where Raja came for hunting, she revealed herself to him in the dream and asked him to worship her in order to prosper and make his subjects flourish. Later, Raja shifted his capital to the forest of *Mrinmayi* and named the place Bishnupur and established himself as the king of Bishnupur.⁷³ There are several other sets of the legends where the Malla Rajas are known to have flourished under the auspices of Goddess Durga, called by a particular name *Mrinmayi*.

About the Poet

From the autobiographical account and more imparable references throughout the text one could grasp a scattered idea of his early life and the origin of the text within contemporary aspects of his life. Mukundaram is a Brahman and is associated with the western part of the Rarh region of the

⁷¹ Mīrzā Nathan, Moayyidul Islam Borah and Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, *Bahāristān-i-Ghaybī: a History of the Mughal Wars in Assam, Cooch Behar, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during the Reign of Jahāngīr and Shāhjahān* (Borah Press Gov. of Assam in the Dep. of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Narayani Handiqui Historical Inst., 1992),68.

⁷² L.S.S. O' Malley, "Bankura" in *Bengal District Gazetteers*, (Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1908), 84.

⁷³ Abū Al-Fazl Ibn Mubārak and Henry Beveridge, *The Akbarnama of Abu'l Fazl: History of the Reign of Akbar including an Account of His Predecessors* (Asiatic Society, 2010).

western Bengal. For seven generations his ancestors lived in the village of Damunya⁷⁴, located in the southernmost part of the Burdwan district in West Bengal. Mukundaram in various references mentions his ancestral village, he writes that in the village of Damunya, by the river Ratna in Burdwan district. A temple was built in honor of Siva by a Brahman. But the god left the temple to take abode under a pipal tree. Madhav Ojha, one of the poet's ancestors, looked after the shrine. Mukundaram, by the grace of Siva, wrote poems in honor of the deity in childhood. Further, he provided the genealogy for his family. His grandfather was Jagannath Misra, one of the nine sons of Madhav, son of Umapati and Tapan Ojha. Mukundaram was the youngest son of Hriday Misra, Jagannath's son and his eldest brother was Kabichandra. Jagannath Misra had the title of 'Gunaraj'. 'Gunaraj' title was conferred during the Pathan rule in Bengal.⁷⁵ Therefore, Mukundaram's grandfather might have had an important position in the court of the Hussain Shah (1494-1519)⁷⁶. Mukundaram in his autobiographical section writes that his family had lived in Damunya for seven generations and cultivating the land was their means of livelihood. However, Mukundaram does not mention clearly if the family cultivated the land themselves or with the help of agricultural workers, or 'rented' it out. Land grants to Brahmins in order to maintain the worship of the deity was a common phenomenon. We are also told in another fragment that one Digar Datta, probably a Kayastha landholder, brought Madhav Ojha to Damunya and helped settle the family in the village holding some office under him, probably in the service of Siva. However, Mukundaram

⁷⁴ Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakravarti, *Chandimangal*, trans. Edward M. Yazijian (India: Penguin Classics, 2015), 4.

⁷⁵ Edward M Yazijian and Mukundarāma Cakrabartī, *From Performance to Literature: The Caṇḍīmāṅgala of Kavikaṅkaṇa Mukunddarāma Cakravarti* (Penguin Books, 2007), X (Introduction).

⁷⁶ Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakravarti, *Chandimangal*, trans. Edward M. Yazijian (India: Penguin Classics, 2015), 7.

depicts his grandfather, Jagannath, a devotee of Krishna as Gopal and who also gave up non-vegetarian food.

Unlike other Brahmans of the time, Mukundaram was not just the village poet but he was a man of vast knowledge and learning. Mukundaram himself wrote that he had an in-depth knowledge of Sanskrit grammar and literature. He was well learnt in classical Sanskrit texts like Puranas, Mahabharata, Ramayana and local Kulapanjika (caste histories). He could read and write in eighteen languages. It was his great learning that got him employed as the court poet and tutor of Raja Raghunath Ray in the Arara. From the elaboration in the text, it is clearly visible that Mukundaram had vast knowledge of subjects like astronomy, astrology, plants, animals, medicines and geography. His geographical descriptions in the text projects his broad knowledge of the region, however it also had limitations. Throughout the text Mukundaram provides a detailed description of the rivers and routes of the Rarh region.⁷⁷

While Mukundaram does not provide much detail about his own religious affiliations. He mentions his grandfather, Jagannath Mishra, as a Vaishanva and a devotee of Krishna. In the introductory section he mentions his debts and influences from the Gaudiya Vaishnavas. But unlike Vaishnava literature his work was not limited to worship of Vishnu. Mukundaram wrote himself to be the follower of Raghunandan Bhattacharyya⁷⁸. A famous scholar of Smriti Shastra in Bengal in the sixteenth century. He and his followers are worshippers of Vishnu along with other Hindu gods and goddesses like Ganesh, Shiva and Durga. Unlike other contemporary Vaishnava texts like

⁷⁷ For instance, a detailed description of the river voyage undertaken by the merchant Dhanpati and his son, Shrimanta. Many towns along the river which Mukundaram mention are still there even though the river route changed significantly over the centuries. His descriptions to some extent are similar to present day maps of Howrah and east banks of Ganges through the towns of Shantipur and Katwa.

⁷⁸ Asutosh Bhattacharya Āśutosha Bhaṭṭācārya, *An Introduction to the Study of the Medieval Bengali Epics* Bamlā magala kavyera itihasa, (Calcutta Book House, 1943), 508.

Chaitanya Charitamrita and *Chaitanya-Bhagvat*, Mukundaram's Chandimangal did not point to any kind of religious intolerance towards any other communities.

Why were Brahmans composing the narratives?

The story of the establishment of Garhjat by the low caste hunter Kalketu, Kalinga Raja's raid on Garhjat and final adjustments between the Kalinga raja and Kalketu is similar to the account of the emergence and growth of the frontier principalities in western tracks of Bengal. These narratives constituted a link between the rajas who were originally tribal but later claimed Kshatriya status and with their tribal subjects who formed a major part of the population in these frontier territories. A tripartite relation between the devil, the raja and the subjects were established. In Chandimangal Narratives, Kalketu acted as the medium between the goddess and people due to the grace that Chandi had showered upon him. These rulers of low caste in order to further validate their rule were often inclined towards the process of Brahmanisation.⁷⁹ Similarly, Kalketu while taking charge of Garhjat announced that he would rule as the servant of the Brahmans. He granted rent/tax free lands to Brahmans. Kayasthas and Brahmans were given important positions in his administration. Several grants were made for the maintenance of the Brahmans and to build temples in honor of the deities.

Another view of why Brahmans were composing the Mangal-Kāvya and their unusual attempt to valorize the popular deities of the lower caste masses of the region is that the incorporation of these local gods of the rural masses, mainly of the Rarh, into the Hindu pantheon may surely have helped to include the lower strata to Hinduism in this region during a period when their counterparts in

⁷⁹ Mukundram in his autobiographical sketch, mentions Raja Bankura Ray as a Brahmin ruler and he mentioned his kingdom as 'Brahmanbhum'

other parts of Bengal were swelling the ranks of Islam.⁸⁰ Eaton and James Wise assume that “when the Muhammadan armies poured into Bengal, it is hard to believe that they were not welcomed (by the ‘lowest strata’) and that many a despairing *Chandal* and *Kaibartta* joyfully embraced a religion that proclaimed the equality of all men”.⁸¹ To this, Jawahar Sircar argued that, ‘no doubt, some elements among the *antyajas* may have viewed the invaders as a perfect antidote against Brahmanical, caste-based suppression, but this does not prove that they switched their age-old socio-religious-cultural loyalties and lifestyles instantly (which, indeed, is one of the most difficult of human feats) to a rather-demanding alien value system, just for this reason.’⁸² He argued that, when other regions of Bengal were unanimously in favor of Islam, the westernmost tract of Bengal opted for Hinduism. Sircar explained this sharp spatio-religious divide in Bengal through revealing the census operations from 1872 to 1931. From the 1881 census, it appears that 95 percent of the *Bauris* of Bengal were in the Rarh, while between 76 and 79 percent of the *Doms* and *Bagdis* were in this ‘division’. If we add the population of the districts adjoining the Rarh, we find that the *Jeles*, the *Chamar-Muchis* and the *Dhopas* (who are also known to be devoted to Dharma, Manasa, etc.) have between 58 and 74 percent of their total numbers were in this region.⁸³ It is important to look at the demographic composition in the Krishnadas Kaviraj’s *Chaitanya Charitamrita*⁸⁴, one of the contemporary texts in the sixteenth century, how it considered the people of the western parts of the Rarh as ‘nearly tribal’ in their ‘wild’ disposition, while Mukundaram, wrote in the closing years of that century, more disparagingly of the *Rarhis*. “Those who are of *Chuar* castes are from very low stock / they are unworthy of touch, for these are what people call the Rarh.” The

⁸⁰ Jawahar Sircar, *The Construction of the Hindu Identity in Medieval Western Bengal?: The Role of Popular Cults* (Kolkata: Institute of Development Studies, 2005), 80-84.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 28.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸⁴ A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*. New York: 1968. Accessed 20th October, 2020. <https://vedabase.io/en/library/cc/adi/1/>, 29.

appropriation of the popular deities of the ‘depressed’ masses of the region would, in effect, permit or facilitate the Brahman’s entry into the realm of ‘low’ local worships. According to W.L Smith, both these two acts of adjustment, i.e., of the popular deities of the low castes within the Hindu pantheon and of the new agriculturists‘ who rose largely from among these forsaken castes that were either within or on the periphery of the Hindu fold, may also have paid economic dividends to the priestly class.⁸⁵Such an inclusive attitude helped not only in firming up the commitment of the beneficiaries to Hinduism (rather than to Islam) but also in their subsequent patronage of Brahmanism. Asutosh Bhattacharyya is more realistic, when he declared that while “the primary task of the Mangal-Kāvya was definitely to dress the folk deities in Puranic ‘respectability’”⁸⁶, yet the “poets never sacrificed the popular appeal of the folk beliefs at the altar of Puranic rigidity”⁸⁷

“Just as the Sanskrit Puranas were composed as a Brahmanical response to the challenge that it received from Buddhism,” insists Asutosh Bhattacharyya⁸⁸, “the first confrontation that Hindu society in Bengal received from Islam resulted in the creation of the Mangal-Kāvya”.Jawhar Sircar further saw Mangal-Kāvya, as a ‘campaign’ — the significance of which lies in the wide-spread acceptance of popular deities into the Hindu mainstream. This ‘acceptance’, of course, brought within the cloisters of ‘Hindu respectability’ not only these divinities but (more importantly) their followers as well — the populous subaltern masses of western Bengal. This phenomenon was also however cannot be seen in isolation; it was largely associated with the socio-economic changes due to peasantization of the Rarh region. They may have catalyzed the process of the ‘lower’ orders taking up farming as their primary occupation, which eventually led to the regrouping of its

⁸⁵ W.L Smith, *The One-eyed Goddess:A Study of the Manasa Mangal* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1980), 178.

⁸⁶ Jawhar Sircar, *The Construction of the Hindu Identity in Medieval Western Bengal?: The Role of Popular Cults* (Kolkata: Institute of Development Studies, 2005), 205.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

members as the new (Hindu) agricultural castes of western Bengal — better placed in the caste hierarchy in comparison to the castes from which they had emanated.

Some recent scholars have pointed to another dimension of the Mangal-Kāvya literature. It has been argued that the lower strata of the Bengali population were neither Hindus nor Muslims before the fourteenth century. The time when a huge section in them, mostly in eastern Bengal converted to Islam through their association with the certain Pirs who came and settled in Eastern Bengal, a parallel process also led to the Hinduisation of lower class or those who worshipped a variety of local deities in western Bengal. The Mangal-Kāvya at this time, all written by poor Brahmins, aiming to confer important puranic status on local deities, became a major instrument in this phenomenon. It provided the newly emerging line of Brahmins an important position among the newly settled forested towns and included the latter within the fold of larger Brahmanical Hinduism.⁸⁹ Mukundaram's Chandimangal played a leading role in this process.

When was the text written?

There is no mention of Mukundaram's date of birth or death. But an analysis of his autobiography suggests it to be somewhere around 1537-47. Mukundaram, in his autobiographical account written in 1577, mentioned Raja Man Singh as the king of north and eastern Bengal as well as Orissa who was then the subadar of the suba of Bengal. He starts with congratulating the appointment of Man Singh as governor of Bengal by the emperor Akbar and says, "Glory to King Man Singh, The Governor of Gaur, Banga and Utkal who is supposed to be the bee at the lotus

⁸⁹ Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir; an Introductory Study in Social History* (Munshiram Manoharlal, 1969), 96.

feet of Vishnu." It is clear from the above verse that the poet considered Man Singh's subedari in Bengal as a blessing to the people, Hindus in particular.

Man Singh came to the Eastern province in the initial years of the Akbar's reign and stayed till the 44th year. Abu Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari*⁹⁰ states that he was ordered by the emperor to join the forces of the Deccan. Later, He came back after the death of his son Jagat Singh and disturbances caused by the Afghans. He stayed in Bengal till the third year of Jahangir's reign. Poem picturises Bengal in the sixteenth century. There are references in the poem which might suggest that the main body of the poem might have been composed before but the introductory section which refers to Man Singh was clearly composed in the sixteenth century.

Therefore, it could be inferred that Mukundaram's Chandimangal was written in 1577. The reference of Man Singh and Raja Todar Mal's rent roll dates back to 1575-82. The reference of Gopinath is also from the *Antyalila of Chaitanya Charitamrita*⁹¹, which was composed in the last years of Krishnadasa Kaviraja (1575-80)⁹². Mukundaram might have lived on rent-free land under a Hindu Zamindar, or would have paid a nominal rent. But with the Todar Mal settlement⁹³ As suggested by *Ain* which was introduced in 1575-1583, his holding was remeasured, waste lands were counted as arable and cultivable, assessable and hence, higher rent was demanded. As a consequence he had to leave his ancestral village where his family lived for generations. A section

⁹⁰ Abū Al-Faḍl Ibn Mubārak and H. Blochmann, *The Ā'in-i Akbarī: A Gazetteer and Administrative Manual of Akbar's Empire and Part History of India* (Asiatic Society, 1993), 74.

⁹¹ A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*. New York: 1968. Accessed 20th October, 2020. <https://vedabase.io/en/library/cc/antya/>

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Abū Al-Faḍl Ibn Mubārak and H. Blochmann, *The Ā'in-i Akbarī: A Gazetteer and Administrative Manual of Akbar's Empire and Part History of India* (Asiatic Society, 1993), 376.

in Mukundaram's Chandimangal mentions the alternative setting offered in the Kalketu's newly established kingdom of Garhjat, he offered that 'there is no need to give any rent in advance. No revenue officer will be appointed and there won't be any extra rent, taxes, or any fees when possession of allotted land is taken. There will be no money due on instalment plan here in Garhjat. No taxes will be levied on festivals, salt, police protection, rice harvest, nor there be five percent fees or penalties collected for accounting mistakes. Rice can be sold when desired. No taxes will be levied on Brahmins, arable land homes will be given to them'.⁹⁴

*Riyaz-us-Salatin*⁹⁵ also refer that the rent roll of Bengal prepared by Akbar's finance ministers, Khawaja Muzaffar Ali and Todar Mal in 1582 A.C was imposed on 19 *Sarkar* composing the Bengal proper. The 19 Sarkars which made Bengal proper in 1582, paid a revenue on *Khalsa* lands inclusive of a few duties on salt, hats and fisheries, of Rs. 6,3,37,052. According to the grant the value of Jagir lands were fixed at Rs. 4,348,892 so that in 1582 and before it, Rs 10,685,944 was the total revenue of Bengal. This was levied on *Rayats* in species, as the equivalent of the sixth share of the entire produce of the land, claimed by the sovereign as his share. This rent-roll remained in force during the reign of Jahangir. However, the Mal-administration under Man Singh cannot be generalized through Mukundaram's description. There must have been individual cases of hardships and individual landlords practicing these tyrannical measures. This might also be the result of the too strict application of the new Todar Mal settlement, which also led to the depreciation of the coins and sanctioned an elaborate system of *batta*. Mukundaram's insistence

⁹⁴ Edward M Yazijian and Mukundarāma Cakrabartī, *From Performance to Literature: The Caṇḍīmaṅgala of Kavikaṅkaṇa Mukunddarāma Cakravarti* (Penguin Books, 2007), 90.

⁹⁵ Ghulām Ḥusain Salim and Maulavi Abdus Salam. *The Riyazu-S-Salātīn: A History of Bengal* (Asiatic Society, 1904), 47.

on the help extended to him by his neighboring villages and the patronage and protection he received from the neighboring Raja also refutes the theory of mal-administration.

Further, Mukundaram's description: "The accountants became death personified, classifying barren land as fertile and taking bribes without giving anything in return. The moneychangers became the gods of death, for every rupee they gave 21/2 annas less, while they took for themselves as interest one pie per day per rupee. They took from us and seized all our money. The two-fold capacity of the Poddar is represented here. In first case as the receiver of government dues i.e. giving 21/2 annas excess for every rupee and secondly as the village money lender charging an interest of one pie per day on every rupee" also contradicts with the norms sketched out for the collector of the revenue in the *Ain-i-Akbari*.⁹⁶

Therefore, to sum, given that the worship of Chandi was already established in the sixteenth century Bengal, this biographical account must have been an attempt by Mukundaram to locate the story of his human characters within the context of the times he lived. Mukundaram throughout

⁹⁶ The collector of revenue should be a friend of the agriculturist. Zeal and truthfulness should be his rule of conduct. He should consider himself the representative of the lord paramount and establish himself where every one may have easy access to him without the intervention of a Mediator. He should not cease from punishing highway robbers, murderers and evildoers, nor from heavily muzzling them, and so administer that the cry of complaint shall be stilled. He should assist the needy husband with advances of money and recover them gradually. And when through the exertions of the village headman the full rental is received, he should allow him half a biswah on each bigah or otherwise or reward him according to the measure of his services. He should ascertain the extent of the soil in cultivation and weigh each several portions in the scales of personal observation and be acquainted with its quality. The agricultural value of land varies in different districts and certain soils are adapted to certain crops. He should deal differently, therefore, with each agriculturalist and take his case into consideration. He should take into account discrimination and the engagements of former collector and remedy the procedure of ignorance or dishonesty. He should strive to bring waste lands into cultivation and take heed that what is in cultivation fall not waste. He should stimulate the increase of valuable produce and remit somewhat of the assessment with a view to its augmentation. And if the husbandman is capable of adding to his cultivation, he should allow him land in some other village. He should be just and provident in his measurements. Let him increase the facilities of the husbandman year by year. He should not entrust the appraisement to the headman of the village it give rise to remissness and incompetence and undue authority be conferred on high-handed oppressors, but he should deal with each husbandman, present his demand, and separately and civilly receive his dues. He should collect revenue in an amicable manner and extend not the hand of demand out of season.

the text claims the desire to create a new or unique Mangal poem with the blessing of goddess. His attempt was to distinguish his text from that of his predecessors. By relating the story of how Chandi commanded him to write the story and by providing autobiographical information, he must have tried to make the stories relevant to the place or time by weaving contemporary issues with the already existing narratives. What is unique about Mukundaram's text is the amount of information he includes about himself and the events that led up to him leaving his ancestral home. Not satisfied with just listing his name, lineage, and place of residence, Mukundaram paints a detailed portrait of his life and times unprecedented in the literature of his day. It is evident as well that the events depicted had a great impact on his interpretation of the already existing narrative, especially in the descriptions of Kalketu's Kingdom found in the Hunter's story. This section of the text has been a rich source of material for historians studying sixteenth century Bengal as Mukundaram vividly describes the social and political details of the era.⁹⁷ While the Chandimangal gives us valuable clues to life in sixteenth century Bengal, one would be mistaken to think that the portrayal in these narratives are always realistic and not colored by Mukundaram's limited knowledge of society and politics outside his own sphere.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Ronald Inden, 'The Hindu Chieftdom in Middle Bengali Literature' in *Bengal Literature and History* (Asian Study Centre, Michigan State University, 1967), 23.

⁹⁸ For instance, when he describes the wedding of Phullara and Kalketu.

CHAPTER 3

Agrarian Expansion and Land Relations as reflected in the Mukundaram's Chandimangal

In the sixteenth century, the waves of the early modern world economy started moving forward towards India through a globalized maritime system. The insistence of the Mughal state was not on the possession of the land but on the expansion of area under cultivation. The Indian subcontinent saw a complex institutional and political interaction between the state and the new forces emanating from expanding agrarian economy. There existed a close relationship between agrarian expansion and new emerging complex social and landed relations. Various levels of landed rights emanated following the process of extension of cultivation by granting rent-free lands and forest clearance. Proprietary rights over land were also given to those who brought uncultivated waste land under cultivation (*jangal-bari*). The grantees tried to exert superior rights on lands, rights on land followed naturally from their participation in the reclamation of forest and the establishment of villages on the reclaimed lands. Further, extension of the land grants in the interior villages tended to disturb the indigenous system of internal social and economic relations. In order to consolidate its social and political acceptability within the diversified society and to extract agrarian surplus in the form of revenue, the Mughal state initiated a new technique of governance, which was strengthened by political consolidation and emergence of powerful states governing massive agrarian hinterlands.⁹⁹The effect of agrarian governance depended wholly on the manner of its administration. State appointed officials in every village, a headmen, accountant,

⁹⁹ Rajat Datta, 'Governing Agrarian Diversities: The State and the Making of an Early Modern Economy in Sixteenth Century Northern India', *The Medieval History Journal*, volume 16, no. 2 (October 2013):479.

collector and clerks. Therefore, before getting into any discussion of how rural administration worked at the local levels, it is important to have a wider understanding of the rural administrative structure under Mughals in large. How flexible measures were taken by locally emerging chiefs in their newly established kingdoms, how local chiefs entered into the agreements with Village or caste headmen at the local levels, how local officials were appointed at the forest tracts, How adjustments at the local level were crucial features of the polity of this time.

Rural administration in Medieval Bengal

With the Mughal conquest of Bengal in the sixteenth century, rural administration was multilayered and most of the administrative pattern of the sultanate period was retained. Like earlier, provinces were divided into *Sarkars* and Sarkars into *Parganas* under the Mughals. *Sarkar* was headed by *Faujdar* who was responsible for the maintenance of law and order within the *Sarkar*. According to *Ain-i-Akbari*¹⁰⁰, *Faujdar* was not necessarily in charge of a *Sarkar* but sometimes of several *Parganas*. *Kotwal* and *Qazi* assisted *Faujdar* in revenue and judicial administration. *Kotwal* was the officer responsible for regulating markets, examining weights, and *punishing* those found guilty of fraud. *Pargana*, on the other hand, as a separate administrative unit was headed by *Shiqqdar*, appointed to perform all the powers including limited judicial powers.

The Mughal rulers, unlike their Sultan counterparts, maintained an elaborate and organized administrative pattern for the purpose of revenue collection. Revenue officials were appointed at various levels in a well-arranged and closely-knit official hierarchy. Lands were classified in

¹⁰⁰ Abū Al-Faḥr Ibn Mubārak and H. Blochmann, *The Ā'īn-i Akbarī: A Gazetteer and Administrative Manual of Akbar's Empire and Part History of India* (Asiatic Society, 1993).

different categories for the purpose of the revenue collection: (1) Lands administered directly by the state or by the revenue officials appointed directly by the state, also known as *Khalsa* lands or crown lands (2) Jagir lands granted to officers for their maintenance in lieu of services they provided; (3) Zamindari lands and (4) Rent free lands granted for various purposes such as the maintenance of religious institutions or individuals.¹⁰¹

Various revenue officials were appointed at various levels for the revenue administration. The *Diwan*, or the revenue collector, was placed at the head of revenue administration. *Diwan* was assisted in revenue collection by the *Amil* also known as *Amalguzar* or *Karori*, the assessor of the value of land, and the *Bitikchi*, the recordkeeper. While the task of the *Amil* of the Sarkar was to assess the value of lands after enquiring about the conditions of the peasants in every village, the *Bitikchi* was to prepare the necessary papers and records on the basis of which the former was to assess the value of land and to collect revenue. At the Pargana level, an accountant or *Karkun* was appointed for the same.¹⁰²

The recordkeeper or the *Bitikchi*, on receiving the records from the Pargana accountant, undertook the survey of the villages of a *Sarkar*, made an approximate estimate of the total lands of each village and following which he determined the assessment of each cultivator. He was also responsible for maintaining the records of monthly income and expenditure at the local level and submitted the final one to the *Diwan* through the *Amil* of the Sarkar. Finally, *Amil* collected revenue relying on *Bitikchi*'s record. The appointment of land assessor or *Karori* was only practiced under

¹⁰¹ Rajat Datta, "Governing Agrarian Diversities: The State and the Making of an Early Modern Economy in Sixteenth Century Northern India". *The Medieval History Journal* 16, no. 2 (2013): 476.

¹⁰² Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir; an Introductory Study in Social History* (Munshiram Manoharlal, 1969), 79.

Akbar. Later, it was abolished under the reign of Aurangzeb and by this time, ‘*Karori*’ and ‘*Amil*’ were used interchangeably.¹⁰³ Under Mughals, like earlier Sultans, *Patwari* was also appointed at the village level. *Patwari* was the village accountant and maintained records of the holdings of the villagers and assessed revenue due to be collected. Therefore, there existed two independent systems of maintaining accounts.

In addition to the above-mentioned closely-knit hierarchy of officials, there were the *Fotadar* or the treasurer of the Pargana, and the *Qanungo* or the local assessor of the Pargana.¹⁰⁴ The task of the *Fotadar* was to inform the *Karkun* and the *Shiqqdar* regularly about the maintenance of the treasury and to get his records signed by the *Patwari* in order to avoid any variance between his accounts and those of the *Patwari*. The *Fotadar* was not empowered to disburse any amount without the approval of the provincial *Diwan*. One of the most important functionaries in the revenue administration was the *Qanungo*. They were a hereditary class of local assessors and instructed to keep records relating to landed property, its revenue, value, and tenure. It was the *Qanungo* who helped the Pargana *Amin* to maintain the current assessment by producing the previous assessments and the rent-roll furnished by the *Amin* was required to be signed by the *Qanungo* after which the *Qabuliyat* or agreement signed by the *Chaudhuri* was enclosed to it.

Chaudhuri played an important part in the revenue administration. He acted as the Pargana headman and was responsible for encouraging cultivation and protecting the peasants from malpractices. The revenue administration of the *Khalsa* lands followed the same pattern as that of

¹⁰³ Ibid., 83.

¹⁰⁴ Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society* (Delhi: Manohar, 1979).

the Jagir lands with the exception that the Officers in charge of such lands carried out both the general and revenue administration through their own men.

Apart from the revenue administration run by state, at the village level there runned a parallel revenue administration of Zamindari lands. The authority of the local raja or Zamindar was backed by the social relationships and physical force. The Mughal state did not interfere or disturb the functioning of the Zamindari administration as long as they paid their tribute regularly to the state as a symbol of their recognition and loyalty to the imperial power.¹⁰⁵ The local jurisdiction vested in the hand of Zamindars. They were responsible for maintaining the law and order of their respective region. However, the judicial authority of the Zamindars was not unlimited. Various state appointed officials did keep checks on a regular basis, which led to conflicts as well. While Zamindars were entrusted with dealing with petty disputes, both criminal and civil. The bigger issues involving religion or other were in the authority of the state appointed district *Qazi*. In order to reduce the power of these chieftains, the state also maintained direct relationships with the subjects of Zamindars. State ensured justice to those who appealed against the chief by issuing several *farmans* directing the chieftains. These measures played a progressive role in the development of the relationship between the states and the agrarian system. Politically and administratively, in a general sense, the Zamindar class rendered loyal cooperation and assistance to the Mughal Empire. Due to its high dependence on the Zamindars for revenue resources as well as for administration, the Mughal government took various measures to solve the contradictions

¹⁰⁵ Nurul Hasan, 'Zamindars Under the Mughals,' in *The Mughal State, 1526-1750*, ed. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 297.

and clashes that often emerged between the two classes. Thus, there emerged not only a variety of land rights but also a kind of a pyramidal structure in agrarian relations.¹⁰⁶

Therefore, one of the most integral features of the rural administration of Bengal under Mughals was the intertwined existence of political administration with the social relationships developed at local levels. In other words, the Political system in Bengal during the Mughal period was composite in character combining with itself elements of centralization and decentralization. At some levels, political functions had become differentiated; at others, these were still undifferentiated from the matrix of generalized social relationships.¹⁰⁷ Administrative roles and powers were diffused at various levels. Political functions were closely intermingled with social function, through caste and clan appeals, largely vested in the hands of the Zamindars.

Agrarian relations and administration of Zamindari lands

Landscape of much of northern India during this time could be depicted by a vast expanse of cultivated land peppered with innumerable villages.¹⁰⁸ Chetan Singh also pointed out that the stability of the Mughal Empire besides depending on the revenues from cultivated areas, depended also beyond the agrarian economy i.e. on uncultivated forest lands, pastures, and more. Uncultivated or forest areas covered a large area during the early modern times, which the state if not integrate, tried to dominate this areas by charging taxes on the pasture lands, by asking

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir; an Introductory Study in Social History* (Munshiram Manoharlal, 1969), 35.

¹⁰⁸ Chetan Singh, 'Forests, Pastoralists and Agrarian Society in Mughal India,' in *Nature, Culture and Imperialism*, ed. David Arnold and Ramchandra Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 21-49.

peshkash (tribute) from the forest chieftains, by granting these lands and also by their increased demand for the forest produce. Besides, there were substantial Wastelands or *Ujar* lands, which under plough seemed important to sustain the economy.

Mughal states undertook flexible measures in their agrarian governance in order to manage the geographical diversities. And in the case of medieval Bengal, this flexibility can be witnessed in the integration of the local chiefs in the administration as the Zamindars and providing a certain level of autonomy to these Zamindars to administer at local levels. The Zamindar class played an important role in political, economic and cultural life. Zamindars were the holders of the hereditary interest ranging from powerful and independent chieftains to petty intermediaries at the village level.¹⁰⁹ Politically, on one hand there existed a continuous clash of interest between the Mughal government and Zamindars and on other hand administration heavily depended on Zamindars support.

Zamindari was a pyramidal revenue collecting and tribute sharing structure through which revenue and tributes were collected for distribution between Mughal state and rural classes, leaving a margin of the surplus for the subsistence of the cultivator. Most of the larger Zamindars belonged to the upper-caste Hindus, while the smaller ones were in the hands of the lower caste.¹¹⁰ Caste played a major role in determining the superiority of the Zamindars. Apart from being the state functionaries, Zamindars were responsible for the administration of the area under their

¹⁰⁹ Nurul Hasan, 'Zamindars Under the Mughals,' in *The Mughal State, 1526-1750*, ed. Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 299.

¹¹⁰ Rajat Datta, 'Rural Society and the Structure of Landed Property in Eighteenth Century Bengal', in *Agrarian Structure and Economic Development*, ed. Peter Rob (SOAS: London, 1992), 135.

jurisdiction. Big Zamindars were also called as rajas. The social prestige of the Zamindar in Bengal was measured by an inseparable mix of territorial jurisdiction, amount of revenue assessed, and by their extent of patronage provided by donation of lands to local temples, mosques and other religious orders.¹¹¹ There were government appointed officials, like Amin, *Faujdar*, *Qanungo*, but they were also under the control of the Zamindars. There existed a close correlation between office holding and Zamindari.¹¹²

When we look into the rural administration of the Mughal Bengal, to estimate the percentage of Hindu officials in the general administration at both Sarkars and Pargana levels and in the administration of the *Khalsa* (crown lands) and Jagir lands, contemporary records suggests that major top posts were largely, taken by the Muslims. There were many references that Bengali Hindus were appointed by the Muslim rulers because of their local experiences in revenue related matters and for their hold over the Persian language. Jadunath Sarkar pointed that ‘they mostly belonged to the Vaidya, Brahman, and Kayastha castes- whose progeny were also called as ‘Rajas’¹¹³ Officials belonging to the Kayastha caste often held important posts like that of *Amil*, *Faujdar*, *Karori* etc. The post of *Qanungo*, to some extent, were monopolized by the Kayasthas in the revenue administration of Bengal. One also needs to note here that this predominance of the Kayasthas in the revenue administration goes back to the early fifteenth century.

In this regard, Kumkum Chatterjee pointed out that with the Mughal rule in Bengal, this association of the government with the scribal elites was further expanded. Chatterjee argued,

¹¹¹ Ibid., 138.

¹¹² Ratanalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society* (Delhi: Manohar, 1979), 27.

¹¹³ Sir Jadunath Sarkar, *The history of Bengal; Muslim period, 1200-1757* (Patna, India: Academica Asiatica, 1973), 410.

“It is likely that Mughal provincial administration was much more elaborate than that of the Bengal sultans. Although Mughal Bengal is conventionally supposed to have been ‘under-administered’, my view is that this regime maintained a sufficient presence and offered more than enough incentives for high-status Brahman, Vaidya and Kayastha communities to offer their services to it in significant numbers. The factors which had created conditions for the association of Hindu scribal lineages with a variety of Indo–Islamic political regimes— traditions of literacy, clerical, accounting, management and other administrative skills, combined with military prowess—were the same as before. One factor whose importance rose sharply in Mughal Bengal was literacy and proficiency in the Persian language.”¹¹⁴

Many of these elites invested in several ‘portfolios’¹¹⁵. They were proficient in literary, clerical, accounting, management and other administrative skills, along with mercenary and logistical expertise. Many among them received titles such as ‘Roy’, ‘Datta’, ‘Sarkar’ or ‘Mallik’ from the administrations of the sultans they served, sometimes successively for several generations. Capitalizing their proximity to centers of political power, many of them acquired landowning rights.

Thus, as far as the village administration of the time period in discussion is considered, two conclusions can be inferred. Firstly, the prevalence of the caste based system and second is the dominant role played by a few particular castes, mostly Brahmins and Kayasthas in the sphere of Zamindari revenue administration. These groups were extremely adaptable in terms of professional efficiency. They invested in multiple service and landowning portfolios, and were trained simultaneously in Persian, vernacular and Sanskritic learnings. The political lineage of these families proved to be durable as they provided technical and political skills necessary for the state formation.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Kumkum Chatterjee, “Scribal elites in Sultanate and Mughal Bengal”, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 47, no.4 (2010): 459.

¹¹⁵ Sanjay Subrahmanyam and C. A. Bayly, “Portfolio Capitalist and the Political Economy of Early Modern India”, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 25, no. 4 (1988).

¹¹⁶ Kumkum Chatterjee, “Scribal Elites in Sultanate and Mughal Bengal”, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 47, no. 4 (2010): 456.

Formation of Zamindari in Mughal Bengal was by a combination of state action and individual initiative. Zamindari was obtained through inheritance or transfer of rights, by clearing waste lands for cultivation (*jangal-bari*) and by the order of the state (*sanad*). According to McLane, Zamindars that received *sanad* from state played the dual role of chief or raja of the assigned area and also of servant to the state.¹¹⁷ Zamindari was a unit of government, it organized the distribution of power, social prestige and economic resources among its subordinates and superiors. Numerous dependent land rights or land rights were created in the process, through donations of land, sales and conveyance and a numerous land market thus developed. Zamindars performed both the extractive and distributive functions.

Zamindari was not a unit of production but Zamindars played a major role in the process of agricultural production. Creation of Zamindari itself had a close connection with the agricultural economy and with the extension of the cultivated lands.¹¹⁸ They provided agricultural loans and also oversaw the construction. They ensured the maintenance of flood control embankments and facilities like safe drinking water, tanks etc. Zamindars also participated in the direct agricultural production in their personal lands. They used both economic and non-economic means of coercion in the organization of the production. Zamindars in Bengal did not use the unpaid labor.

Many historians often saw the Mughal Empire and Zamindaris as contradictory political systems. While the role of the Zamindars in rural society was characterized by “customary, informal and

¹¹⁷ John R. McLane, *Land and Local Kingship in Eighteenth-century Bengal* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 34.

¹¹⁸ Rajat Datta, 'Rural Society and the Structure of Landed Property in Eighteenth Century Bengal', in *Agrarian Structure and Economic Development*, ed. Peter Rob (SOAS: London, 1992), 136.

patrimonial relations, and their lordship was localist, relativistic, collegial and redistributionist, the Mughal state was universalistic, absolutistic and fiscally oriented, based on transcendent, codified, objective rules and relative uniformity and centralization which allowed it to claim a virtual monopoly on legitimate authority”¹¹⁹ By the sixteenth century, Zamindars overlapped with the imperial bureaucracy. However, this scarcely affected the paternal indulgence and ritual obligations Zamindars were expected to perform according to the moral standard of the traditional society. Their functioning, at this time, depended on the balance between two contradictory roles.¹²⁰ From the late sixteenth century, Bengal to some extent was treated as a special case within the Mughal Empire. In terms of revenue extraction, Bengal remained largely under assessed even after the settlement of Todar Mal in 1580.¹²¹

It is very difficult to determine a comprehensive idea of these social functions and the revenue administration of Zamindari lands through relying only on the state chronicles. To broaden the perspective, it is important to dig into contemporary Bengali literature that throws some light on the functioning and jurisdiction of the village administration. The revenue administration of the Zamindari lands in a specific context to Rarh will be discussed further along with the general administration, as projected in the Chandimangal, in order to give a clearer picture of the revenue set-up.

This research, however, does not attempt to offer any blanket understanding of the literary cultures in the Zamindari courts in Medieval Western Rarh region of Bengal. Instead, focusing exclusively on Mukundaram’s Chandimangal, it explores the process through which pre-existing literary

¹¹⁹ John R. McLane, *Land and Local Kingship in Eighteenth-century Bengal* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 13.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29-32.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

cultures were refashioned in the Zamindari courts. As Sudipta Kaviraj argued, literary cultures in early modern Bengal were stretched out on several planes. Since the twelfth century, by substituting the vernacular verb forms with *tatsama* nouns and adjectives i.e. those which were direct derivative of Sanskrit, vernacular literatures were made to circulate beyond the region. Simultaneously, vernacular literary cultures were themselves segregated into multiple linguistic and discursive spaces.¹²² The popular performative Mangal-Kāvya literatures, narratively and thematically, were completely different from the high cultures of other contemporary Vaishnava texts. Further, from the late sixteenth century, there was a growing influence of Persian cultural elements on Bengali literature. To this, Kumkum Chatterjee pointed out that the Mangal-Kāvya became gradually socialized with the Persian idiomatic, cultural and political aspects of the Mughal Empire.¹²³

The Brahmanical learnings in their court, therefore, intersected with the Persian influences. Bengal's unique form of Brahmanism became synonymous with the mainstream culture of the region. The Zamindars participated in both the learning cultures, but created a particular fusion suitable for their own political and cultural purposes. They liberally borrowed from high cultural worlds of Persian, but recomposed those elements with a unique diacritic of vernacular. As Sheldon Pollock pointed out, most of the pre-modern vernacular texts borrowed from the idiomatic and generic modalities of high literary cultures, but those modalities were refashioned with a novel sense of territoriality and governance peculiar to the vernacular culture.¹²⁴

¹²² Sudipta Kaviraj, "The Two Histories of Literary Culture in Bengal," *Literary Cultures in History* (2019): 514.

¹²³ Kumkum Chatterjee. "Goddess Encounters: Mughals, Monsters and the Goddess in Bengal," *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 5 (2013): 457.

¹²⁴ Sheldon Pollock, *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (University of California Press, 2007).

Agrarian expansion as reflected in the narrative

In Chandimangal, Mukundaram attempts to provide a broad picture of how the process of agrarian expansion and subsequent process of forest clearance led to the development of various levels of landed and administrative relations, and how various communities and castes were intertwined in this process. Poet through the narrative provides a perspective to how Kalketu establishes the kingdom of Garhjat with Chandi's help.¹²⁵

According to the narrative, the process of forest clearance begins with Kalketu marching with cavalymen, warriors on elephants and Malla soldiers, suggesting the maintenance of the local stand army by the local Malla chieftaincy, which further helped them in settling their new foundation for revenue and cash. Chandimangal also mentions the arrival of day-labourers in huge numbers. Labourers from different regions arrived in groups. Poem mentions a forest-dwelling group called 'Damu' came from north and a group of five hundred called 'Bhasa' arrived from the south.¹²⁶ They were welcomed by the hunter and were provided with a huge number of machetes, hatchets and axes. Further, two thousand workers joined from the west assisted by Daphar Miyan, chanting the names of their Pirs and prophets as they cleared forests and established a bazaar. These groups took the charge of clearing the forest and building temples and shrines, a longhouse was constructed for the homeless and a place where visitors could stay. Poem also mentions that in the west, homes were raised for the Muslim residents along with gates and mosques of various

¹²⁵ This story is given in the Akhetik Khanda of Mukundaram's Chandimangal

¹²⁶ Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakravarti, Chandimangal, trans. Edward M. Yazijian (India: Penguin Classics, 2015), 20.

designs.¹²⁷ The period was characterized not only by the influx of Hindus and Muslims in the Rarh region, but also of some other aboriginal groups. Alongside witnessing a large-scale internal migration on the part of the forested communities themselves, interactions led to gradually, to more settled modes of cultivation introduced by the non-tribal communities coming from outside the region.

The references of clearance of the forest by these labourers but the poem does not necessarily suggest that they settled there. Mukundaram's text mentions that many of the workers returned to their homes after the construction. Kalketu requested the goddess to help him establish a community as the place cannot attract the tenants. To this, goddesses started appearing in the dreams of the people saying, Kalketu will provide them with paddy, cattle, silver coins and gold if they go and settle on the newly formed town. Lands were provided for the cultivation, tax free for seven years and one silver coin to be paid for every plough used. Following which hundreds of tenants left for the new town and settled in the homes constructed by the hunter as they were rent free for the period of three years. Many Kshatriyas, Kayasthas, Rajput and Muslim communities settled in the newly formed kingdom of Kalinga. The western part of town, termed as *Hasanhathi*, was allotted to the *Saiyads*, *Maulanas*, and *Kazis*.¹²⁸ There were *Pathan* clans namely *Surani*, *Lohani*, *Spani*, *Kitapi*, *Bittani* and *Huni*. Not only the newly settling communities were now reduced to the cultivators or tax-paying raiyats, but the large-scale migration was also opened. Now they were getting transformed from reclaimers of land into peasant cultivators. Villages consist of many castes and advanced cooperation among the peasants and others involved in the process of production. There was immense diversity of occupation among the newly arrived Hindu

127 Ibid., 85.

128 Ibid., 91.

and Muslim castes. Hats or periodical markets became the interaction point for forested and agrarian communities from the adjoining villages. Thus the market became one of the most important channels of contact.

Chandimangal points too many other communities along with their associated occupation in detail: Those who knew nothing about fasting during the month of Ramadan were called *Gola*. Those who polished thread were called *Jola*, those transporting rice on carts were called *Mugari*. Fishmongers were called *Kabari*. People who made loom shuttles were called *Sanakar*. Those who roamed from town to town with paintings are called *Tirakari*. Those who made paper were called *Kagati*. Mukundaram also points to the Brahmin residing in the town, how they were distinguished.¹²⁹ There were *Varendra* Brahmins who recited Vedas and Puranas, a class of village priests, astrologers, matchmakers and *Agradani* Brahmins, those who performed last rites. The Vaishnava devoted themselves to Krishna. Then there were *Vaishya* merchant communities, who protected cows and cultivated crops, lent money to earn interests and ran retail trade. There were physicians with the surname *Gupta*, *Sen*, *Das*, and *Datta*. Mukundaram also writes in detail about the Kayastha community. About maintaining relations with Kayasthas, there is ample evidence that suggests this. Mukundaram records while Kalketu march towards the establishment of the Garhjat kingdom, “a Kayastha bowed his head to the mighty hunter”¹³⁰ and he was also responsible for recording the disbursement of funds for every purchase.

The process of extension of cultivation by granting rent-free land is shown in the incident where Gujarat was inhabited by many caste, the majority of whom belonged to the lower rungs. But

¹²⁹ Ibid., 79.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 81.

Kalketu had announced that he would rule Garhjat as the servants of the Brahmins.¹³¹ All the lands he had given to the Brahmins were made rent-free. The Kayastha appear to have been given a position of importance in Kalketu's administration: they formed the bureaucracy. The profusion of such rent free grants indicates the urge for accelerating the process of Brahmanisation which was another means for the rulers of low caste origin to validate their rule. Further, an extension of the land grants in the interior villages tended to disturb the indigenous system of internal social and economic relations. The grantees tried to exert superior rights on land at the cost of the peasants. The grantees of lands, in most cases, cultivated their lands by agricultural laborers, sometimes brought from the outside. There is evidence showing peasants or tenant cultivators heavily dependent on the loans for their seeds and agricultural implements, how they were further exploited by the moneylenders who formed an important gentry class during this time.

According to the narrative, there existed a relationship of assistance and exchange between the Zamindar and his *ryots*. There was the system of giving a 'patta'¹³² or deed by the Zamindars to the peasants by which their tenancy rights were acknowledged. Peasants were also given loans by some Zamindars in the form of cattle and seeds. The Zamindars had their own officials, *Diwan* and *Amils*, for the collection of the revenue from the peasants. Kalketu also granted a certain level of autonomy to the local officials. Kalketu made local settlements through the agency of the *Mandal*. There was no intermediary official between him and the *Mandal*¹³³. Kalketu demanded only one rupee per plough after seven years of cultivation.¹³⁴ However, there is no mention of

¹³¹ Ibid., 17.

¹³² 'na karo kaharo sankha pattai nisan mor dharo', meaning, 'do not be afraid of anybody. The conferment of Patta is the final sanction'. Mukunda Rām Cakravartī, and Sukumar Sen, *Caṇḍīmāṅgala* (Sāhitya Akādemi, 2013), 67.

¹³³ Bulan Mandal, the headman of the peasants who had migrated to Kalketu's kingdom. Kabikankar Mukundaram Chakravarti, *Chandimangal*, trans. Edward M. Yazijian (India: Penguin Classics, 2015), 89.

¹³⁴ 'Hal pichhe aek tanka'. Mukunda Rām Cakravartī, and Sukumar Sen, *Caṇḍīmāṅgala* (Sāhitya Akādemi, 2013), 67.

what *Mandal* demanded from the peasants as they enjoyed the right to control the local resources at the village level.

Adjustments with the local forces was one the important features of the Malla Rajas's polity. They entered into agreements with village or caste headmen at the local levels namely *Mandals* and *Mukhyas*. There was a village headman or *Mandal* in every village who enjoyed some limited powers and privileges. However, the power vested authority in the specific sense i.e. the power to judge a man's conduct was partly devolved upon the caste or rather the wider kinship group, not necessarily confined to one village. Local officials were appointed at the forest tracts like *Sardar*, *Ghatwals*, *Gigwars* and *Dihidars*. Service lands were often granted to them for the maintenance of temples. The extension of land made the social and economic relations even more complex. The grantees tried to exert superior rights on lands and demanded taxes from the peasants¹³⁵, whose rights on land followed naturally from their participation in the reclamation of forest and the establishment of villages on the reclaimed lands. However, to avoid such oppressions, Kalketu came to an agreement with Bulan *Mandal* in his story. From Mukundaram's Chandimangal it is further evident that the individuals possessing high status within the group were collectively invested with this authority subject to the final arbitration by the local Raja or Zamindar.

¹³⁵ Mukundaram mentions in his autobiographical sketch that during the subedari of Man Singh Mahmud Sharif was the Dihidar of the poet's locality and he was an oppressor. Mukundaram had to leave Damunnya, his ancestral homestead, a village in Burdwan district because of the oppression of Mahmud Sharif. The poet was not the only case of oppression. No subject was free from the oppression by the Government employees such as Dihidar, poddar etc

Interaction between the farming and forest communities

Both farming and forest economies, as found by most historians, were never isolated from each other. The forested areas were never totally isolated socio-economic entities and their distinctiveness from agrarian societies did not prevent them from interacting with it. Adjacent to the core agricultural areas of the Mughal Empire existed territories where a perpetual struggle went on between cultivators and those living in forests. Frontiers as explained by Jos Gommans, “does not just contain the notion of frequent violent mission and expansion rather it emerged as an overlapping area in which two different ways of life encountered each other, the one predominantly pastoral nomadic, the other mainly agricultural communities”¹³⁶ These communities both opposed and complemented each other. There existed a ‘complementary opposition’¹³⁷ between the agricultural communities and other local pastoral tribes. And this ambivalent relationship is clearly manifested in the various encounters which took place in the stories. The coexistence of any forested communities with the agrarian communities can be reflected in the changing occupation roles and their codependency on each other. Another remarkable aspect that narrative brings into light marriage as an institution for the negotiation between the various castes. Marriage alliances were seen as some sort of compromise offered for the coexistence of both agricultural and local tribal groups. Marriage rituals also pointed to the same. In Mukundaram’s narrative, the marriage ceremony of the hunter and his wife was more like that of larger Hindu marriages. Brahmans were shown as matchmakers. Priests and astrologers reading Vedic hymns, exchanging gifts and

¹³⁶ Jos J. L. Gommans, "The Silent Frontier of South Asia, c. A.D. 1100-1800," *Journal of World History* 9, no. 1 (1998): 20.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

preparing ritualistic food. Such rituals do not pertain to the forested communities in general according to the poet.¹³⁸

In this context, Historian Kathleen D. Morrison, while tracking environmental, social, economic and political formations of early modern South India, also explained how imperialized expansions, in cooperation with changes in agricultural production, histories of long distance and local exchange involving forest products intervene. She explains how the presence of a particular kind of geographical space led to the development of activities that were indigenous to the hill people or tribes. 'Specialized forager-traders'¹³⁹ is what she calls these upland people which due to land-use push and political pull became participants of the world economy. Also, important to note is that these relations were not incidental and even the forest population was dependent on lowlands for its products.

Similarly, adjacent to the core agricultural areas of the Mughal Empire, existed territories where a perpetual struggle went on between cultivators and those living in forests.¹⁴⁰As regressive tax policies made peasants, Zamindars and others migrated to new areas, amalgamations of various subsistence activities took place. The Indian subcontinent is known for its geographical heterogeneity, has various physical settings which have interacted in historic spaces and altered with the changing conditions of social power. Ecology and its intervention with human spaces created economic systems that best suited the geographical conditions they prevailed in.

¹³⁸ Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakravarti, Chandimangal, trans. Edward M. Yazijian (India: Penguin Classics, 2015), 31.

¹³⁹ Kathleen D Morrison, *Forager-traders in South and South East Asia: Long Term Histories* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 23.

¹⁴⁰ Chetan Singh, 'Forests, Pastoralists and Agrarian Society in Mughal India,' in *Nature, Culture and Imperialism*, ed. David Arnold and Ramchandra Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 36.

It is this ecological diversity that ensured that the geographical space and natural resources would be shared with a host of social organizations and utilized in different ways by each of them.¹⁴¹ Environmental factors crucially affected the nature of socio-economic developments of the empire. As topography was found to shelter certain areas from the expanding influences of large states, their emerged areas which were able to resist political, economic control or cultural influences of the so-called centers. Though it were the earlier emperors like Babar which with a less rigid system were able to utilize economies of pastoral societies, utilizing them became difficult as the systems became rigid and all attention went on to agrarian resources, which certain historians point were less unpredictable and easy to extract. Thus, geography made possible the rise of several chieftains, completely autonomous in their powers. However, interaction never ceased.¹⁴² It was these areas, socially distinct and predominantly non-agrarian that developed freely, out of the reach of imperial control, and attained a character which historians like Chetan Singh found predominantly different from core Mughal states. However, notions of these country people being alien, peripheral and abstract have developed for the fact that their subsistence activity differed from that of those which were considered civilized (agriculture and sophisticated commercial activity¹⁴³). As constant efforts were put in by the state to incorporate these regions, it is clear that this hostility was due to the inability to acquire these areas of natural abundance.’

Thus to conclude, the relation between the socio-historical reality of any given time period and the literary culture is very difficult to formulate. In the case of Chandimangal, socio-historical reality can be understood as a context of the text. The text as Quentin Skinner suggested can be located

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 22.

¹⁴² Ibid., 34.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 21.

in the ultimate framework of its social context, through which obvious embedded meanings were intended to be conveyed and read in certain ways.¹⁴⁴ Further, Kumkum Chatterjee also pointed out while arguing mapping of historical consciousness in the Mangal-Kāvya narratives that segments embedded in these texts represent the socio-historical context in certain ways. The Patterns of representations indicate the perception prevalent in the society that has been articulated in the space of literary culture.¹⁴⁵ Literary texts may not point out what happened in the past, and why it happened, but they reflect the way happenings were perceived in their contemporaneous society.

As Tony Stewart also argued, “fictional narratives in early modern Bengal inevitably help to make sense of one’s place in a given culture by laying out the parameters within which action can be contemplated and certain types of identity imagined. Such stories are neither essentialized nor schematic depictions of worldly experience nor idealized statements of perfect identities; rather they acknowledge the range of possibilities, setting the parameters within which one can envision a life. Such narratives can give shape to eventual courses of action, help explain why things are, or why decisions are made the way they are, and even justify who we are.”¹⁴⁶ Mangal-Kāvya texts were chosen by the contemporary elites, to articulate urgent concerns. Most of these new narratives were composed in the courts of Zamindars and bureaucrats. In this context, therefore, Chandimangal can be understood as indicating what could have been imagined within the space of literary cultures. Further it provides an understanding of the role played by literary narratives in wider social processes.

¹⁴⁴ Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in History of Ideas”, *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 39.

¹⁴⁵ Kumkum Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 33.

¹⁴⁶ Tony K Stewart, *Fabulous Females and Peerless Pirs Tales of Mad Adventure in Old Bengal* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.

CHAPTER 4

Locating everyday forms of resistance in Mukundaram's Chandimangal

Introduction

In the early years of Indian society, the brahmanical mode of composing, defining and interpreting history, culture and stories became the basis of the formation of narratives in the forms of Puranic stories located with brahmanical values. Through this the Brahmins created a brahmanical mind-set and normative frame of reference to the different groups. To counter such oppressive historical constructions, different groups engaged in communicating their own stories, which they composed in various forms. They constructed a plethora of symbols which are used as tools for empowerment in response to the urge to acquire self-respect. Such narratives acted as resisting narratives, creating a space within the larger complex relationships of negotiation and conflicts. This study proposes to examine these popular forms of narrative. How these narratives, on one hand, integrate caste narratives with the brahmanical narrative, but in this process also creates its own space and uses this space to express dissent. It enables these groups to enter into the meaningful domain of knowing, inventing, creating and telling a past that is able to dialogue with the present.

As Susan Wadley puts it, "In the popular religion of north India, rituals are not merely a context in which the communication of the sacred takes place; rituals are also powerful transformers of one's life path".¹⁴⁷ Therefore, it becomes crucial to consider folk ideology and practice as another

¹⁴⁷ Susan S Wadley, *Essays on North Indian Folk Traditions* (New Delhi: DC Publishers. 1995), 41.

dimension of power and protest. When we talk of folk literature, Indra Deva¹⁴⁸ also argued that folk literature is so integrated with the life of the folk that its various functions can hardly be seen separately. It accompanies the folk in almost all aspects and stages of their lives.

Lastly, Assa Doron offered a critical reading of Vrata Katha, a pamphlet belonging to the popular genre of religious literature.¹⁴⁹ Mangal-Kāvya are also a form of Vrata stories, according to him, must be read within a wider framework that is sensitive to the fears, struggles, wants and hopes of disadvantaged groups as these are experienced in their daily lives, away from the spotlight of modern-day politics and resistance ideology. Mangal-Kāvya acted as a literary space for such narratives, projecting everyday forms of resistance. Mangal-Kāvya was one of the performative narratives that also became an effective medium of mass communication in the medieval period. Many of the dissent groups made use of this highly effective channel of mass communication. Therefore, in the case of western Rarh, through the reading of the Mukundaram's Chandimangal will help in pointing out the above-mentioned concept

Religious performances offer an ideal medium for communication in traditional societies. These religious performances take place in a public location and are capable of reaching a diverse social setting. Secondly, due to their religious character they are able to overcome many of the usual limitations of social differentiations. According to Neema Caughran,¹⁵⁰ “The story is about the power of disorder, of overindulgence in a cultural setting where control and moderation are the only options within the paradigms of domination. The very act of molding and telling such stories should be seen as acts of agency, of re-contextualization and resistance deployed as necessary for

¹⁴⁸ Indra Deva, *Folk Culture and peasant society in India*, (Jaipur: Rawat publications, 1989), 203.

¹⁴⁹ Assa Doron, “In Practice of the Ordinary Man: Popular Media, Social Hierarchy and Identity in a North Indian Text”, *Asian Studies Review* 33 (2009): 524.

¹⁵⁰ N. Caughran, “Fasts, feasts, and the slovenly woman: Strategies of resistance among North Indian Potter women”, *Asian Folklore Studies* 57, no.2 (1998): 262.

survival. Narratives that develop both in formal tales and informal speech need to be seen as functioning towards the construction of the self where that self is so often denied.”

Religious narratives, where in order to get legitimization, legends and myths emerged where these chiefs enjoyed direct conviction from the goddess herself. The goddess is said to have come in contact with the raja on her own accord. The legitimization of the Raja depended on his position in the cult of the Devi. Thus, a tripartite relationship between the goddess, the local Raja and the local subjects were established. In this arrangement, Raja acted as the medium between the goddess and the people. This was also the position of Kalketu, he is shown as protecting the forest and the people by the grace of Chandi. On the other hand, he also established his supremacy over the Kalinga Raja. However, Kalketu still turned to the Kalinga raja for the legitimization and in order to further validate his rule, he accelerated the process of brahmanisation by giving the rent free lands to the Brahmins.

In the "instruction and advice" mode, the Mangal-Kāvya presented models of ideal behavior through mortal heroes and heroines. Thus, Kalketu, the human hero of the Chandimangal, embodied the virtues that rulers were expected to possess.¹⁵¹ Such narratives acted as resisting narratives, creating a space within the larger complex relationships of negotiation and conflicts. There are several incidents pointed out by Mukundaram, both subtly and directly, in his narrative poetry which project resistance of various forms and at varied settings. Resistance existed at so many levels. In this chapter, my attempt is to trace the resistance taking place between the local chiefs with the larger Mughal rule. Resistance and conflict among the state appointed agrarian officials and locally appointed officials, resistance emerging between different agrarian classes,

¹⁵¹ Sukumar Sen, *History of Bengali Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1960), 52.

resistance between local agrarian and forested communities. Lastly, social resistance including caste and gendered forms.

Local chiefs and Mughal state

With the Mughal conquest of Bengal, Agrarian expansion was often managed and controlled by the powerful rural institutional and social agencies that emerged during the political vacuum of the late fifteenth century. As scholars have pointed out, the Mughal state was never an absolute or as centralized as was considered. McLane noted that effective Mughal rule had required the subordination of 'regional' or 'local' power which included a variety of chiefs, rajas, or clan leaders. They also depended heavily on the non-military factors¹⁵² i.e. largely on the landholders, merchants, bankers etc., as B.S Cohn focuses on the use of the term like *Shah-an-shah*¹⁵³, king of kings for Mughal rulers rather than 'oriental despot'. Power and authority of the center was shared in a vertical order or through political hierarchy. So, there always existed a variation in the political order. Keeping this in view and as discussed in the previous chapter, with the Mughal rule in Bengal, there originated a new right by merging powerful rural aristocracy and other superior elements within the villages, those exercising these rights are often termed as Zamindars.¹⁵⁴ There was an important relationship between the imperial authorities and the Zamindars. With the armed retainers and its local customary rights, Zamindars often turned up as a subversive element in the whole political structure.¹⁵⁵ They often maintained dual relations with both state and the peasants. As Zamindars were the powerful local elements, they were used by the rulers for the collection of revenue from the peasantry or in assisting the *jagirdars* for the collection of revenue. But on the

¹⁵² John R. McLane, *Land and Local Kingship in Eighteenth-century Bengal* (Cambridge, 1993), 123.

¹⁵³ Bernard S. Cohn, "Political Systems in Eighteenth Century India: the Benares Region", *Journal of American Oriental Society* LXXXII, no.3 (1962): 44.

¹⁵⁴ Irfan Habib, "The Social Distribution of Landed Property in pre-British India", *Social Scientist* 23 (1995): 101.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

other hand, these Zamindars also backed the peasantry class to revolt against the heavy revenue exactions by using their clan and caste appeals. Caste played a major role in determining the superiority of the Zamindars. Apart from being the state functionaries, Zamindars were responsible for the administration of the area under their jurisdiction.

Further, the imposition of the land tax by the Mughals remolded the relations of the peasants with both the Zamindars and the ruler. A triangular relationship thus came to exist between the peasantry, the Zamindars and the ruling class.¹⁵⁶ The taxation pattern with the Todar Mal's rent roll in the Akbar's reign generated its own pressure upon the peasants. The medieval peasants faced the dual exploitation of the ruling class and the Zamindars, and by an intensified pace of internal differentiation from fiscal and market factors. The balance of power shifted decisively from the center to the different layers of the society. Those emerging as autonomous regional chiefs formed new ties of loyalty with the local agrarian communities, largely peasants. There continued to exist an intense tension between the peasants and their superior and subordinate classes. Tensions and conflict emerged over the disputes about village boundaries, resentment against revenue rates, method of assessment and collection.¹⁵⁷ Another cause of resentment was the classification of the cultivable area. Land being the chief agrarian resource often became a cause of dispute amongst the peasants.

Armed conflicts between the Zamindars and peasants, peasants and state, upper and ordinary peasant broke out very frequently, there also existed some uniform form of everyday resistance and dissents. Reaction of peasants to an unequal distribution of economic resources, power and position need to be analyzed and understood by taking into account not only the big dramatic

¹⁵⁶ R.S.Sharma, "Problems of Peasant Protests in Early Medieval India, *Social Scientist* 16, no. 9 (Sep., 1988): 12.

¹⁵⁷ Madhu Tandon Sethia, *Rajput Polity: Warriors, Peasants and Merchants (1700-1800)* (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2003), 207.

uprisings or movements but also by exploring the day to day resistance within or outside the process of production in various forms.¹⁵⁸ It also has to be noted that forms of resistance vary according to the conditions and constraints under which they are generated. Since the disputes and tension engulfing the rural society were multifarious as well as multi-angular, therefore, this broad idea of the resistance will take into account the various aspects and forms of dissent among the peasant society.¹⁵⁹ Projection of resistance through religious performances and forming myths around folk or village cult became one of the popular forms of resistance among agrarian communities.

In Chandimangal, starting from his autobiographical account where Mukundaram described in detail the troubled times in which he lived. Given that the worship of Chandi was already established in the sixteenth century Bengal, this biographical account must have been an attempt by Mukundaram to locate the story of his human characters within the context of the times he lived. Mukundaram's biographical account can be seen as a social site, located within an embedded social environment of which it is a product and in which it acts as an agent.

Mukundaram gives the detailed information of his flight from his ancestral village, Damunya. Story behind his exile and how Gopinath Nandi, *talukdar* (landlord) of the region, has been jailed. How the new revenue officer is corrupt, that fallow lands were assessed as arable, 15 kathas of lands were fraudulently measured as a Kura (20 kathas is 1 Kura), the value of rupee had fallen by 2 and half annas, the money lenders had become exciting. Peasants began to sell off their grain and cattle, there was a glut on the market, and things worth a rupee sold for ten annas. The people

¹⁵⁸ Mukhia Harbans, "Peasant Production and Medieval Indian Society.", *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 12, no. 2-3 (1985): 242.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

would have left the village but were forced to stay. Mukundaram somehow manages to escape with his family with the help of his friends after many trials and tribulations.

It can be assumed here through the poet's account that he might have lived on rent-free land under a Hindu Zamindar, or would have paid a nominal rent. But with the Todar Mal settlement,¹⁶⁰ as suggested by Ain which was introduced in 1575-1583, landholding was now remeasured, waste lands were counted as cultivable and arable, assessable and hence, higher rent was demanded from the cultivators. As a consequence he had to leave his ancestral village where his family lived for generations. Various sections in Mukundaram's Chandimangal mentions the alternative setting offered in the Kalketu's newly established kingdom of Garhjat, for instance, 'there is no need to give any rent in advance. No revenue officer will be appointed and there will not be any extra rent, taxes, or any fees when possession of allotted land is taken. There will be no money due on instalment plan here in Garhjat. No taxes will be levied on festivals, salt, police protection, rice harvest, nor there be five percent fees or penalties collected for accounting mistakes. Rice can be sold when desired. No taxes will be levied on Brahmins, arable land homes will be given to them'.¹⁶¹ There are several mentions how Kalketu induces and settles farmers, including Muslims, for ensuring the development of agriculture in his new 'kingdom' of Gujarat, which is on the southern end of the Rarh. He goes to the extent of promising that his officials would not be extorting taxes from these agricultural groups.

Therefore, it could be inferred that Mukundaram in his narrative poem tried to contextualize his life within the social structure in which he lived. His narrative poem can be therefore seen as

¹⁶⁰ Abū Al-Faḥl Ibn Mubārak and H. Blochmann, *The Ā'in-i Akbarī: A Gazetteer and Administrative Manual of Akbar's Empire and Part History of India* (Asiatic Society, 1993), 376.

¹⁶¹ Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakravarti, *Chandimangal*, trans. Edward M. Yazijian (India: Penguin Classics, 2015), 90.

performative rituals that became a medium to articulate the experienced exploitations and hardships arising out of the socio-political changes of the sixteenth century. Reaction of agrarian communities to these changes, unequal distribution of economic resources, power and position and subsequent adjustments at the local level.

Resistance at the local level

Mukundaram's Chandimangal manifested resistance, conflicts and negotiation at various local levels, within the hunter and the merchant communities, forest dwelling communities with other landed classes, within the Brahman and Kayastha communities, and finally among the neighboring chieftaincies. But before discussing resistance at various local levels, it is very important to understand the implication of the narratives in the larger context. How these narratives justify the larger socio-agrarian changes and processes of the time.

To start with, animals of the forest in the narrative when seeking Chandi's protection, reflects the process of shifting of pastoralism towards sedentarisation. Animals resisting the malpractices of the hunter and their killings could be an attempt in the narrative to justify the forest clearance and agrarian expansion over the existing hunting practices. Narrative provides a detailed picture of how animals are unhappy with the mass hunting and being sold at circuses.¹⁶² While on one hand, hunter was criticized for killing animals, there also existed a parallel attempt in the narrative to show Kalketu as a great warrior. By the grace of Chandi, where the same hunter will be given the charge of the forest, to provide for the well-being of the animals and the other settled tenants is a further attempt to legitimize the just rule of the emerging chiefs in the newly found settlements.

¹⁶² Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakravarti, *Chandimangal*, trans. Edward M. Yazijian (India: Penguin Classics, 2015), 56. 'A monkey chimed in, I am so unlucky. Kalketu sold my family to circuses. 'Kalketu is committing mass murder by his constant killings of animals'.

These chiefs came from previously forested or tribal backgrounds, however, now taken in the fold of the agrarian expansion and more settled form of living.

Chandimangal as a counter narrative, engaged different aspects and symbols in communicating their stories. These narratives, on one hand, integrate caste narratives with the brahmanical narrative, but in this process also creates its own space and uses this space to express dissent. It enabled the subordinated groups to invent, know, create and tell their past that is in continuous dialogue with their present. This is clearly visible in multiple references of Kalketu presenting himself as a low caste hunter and his position as a low caste hunter in the larger social hierarchy. Narrative reflected that while Kalketu's position in the caste hierarchy was low, he was bestowed by the Chandi herself and how his rule was recognized by Brahmans, Kayasthas and other dominant castes.

Narrative was used to construct a plethora of symbols which are used as tools for empowerment in response to the urge to acquire self-respect. For instance, in an incident in the narrative where Chandi appears in the home of Kalketu in disguise of a lizard, was taken as a prisoner by the hunter. To which Chandi responded: 'I came here to give the hunter a boon. The gods worship me, yet I've been tied up by a hunter! There is something that strikes fear in my heart. I, who am honored by the lord of the gods Indra, have become the prisoner of a hunter! Why did I ever turn myself into a lizard? I am so humiliated!'¹⁶³ In another incident, where Kalketu is trying to know about the identity of the Chandi: 'I am a hunter of low birth, while you're a maiden of a notable family. I, Kalketu, desire to know your identity. You must be the daughter of either the gods or

¹⁶³ Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakravarti, *Chandimangal*, trans. Edward M. Yazijian (India: Penguin Classics, 2015), 67.

Brahmins, so why have you come here? We hunters are violent and uncouth, and this hut with animal bones strewn everywhere is no different from a cremation ground',¹⁶⁴.

He further advised the goddess to bathe after touching in his house. Later when the goddess finally reveals herself, Kalketu: "Why would a goddess come to a huntsman house, who comes from a very low caste background"? He says it was hard to believe and asks her to manifest her original form, the one that everyone worships in the autumn, to be reassured.¹⁶⁵ Chandi then appears in her *Mahishamardini*¹⁶⁶ form, on seeing that both hunter and his wife fainted. Finally, when the goddess asks Kalketu to build a temple for her in the center of his newly formed town and worship her with a festival on every Tuesday. Kalketu replies: 'I am of low birth and a member of the forest-dwelling community. No one will touch me. People consider me a barbarian. Therefore I will retain a Brahmin to be my priest'. To this Chandi replied, 'your priest will have a vision of me and will accept your request'.

Brahmins acting as a link between the goddess and the low caste hunter can be therefore viewed as a conscious attempt on the part of the Brahmin poets to retain their position in the larger caste hierarchy and picturises their service to the emerging tribal chiefs as an act of service to the goddess. In the process, local chiefs also legitimize their rule in the larger sphere without dejecting their low position in the existing hierarchy but rather having Brahmins in their service through the grace of the goddess of the larger Hindu pantheon. Further this complementing relationship was maintained by granting tax free lands to the Brahmins and constructing temples for the goddess.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., 74.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 76.

¹⁶⁶ Goddess surrounded by eight associates in eight directions, placing her right foot on the back of a lion and her left foot on the back of a buffalo. A Mahisha demon head holding in her one left hand, with right she puts a trident into his chest. Kartik stood to her left and Ganesh to her right. On her head she supported Shiva riding a bull. Saravasti and Lakshmi on two sides. All gods respectfully praise the goddess.

Mukundaram's Chandimangal acted as a counter narrative and projecting a reverse order, where goddess acted as link between the two groups and validating their new roles. Roles which emerged out of the larger social-political developments of the time. This phenomenon was seen in the case of the above incident where Brahmans' service in the hunter's newly founded kingdom was viewed as the service to the goddess. Similarly, Mukundaram's narrative points to the dynamics between the Hunter with other local groups and how goddess always facilitated the acceptance of his position and ensured the protection from exploitation or any kind of oppression.

In this context, David Curley argued that through the promotion of the cultural projects, literary writings, Zamindars created a novel notion of Hinduism which justified the sacred royal authority of the upper caste Zamindars over their lower caste *prajas*— an authority that emanated from the goddess herself.¹⁶⁷ Kumkum Chatterjee suggested that the Zamindars tried to create a pretense of antiquity of the lineage of the family through the composition of their origin narratives.¹⁶⁸ Hence, Mukundaram's Chandimangal because of its popularity and porousness, was taken as the suitable sites for the articulation of contemporary concerns. Through the exploration of a few segments of the narrative, the way zamindars fashioned their identity in the discursive spaces of literature can be understood.

For instance, Chandi rewarded Kalketu with a ring worth the price of seventy million silver coins to set up his kingdom and serve its tenants. She further asked him to exchange the ring for a good price from a merchant. Mukundaram while narrating this incident in Chandimangal, pointed to deceitful nature of the merchant community and their relationship with the hunter. When Kalketu

¹⁶⁷ David L. Curley, *Poetry and History: Bengali Maṅgal-kābya and Social Change in Precolonial Bengal* (Chronicle Books, 2008), 226.

¹⁶⁸ Chatterjee, Kumkum, "Scribal elites in the Sultanate and Mughal Bengal", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 47, no.4 (2010): 455.

went to the Merchant, his wife lied about his absence in the house as Merchant owed the hunter money for meat. Merchant's wife also asked Kalketu to bring more wood the next day in order to get his previous money. But after Kalketu mentioned the valuable ring and told them that he was not there for money, Merchant came out and attended to him instantly. However, the merchant wrongly weighed the ring and agreed to a very low price and some rice and beans as payment along with the money. When the hunter realized that merchant was being unfair and refused to sell it, merchant cleverly exchanged his ring for a fake one. It was only after Chandi herself appeared before merchant and countered him that he agreed on a fair price to Kalketu and took the ring. While the goddess ensured protection to the hunter from any kind of exploitation, he was further vested with the role of protecting his subjects from similar kind of exploitation. Kalketu or the local chiefs were projected as the direct link between the god and the subjects.¹⁶⁹

The incident of malpractices on the part of the moneylenders and merchants have been also pointed out by Mukundaram in his autobiographical account, suggesting that narrative and its actors in some form did try to project the social realities of the time. In his autobiographical introduction, the imprisonment of Lord Gopinath for nonpayment of revenue reflected the extent of powers which the revenue officials exercised in those days. Revenue collector was vested with a large share of the powers. To this, James Mill argued, "Revenue officers were allowed the use of military force, the police of the district were placed in their hands, and they were also vested with the civil branch of judicature"¹⁷⁰ There is reference to Lord Gopinath in another contemporary Vaishnava literature of the time. In the ninth section of the *Antyalila* of the *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, it mentions: "Gopīnātha Paṭṭanāyaka, the son of Bhavānanda Rāya, was engaged in the service of

¹⁶⁹ Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakravarti, *Chandimangal*, trans. Edward M. Yazijian (India: Penguin Classics, 2015), 78.

¹⁷⁰ James Mill, *The History of British India, Vol.1* (United Kingdom: Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1818).

the government, but he misappropriated some funds from the treasury. Therefore the *baḍa-jānā*, the eldest son of King Pratāparudra, ordered that he be punished by death. Thus Gopīnātha Paṭṭanāyaka was raised on the *cāṅga* to be killed, but by the mercy of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu he was delivered. Moreover, he was even promoted to a higher post¹⁷¹. These were methods used for the realisation of royal dues from the defaulters. Even if he and his brother mentioned in the text begged for the time and requested paying dues in instalments.

The description of exploitation in his autobiographical sketch can further be clearly seen in other incidents in Chandimangal, most important of which being the Bhangru Datta's conduct in the markets of the hunter's town after being appointed as the chief. The position itself was secured amidst the lines of conflict within the Brahmans and Kayastha communities of the region. In the text, Bulan *Mandal* arrived at the hunter's town before Bhangru Datta and was bestowed with Kalketu's honor for settling in his town. Bhangru Datta as a reaction mentioned his superior lineage: "All Kayastha folks you see here are inferior to me matters of pedigree and eat at my home. I give them water, pots, cloth and ornaments as gifts"¹⁷² He therefore asked Kalketu to accept his respect and honor him in return. He further added that Bulan *Mandal* used to carry his accounting books and deserved to be his servant.

Mukundaram, later in the text, described, "When Bhangru Datta roamed in the market, He looted merchandise from the shopkeepers and merchants without paying anything in return. He punched, kicked, and thrashed the shopkeepers if they resisted. Following which shopkeepers requested the hunter to intervene. They told the hunter that they were exploited by Bhangru Datta, he bribed

¹⁷¹ A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*. New York: 1968. Accessed 20th October, 2020. <https://vedabase.io/en/library/cc/antya/>

¹⁷² Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakravarti, *Chandimangal*, trans. Edward M. Yazijian (India: Penguin Classics, 2015), 100.

them and took vegetable and other goods to his home. He takes rice without payment and beats them up if asked for money. His family and friends also steal cooking pots and ask potters to carry their bags home. He stole betel leaves and areca nuts by force. He even forcedly captures the livestock available for cowherds. His son fights with merchants and causes trouble in the market. He steals sweets from the shop and takes bribes like him. While Bhangru is Cripple and can't work on the land himself, he planted banana trees on other's plough furrows and lands which took up an area equaling the space for seven houses. He also asks for goats in pretext of penalties for falsely charged offences, kills and eats them. His son is an embarrassment to the community, he misbehaves with his young wives when they go out to fetch water.”¹⁷³

After tenants of the town reported this to Kalketu, Bhangru was held accountable that despite living in a rent free land, getting free provisions, and not paying taxes from his profit, he is exploiting his position and Kalketu's reputation. To this, Bhangru replied: “I had been entitled to a leader's perquisites well before I came here. There is no fault in this”¹⁷⁴ Kalketu, however, supported the tenants and removed him from his high position. To which Bhangru accused him of turning arrogant after benefiting from his former position. He threatened the hunter for regaining control that he is superior Brahmin and he went to the king of neighboring kingdom of Kalinga to seek help.

Conflict between King of Kalinga and Kalketu points to how there existed a continuous negotiation and conflict between the already existing and newly emerging regional chiefs. How in order to retain their position in the region, they often sought to patronize Brahmans. It was under this patronization that Brahman like Bhangru and Mukundaram assumed the position of leadership or

¹⁷³ Ibid., 102.

¹⁷⁴ Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakravarti, *Chandimangal*, trans. Edward M. Yazijian (India: Penguin Classics, 2015), 99.

court patronage. They were offered various honors which also led to levels of conflicts within the Brahman or Kayastha communities.

Bhangru goes to the king of Kalinga in the nearest town. He informs him about the Kalketu's kingdom and how people from Kalinga were moving to the hunter's town. He mentions that not even a single tenant is poor or unhappy there. His kingdom is protected by stone falls on the four sides and elephants stood to guard the gate. He even compared Kalketu's kingdom to Ayodhya and Kalketu to Rama. And he offered service to the Kalinga king and repaid his patronage. He also accused the chief police of Kalinga of corruption and bribes. After hearing about Kalketu's kingdom, Kalinga Raja decided to wage a war against the hunter. Mukundaram in Chandimangal provided a detailed description of the war, how local tribes were assisting in the war. He writes, "Thirteen battalions consisting of Kola tribesmen marched for the battle with arrows in their hands and carrying hunting nets on their heads"¹⁷⁵

After Kalketu finally lost to Kalinga raja and was imprisoned, it was Chandi who mediated again and made Kalinga raja himself recognize the rule of the Kalketu. When Chandi appeared in front of Kalketu in the prison, he asked the goddess to let him escape the prison, he would go back to his hunting life and make his living by selling meat in the market. But Chandi replied she will make the Kalinga Raja reward him and make him hold the royal white umbrella over his head.¹⁷⁶ Such narratives again stressed on the direct legitimacy of the Kalketu's rule from the goddess herself. How there was an attempt to validate his rule and get him recognition at various levels of rural setting of medieval Rarh.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 105.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 56.

Lastly, adjacent to the core agricultural areas of the Mughal Empire, existed territories where a perpetual struggle went on between cultivators and those living in forests. Extension of the land grants in the interior villages tended to disturb the indigenous system of internal social and economic relations. The grantees tried to exert superior rights on land at the cost of the peasants. At many incidences, Mukundaram's narrative projected the actual problem of the peasantry showed how the smaller peasants or tenant cultivators heavily dependent on the loans for their seeds and agricultural implements, how they were further exploited by the moneylenders who formed an important gentry class during this time. The grantees of lands, in most cases, cultivated their lands by agricultural laborers, sometimes brought from the outside. The story also describes the condition of the domestic servants and the laborers, how they were exploited by the peasants and superior landlords on the field.

There were incidents where animals were comparing themselves with the landed classes and the state appointed officials: "I am no landholder, nor do I have title bestowed on me by the crown. I collect nothing from any tenant"¹⁷⁷ These narratives also attempted to provide a larger picture of the agrarian relations and practices that existed, reflecting that the forested and agrarian communities never remained in isolation with each other. This interaction when manifested in the narrative gave a sense of how forested communities viewed the larger state and landed classes. Here it is clear from this incident that agrarian exploitation by the landlords was extensive, and the petty croppers sometimes revolted against their masters. So there was social tension, obviously, between them. But this cannot be an example of forced labor; rather, it proves the existence of a conditional agreement between them.

¹⁷⁷ Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakravarti, *Chandimangal*, trans. Edward M. Yazijian (India: Penguin Classics, 2015), 60.

Thus, to conclude, Agrarian society in medieval western Bengal, late sixteenth and early seventeenth century did develop a degree of self-consciousness as a class and its conflict with the state did betray a certain class character. The folksongs and folktales popular among the rural communities since the medieval times have all the ingredients with which to construct a definite agrarian class ideology that included conceptions of economic interests, social ethics and relations with the ruling class.

One can say that these stories are myths, but there existed an attempt of situating historical facts in these myths. These facts may turn useful for reconstructing the course of historical developments of the region where the myth originated or was prevalent. Characters belonged to different strata of society including the people from lowest rung, king, tributary chiefs, subordinate landlords, merchants, Brahmans, traders, agricultural labor, domestic servants, cowherds, hunters, etc. In some cases, the characters belonging to the lower rungs of the society occupied very important positions in the stories. The congregation of such widely divergent characters and the description of their exploits, values, and aspirations in the Mangal narrative poems makes them a veritable source of socioeconomic history. The ‘fictionalization’ of facts therefore, was a conscious attempt to create a ‘voice’ of the patrons who could legitimize their identity in the contemporaneous world.

As Michael Danino puts it, “By the word, ‘Myth’, I mean a complex, multi-layered legend that weaves together heroic deeds and divine miracle, and, through powerful symbols, impresses a set of values on the mind of a people. The Myth becomes, in turn, inseparable from its people’s customs and traditions...And whether or not a myth has some historical bases, it is true as long as it lives and works in the mind it has shaped... Whether they are ‘facts’ in our limited sense of the term is irrelevant. Myths are something greater than fact...Whether or not a myth has grown around a historical seed; it is a maker of history”¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ Danino, Michel, *The Lost River on the Trail of the Sarasvati* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2010), 19.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The agrarian society of medieval Bengal in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century did develop a degree of self-consciousness as a class and its conflict with the state did betray a certain class character. The folk songs and folk tales within the rural society contain all the elements needed to construct a defined agrarian class ideology that reflected economic interests, social ethics and relations with the ruling class. This helps us to understand the different ways in which the state intervened in the socio-cultural and economic lives and the ways in which these communities responded to these interventions. Furthermore, it also discusses how caste consciousness in a stratified society impinged on its class consciousness. How there also remained certain limits to the fuller realisation of the potential of agrarian class struggle against the state. Underlying class and caste consciousness motivated these struggles. It is important to examine the nature of agrarian conflicts and resistance and how these conflicts gave various communities space to negotiate with the socio-economic and political changes occurring during a particular period.

Mukundaram's Chandimangal starts with his detailed biographical sketch where he describes the troubled times in which he lived. Given that the worship of Chandi was already established in the sixteenth century Bengal, this biographical account must have been an attempt by Mukundaram to locate the story of his human characters within the context of the times he lived. Mukundaram throughout the text claims the desire to create a new or unique Mangal poem with the blessing of goddess. His attempt was to distinguish his text from that of his predecessors.

By relating the story of how Chandi commanded him to write the story and by providing autobiographical information, he must have tried to make the stories relevant to the place or time by weaving contemporary issues with the already existing narratives. Therefore, through this study, one can conclude Mukundaram's biographical account can be read as a social site, located within an embedded social environment of which it is a product and in which it acts as an agent. Through this study, I attempted to contextualize Mukundaram's life within the social structure in which he lived that can be of utmost historical importance to understand the larger cultural and social and even political processes of a moment in time.

Through reconstructing and analyzing the narratives, it can be further concluded that Mukundaram's Chandimangal is a literary genre offering detailed and reliable pictures of a lower-class social world, reflected in the activities performed by the main characters, and brought up a realistic depiction of everyday life into the world of conventional literature. As performative rituals, it became a medium to articulate the experienced exploitations and hardships arising out of the socio-political changes of the sixteenth century. Reaction of agrarian communities to these changes, unequal distribution of economic resources, power and position can be understood and analyzed through Chandimangal. It reflects how the adjustments at the local level were crucial features of the polity of this time. Further, how clan and caste appeal amongst the chiefs and the agrarian class played a vital role. Mukundaram in Chandimangal also states several agricultural practices as well as the names of some of the castes and groups engaged in them. The picture of 'peasantization' in western Bengal, as it existed in the last decades of the sixteenth century, comes out in vivid colors from Mukundaram's Chandimangal.

Through my study, I tried to explore the relationship between the evolving literary culture and the socio-historical setting in which the texts were produced and circulated. References to the reality might be scattered in Mukundaram's narratives, but when placed in the context of the society to which he refers to, its documentary usefulness becomes more apparent, and the patterns of representing reality in the discursive space of a literary culture visibly comes out. Therefore, Chandimangal in this study is understood as a discursive site where multiple voices converged, and conventional motifs were seamlessly blended with the contemporary concerns. They could have been utilized for conveying certain meanings in a given socio-historical context which were understood in certain ways by the audience who consumed the text, either through reading and theatrical performances. Thus Chandimangal can be seen in the context of Sudipta Kaviraj's idea of Mangal-Kāvya, i.e. representing a highly significant complex of literary sensibility—combining a distinctly subaltern religious spirit with the depiction of a peasant world of want and domestic troubles. Some sections of this tradition show a great awareness and representation of an Islamic social world, or at least a clear recognition of the mixed religious character of Bengali society.¹⁷⁹

Lastly, this research further brings up many questions as to looking at the regional literary cultures as the source for writing the social history. Mangal-Kāvya texts in this research is studied as a discursive site which has been repeatedly utilized by the patrons and the authors to articulate the contemporary concerns. It was a popular and malleable medium where certain meanings could be conveyed through theatrical performance of the texts. This research does not aspire to provide a holistic generalization on anything. Instead, taking a particular genre of literature, it seeks to explore how Mukundaram's Chandimangal emerged as a literary social site. Putting it differently, this dissertation aims to provide a further scope of looking at regional literary culture in a broader

¹⁷⁹ Sudipta Kaviraj, "The Two Histories of Literary Culture in Bengal," *Literary Cultures in History* (2019), 517.

length in the context of early modern Bengal. However, the exploration of other sources from different regional literary cultures of the time period in discussion, might give rise to contradictory perspectives on what this research proposes. It can be easily suggested in this context that the literary culture, even within a region, does not transform homogeneously, and medieval Bengal, especially the western Rarh region was characterized by spectacular multiplicity of dwellings and perceptions.

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