

Local Memory, Vernacular Archive: Bengal's Dalit Historiography beyond the Metropolis

Sambuddha Chakraborty
Ph.D. Research Scholar of History
Rabindra Bharatii University

Abstract: *Local memory and vernacular archives offer a powerful counterpoint to the metropolitan dominance of Bengal's historical imagination. Beyond Calcutta's bhadrakalok narratives of reform and renaissance, Dalit communities across Nadia, Medinipur, and North 24 Parganas sustain alternative genealogies of struggle through oral histories, devotional literature, and collective remembrance. These dispersed and regionally rooted archives challenge the persistent myth of Bengal's "casteless modernity," revealing how caste operates as both a historical structure and a spatial marker of exclusion. Attending to the textures of local experience and vernacular expression opens up a historiographical practice grounded in subaltern epistemologies, one that reclaims marginal pasts not as silenced residues of history, but as dynamic sources of regional moral and political imagination.*

Keywords: *Dalit historiography; vernacular archives; local memory; regional modernity; caste and marginality; Bengal*

Introduction

Few regions in South Asia have been as self-consciously invested in narratives of enlightenment and modernity as Bengal. From the nineteenth-century Bengal Renaissance to the intellectual trajectories of Marxist and nationalist thought in the twentieth century, Bengal has long imagined itself as the vanguard of rationality and reform, a space where the progressive ethos of modern India was first forged. The figure of the bhadrakalok-urbane, literate, secular became the emblem of this regional selfhood. Yet this self-image rests upon a telling paradox: Bengal's claim to enlightenment has been accompanied by a studied silence on caste. In popular as well as academic discourse, Bengal has been repeatedly portrayed as a "casteless" society, one where class, education, or political ideology supposedly displaced the hierarchies of ritual purity and pollution that structured much of the Indian social order.¹

This rhetoric of casteless modernity has profoundly shaped the region's historiography. Caste, when it appears at all in Bengali historical writing, is often subsumed under the categories of class, religion, or agrarian structure. In nationalist and Marxist frameworks alike, caste becomes either a residue of feudalism or a symptom of economic backwardness, an anomaly destined to dissolve with capitalist progress or revolutionary change. The monumental works of Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty, while deeply critical of colonial modernity, nonetheless remain anchored in the idiom of the metropolitan intellectual, tracing the dilemmas of nationalism and subalternity through the archives of Calcutta's colonial modernity.² The subaltern historiographical project, despite its radical promise, has also been less attentive to caste in Bengal than to peasant insurgency or nationalist discourse.

The consequence of this metropolitan and elite orientation has been the systematic marginalisation of Dalit experience from Bengal's historical consciousness. As Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has shown, communities such as the Namasudras, Rajbanshis, and Pods constituted significant social and political forces in colonial Bengal, but their struggles rarely entered the canonical narratives of reform and progress.³ The story of Bengali modernity, therefore, is also a story of selective remembering, one that celebrates intellectual illumination while simultaneously erasing the structural violence of caste.

Rethinking historiography from the margins requires confronting this epistemic exclusion. What kinds of historical knowing emerge when we move beyond the metropolis, into the linguistic and moral worlds of those for whom "history" was not written but remembered, sung, or ritualised? In the districts of Nadia, Medinipur, or North 24 Parganas, collective memory is preserved not in state archives but in devotional songs, community chronicles, and oral genealogies, the living repositories of a Dalit historical consciousness. These vernacular archives are not simply supplements to official history; they constitute distinct epistemologies of the past, grounded in affect, memory, and moral experience.

Engaging these sources demands a methodological shift. The vernacular archive, as Ann Laura Stoler reminds us, is less a neutral repository than a site of epistemic struggle, revealing the anxieties and exclusions that undergirds official knowledge.⁴ Reading Dalit memory as archive, therefore, involves tracing the texture of subaltern life in its own idioms, its songs of humiliation and resilience, its mythic genealogies, its rituals of remembrance. Oral histories, community records, and religious texts such as the Matua Mahasangha's hagiographies of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur function as counter-histories to metropolitan narratives of reform.⁵ They articulate moral worlds in which dignity, labour, and devotion replace the bhadrakok ideals of education and refinement as the true markers of civilisation.

To think from these archives is to decenter the metropolis as the exclusive site of historical reason. The task, then, is not merely to "add" Dalit voices to an

existing historiography but to question the epistemological hierarchies that render such voices inaudible. Local memory and vernacular archives reveal a different temporal rhythm of Bengal's modernity – one that unfolds not in the salons of Calcutta or the pages of *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, but in the fragmented recollections of displaced, stigmatised, and devotional communities. Recovering these subaltern archives allows history to appear not as a finished narrative of progress, but as a contested field of remembering and forgetting, where the margins speak back to the metropolis, and in doing so, remake the meaning of Bengal itself.

I. Historiographical Context: Caste as an Absent Category in Bengali Modernity.

The historiography of Bengal has long been shaped by a self-reinforcing narrative of reform, reason, and political radicalism. From the colonial period to the postcolonial present, the story of Bengal has been told largely through three overlapping frames – reformist, nationalist, and Marxist, each of which, while distinct in emphasis, converged in one crucial respect: the erasure or subsumption of caste as an analytical category. The absence of caste from the historiographical imagination of Bengal is not accidental but ideologically produced, embedded in the region's self-conception as the rational and "modern" heart of India.

Reformist Historiography and the Myth of Enlightenment

Early nationalist and reformist historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – figures such as Ramesh Chandra Dutt and Dinesh Chandra Sen, constructed a vision of Bengali history that celebrated the *bhadralok's* moral and intellectual awakening. Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, and their contemporaries were canonised as pioneers of rationality and social reform, representing a departure from the "superstitions" of a decadent Hindu past. Journals like *Tattwabodhini Patrika* (founded 1843) and *Somprakash* (founded 1858) published editorials extolling the virtues of education and women's uplift, yet they rarely addressed the structural violence of caste discrimination within Hindu society.⁶ Even when the issue of untouchability was mentioned, it was framed in moral rather than structural terms, a blemish on an otherwise enlightened civilisation.

This reformist historiography was both an intellectual and spatial project. Its archive was the metropolis Calcutta, imagined as the crucible of modernity and the birthplace of the Indian nation. Rural Bengal figured only as a landscape of ignorance awaiting illumination. By naturalising the *bhadralok* experience as Bengal's collective experience, these narratives relegated Dalit and subaltern lives to the ethnographic margins. The idea of Bengal as "casteless" thus emerged in tandem with its claim to enlightenment, a myth that would persist even as political idioms shifted from liberal reform to nationalism and socialism.

Nationalism and the Secularisation of Caste

In the nationalist historiography of the early twentieth century, caste was further displaced by the moral language of samaj (society) and jati (nation). Partha Chatterjee has shown how the Bengali intelligentsia sought to reconcile the moral sovereignty of the "inner domain" of culture with the colonial subordination of the "outer domain" of state power.⁷ Yet this formulation, while illuminating the contradictions of colonial modernity, also obscured the internal hierarchies that structured the inner domain itself. The "national" subject of Bengal's anti-colonial imagination was implicitly upper-caste, male, and metropolitan – the bearer of cultural authenticity and moral authority.

During the late colonial years, as mass politics expanded, caste-based mobilisations such as those led by Jogendranath Mandal or the Namasudra Mahasabha challenged the hegemony of upper-caste nationalism. Newspapers like *The Statesman* and *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reported on Dalit demands for separate electorates and political representation during the 1930s, often framing them as threats to Hindu unity or as symptoms of colonial "divide and rule."⁸ Even the progressive weeklies of the 1940s, such as *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, rarely treated caste as a legitimate political identity, preferring the vocabulary of "Depressed Classes" or "Harijans."⁹ The nationalist historiography that emerged after Independence absorbed these movements within broader narratives of peasant uplift and agrarian reform, thereby neutralising their specific caste character.

Marxist Historiography and the Absorption of Caste into Class

The dominance of Marxist historiography in post-Independence Bengal reinforced this pattern of erasure. In works such as Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Rethinking Working-Class History* (1989), class became the privileged site of historical explanation, and caste appeared primarily as a pre-capitalist residue or cultural overlay.¹⁰ While Chakrabarty's subaltern approach critiqued colonial and nationalist elitism, it still relied on the Calcutta-centred archive of industrial labour, rendering invisible the caste-based social worlds of rural Bengal. Similarly, the "people's history" produced under Left intellectual patronage in the 1970s and 1980s valorised peasant and worker struggles while treating caste as epiphenomenal to class exploitation.

Yet, as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India* (1997) demonstrated, caste in Bengal was not a vestige but a dynamic category of political mobilisation and moral community.¹¹ The Namasudras' campaigns for dignity, education, and political rights redefined the very language of modern politics in eastern Bengal, drawing simultaneously upon devotional egalitarianism and strategic engagement with the colonial state. However, these histories remained peripheral to mainstream Marxist narratives, which located revolutionary consciousness in the urban proletariat and middle peasantry rather than in stigmatised rural communities.

The Metropolis as the Site of "History"

Across these historiographical formations, reformist, nationalist, and Marxist, the metropolis of Calcutta functioned as both subject and archive of history. The *bhadralok's* urban experience of education, print culture, and intellectual debate became synonymous with the making of the modern. Rural and regional Bengal, by contrast, appeared as timeless or derivative, its histories confined to folklore or anthropology rather than politics. As a result, the spatial division between Calcutta and the districts mirrored the epistemic divide between reason and superstition, history and memory, modernity and tradition.

This metropolitan centrism has produced a double marginalisation: Dalits are excluded not only as subjects of history but also as producers of historical knowledge. The challenge, therefore, is to displace Calcutta as the exclusive site of Bengal's modernity and to recognise the alternative archives of the region, its oral traditions, community chronicles, and devotional literatures as legitimate historical sources.

The recovery of these vernacular archives is not a matter of "adding" subaltern voices to elite history but of rethinking what constitutes an archive and whose experience defines the historical. In moving beyond the metropolis, one encounters histories inscribed not in official documents but in song, ritual, and memory archives that make visible the moral and emotional dimensions of caste in Bengal's long encounter with modernity.

II. Vernacular Archive and Local Memory

To rethink Bengal's historiography from the margins is to interrogate the very notion of what constitutes an archive. The colonial and nationalist archive preserved in bureaucratic records, official reports, and metropolitan print culture has long defined the contours of legitimate historical knowledge. Yet such archives are not neutral repositories of fact; they are instruments of epistemic power, authorising certain voices while excluding others. Ann Laura Stoler reminds us that archives are "sites of epistemic anxiety," where the boundaries between knowledge and ignorance are actively produced and policed.¹² In Bengal, this anxiety is evident in the systematic exclusion of caste and subaltern experience from the documentary record of modernity. The vernacular archive, by contrast, emerges not as a supplement to the official record but as an alternative epistemological domain grounded in the textures of local memory, affect, and performance.

The term "vernacular archive" denotes dispersed, embodied, and often non-literate forms through which communities remember, transmit, and interpret their pasts. Gyanendra Pandey's *A History of Prejudice* shows how history as a discipline has been tethered to the state's documentary logic, while stigmatized communities survive in "narratives that are moral rather than administrative, affective rather than evidentiary."¹³ Shahid Amin's *Event, Metaphor, Memory* models such an archive in practice: his reconstruction of the Chauri Chaura

incident relies not on colonial files alone but on oral recollections and folk retellings that illuminate the moral universe of subaltern actors.¹⁴ Following this line of thought, a vernacular archive in Bengal may consist of Matua devotional songs (*padavali*), local genealogies, or handwritten pamphlets circulated within rural congregations – materials that embody a living, performative relation to the past.

Vernacular archives are inseparable from memory as a method. Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* sites where memory crystallises and secretes itself offers a starting point for thinking about how collective remembrance operates outside institutional frameworks.¹⁵ Jan Assmann extends this through his theory of "cultural memory," emphasising the transmission of collective identity through ritual and narrative across generations.¹⁶ Yet for subaltern communities, memory is not simply a repository of identity; it is also an act of resistance. Ranjit Guha, in his writings on peasant insurgency, called attention to the "small voice of history" that survives in rumour, myth, and lamentation – the minor modes through which the oppressed narrate their worlds.¹⁷ Such forms of memory refuse the linear temporality of modern historiography; they blend the mythical with the historical, the sacred with the political, offering what Guha termed "an insurgent consciousness of time."

For Dalit communities in Bengal, local memory often assumes devotional and genealogical forms. The songs of the Matua sect, for instance, recount the life of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur not merely as saints but as moral legislators of a new social order. Oral genealogies link family histories to the collective struggle for dignity, while religious texts such as Sri Sri Harilila Sudhakar encode a vision of social equality through divine idiom.¹⁸ These performances constitute living archives, continually renewed through ritual recitation and community gatherings. Their authority derives not from state recognition but from shared affect and moral resonance. To treat these as archival sources is to acknowledge that historical knowledge can be embodied, sung, or enacted, rather than inscribed in bureaucratic prose.

Such archives also anchor what Veena Das has described as "local moral worlds."¹⁹ In Das's formulation, everyday life is not the residue of larger political events but the site where ethical and emotional meanings are produced and negotiated. Applying this insight to Dalit historiography in Bengal means attending to how memory and affect intertwine in the narration of the past. A song of migration or humiliation, a ritual lament, or a story of divine justice is not simply a reflection of suffering; it is an ethical commentary on the social order itself. These local moral worlds provide a grammar of historical reasoning distinct from that of the metropolis, they locate truth not in documentation but in shared moral experience.

To take the vernacular archive seriously is to move toward a decolonised historiography. Decolonisation, in this sense, does not imply rejecting written history, but reorienting its epistemic foundations. It demands that historians

recognise oral and affective forms of knowing as legitimate evidence, not picturesque supplements to the “real” archive. As Stoler insists, the task is to read “along the archival grain,” tracing not only what the archive says but what it silences.²⁰ For Bengal, this means reading against the metropolitan record of reform and progress to recover the moral and emotional economies of Dalit experience those fugitive histories inscribed in song, devotion, and rumour.

The vernacular archive thus redefines what it means to write history from the margins. It invites us to see subaltern memory not as a deviation from modern historiography but as a rival form of knowledge, one that transforms the very concept of the historical. By listening to voices long spoken outside the state's script, historians can begin to imagine a Bengal where the boundaries between archive and life, document and devotion, are no longer policed by the hierarchies of caste and modernity.

III. Regional Counter-Histories: Dalit Memory beyond the Metropolis

If Calcutta has long functioned as the symbolic centre of Bengal's intellectual and political life, then Dalit memory belongs to its margins — to the lowland villages, refugee colonies, and devotional congregations that lie beyond the metropolitan horizon. It is here, in the everyday moral and mnemonic practices of subaltern communities, that one encounters the plural and regional modernities of Bengal histories that unfold not in the archive of the state but in the grain of lived experience. The counter-histories of Dalit Bengal are dispersed across districts like Nadia, North 24 Parganas, Medinipur, and Bankura, where caste, migration, and devotion intersect to produce alternative visions of community and justice.

Nadia and North 24 Parganas: Devotion as History

The heartland of the Matua movement, spanning Nadia and North 24 Parganas, constitutes one of the richest vernacular archives of Dalit self-articulation in Bengal. Emerging in the mid-nineteenth century under Harichand Thakur (1812–1878) and his son Guruchand Thakur (1847–1937), the Matua faith reimagined Bhakti not as a purely spiritual pursuit but as a social philosophy grounded in equality, education, and collective dignity. The Matua Dharma Paddhati and the Sri Sri Harilila Sudhakar texts circulated through handwritten copies and later printed in Thakurnagar presses recount the divine descent of Harichand as an incarnation born to redeem the oppressed Namashudras from the degradations of caste.²¹

In oral and performative traditions, the Matua archive continues to expand. Field recordings from Nadia villages capture verses sung by devotees that merge memory with prophecy:

“Harichand bole, sab manusher ek dharma, ek praan,
Jekhane bhagwan nai, sekhane bhed-bhab taan.”

(“Harichand says, all humans share one faith, one soul;

Where God is absent, there thrives the knot of discrimination."²²

Such songs, sung during sadhusabhas and community gatherings, encode the moral critique of caste and modernity more vividly than any formal treatise. They narrate a Dalit modernity rooted not in the rationalism of colonial education but in the affective intelligence of devotion. The Matua Mahasangha's pamphlets such as *Naya Bharat: Guruchand Tatva o Samajik Bikash* (1956) invoked education as both a sacred duty and a political right, illustrating how vernacular religious idioms became instruments of social mobilisation.

For the Namashudra refugees who migrated after Partition, the figure of Harichand acquired new historical meanings. In interviews published in the Bengali newspaper *Jugantar* during the 1950s, Matua leaders portrayed the Thakurs as "the prophets of a new Bengal" who offered dignity to displaced Hindus denied entry into *bhadralok* society.²³ The memory of Partition was thus re-inscribed within an older moral genealogy of humiliation and redemption, producing a regional history of caste and migration inseparable from faith.

Medinipur and Bankura: Songs of Suffering and Resistance

Further west, in Medinipur and Bankura, Dalit historical consciousness found expression through oral literatures and protest songs that blend lament with defiance. While the metropolitan intellectuals celebrated the peasant as a revolutionary subject of class, rural Dalit bards recorded their own experiences of labour and exclusion in the idiom of folk verse. Local collections such as *Bhumij Gan o Namashudra Gitika* (compiled 1978, Medinipur District Archive) contain songs describing agricultural bondage and the humiliation of leather workers, washermen, and sharecroppers under upper-caste landlords.

One widely sung verse recalls:

"Amra mati khai, mati pore thaki,

Babu bole, tor naam nei dhaki."

("We eat the dust, we lie upon it;

The landlord says, Your name must not be spoken."²⁴

Such verses do not merely recount suffering, they transform humiliation into testimony. As Shahid Amin has shown in another context, the moral charge of such songs lies not in their factual precision but in their claim to truth through affective intensity.²⁵ These rural literatures constitute an archive of the unrecorded, an emotional historiography where the memory of caste is inseparable from the labouring body and the land it tills.

The post-independence Left, with its emphasis on class unity, often absorbed these voices into the rhetoric of peasant struggle, stripping them of their casteed specificity. Yet, as contemporary Dalit poets from West Medinipur like Sudhir Das and Bhuban Ruidas have noted in local magazines such as *Paschim Banga Dalit Sahitya* (1987-1992), "the village does not remember class, it remembers insult."²⁶ Their writings reclaim the emotional economy of caste as a legitimate site of historical knowing.

Barasat and Bongaon: Caste, Refuge, and the Memory of Displacement

The border districts of Barasat and Bongaon offer another layer to Bengal's Dalit historiography: the convergence of caste and refugeehood. After Partition, thousands of Namashudra families from East Bengal settled in these regions, forming dense networks of refugee colonies like Chandpara, Gobardanga, and Habra. While metropolitan accounts of Partition focused on the urban "refugee crisis" in Calcutta, these colonies evolved their own moral and mnemonic geographies.

Local newsletters such as *Udbastu Barta* (1952–1958) published testimonies of migrants who linked their displacement to a longer history of caste-based marginalisation:

"We left East Bengal not only because of Pakistan, but because we were never allowed to be Bengali."²⁷

These communities established schools and cooperative societies named after Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, weaving the memory of the Matua faith into the everyday labour of resettlement. Oral accounts from Bongaon's Dakshinpara colony recall how devotional gatherings doubled as planning meetings for land occupation and school-building. The boundary between religion and politics, memory and action, was thus blurred in ways the metropolitan lens could not recognise.

The vernacular newspaper *Matua Darpan* (published from Thakurnagar since 1961) chronicled these efforts, portraying the refugee as both a pilgrim and a political subject. In one editorial from 1965, it declared: "The Matua does not beg for home; he builds it anew on sacred soil."²⁸ Here, displacement becomes a theological act of reclamation, a counter-history of Partition where caste identity and regional belonging intersect.

From the Margins to the Map: Regional Modernities

These regional archives of devotion, labour, and displacement together articulate a bottom-up view of modernity. They challenge the metropolitan presumption that Bengal's social progress radiated outward from Calcutta's institutions and intelligentsia. Instead, they reveal how modernity was locally reimagined in idioms of equality and collective dignity that emerged from within Dalit moral worlds. The histories of Nadia's Matua congregations, Medinipur's protest singers, and Bongaon's refugee colonies together compose what might be called a cartography of the subaltern past, a geography where memory itself becomes a mode of political claim-making.

To write these histories is not to romanticise marginality but to acknowledge the plurality of historical reasons. The regional Dalit archive insists that modern Bengal was never a single narrative of progress but a field of contested moral geographies. The metropolis wrote in the language of reform; the margins replied in the idiom of devotion and dignity.

IV. Caste, Region, and the Moral Imagination

To remember, for Bengal's Dalit communities, is not a passive act of nostalgia but a deliberate gesture of survival and critique. Memory is political not only because it recalls what has been silenced, but because it transforms the conditions of being heard. Within the regional moral worlds of Nadia, Bongaon, or Medinipur, remembrance operates as both ritual and argument, a way of reclaiming dignity through the narration of suffering, devotion, and endurance. The politics of remembering thus lies in its capacity to transmute pain into moral authority, turning the private work of mourning into a collective grammar of justice.

Rituals of remembrance are central to this moral imagination. The Matua annual festival (Baruni Mela) at Thakurnagar, which commemorates the birth of Harichand Thakur, is simultaneously a religious pilgrimage, a social congress, and a political gathering. Devotees sing verses from the Harilila Sudhakar and Matua Dharma Paddhati, invoking Harichand as Avatār Purush who revealed equality as divine law. In the midst of devotional fervour, leaders often deliver speeches on education, land rights, and political representation. As one Matua leader declared at the 1975 festival, "Harichand's words are our constitution; his memory is our vote."²⁹ Here, remembrance functions as an alternative mode of political speech, neither secular nor sectarian, but grounded in the ethical sovereignty of the oppressed.

In such practices, memory becomes both the form and content of critique. As Anupama Rao argues in *The Caste Question*, Dalit remembrance often performs an "ethical reoccupation of history," whereby communities reclaim the right to interpret their own suffering.³⁰ The act of narrating humiliation, whether through autobiography, oral history, or song, reconfigures the Dalit subject from an object of pity into a moral witness. In Bengal, this transformation is palpable in the oral genealogies recited during Matua congregations or in the songs of Namashudra poets who recount not only divine revelation but also the struggles of migration and labour.

One such song, collected in Barasat in 1988, begins:

"Ghar hārāiyeo, Harichandke dhori,
Jekhane thaki, sei bhumi amari."

("Though we have lost our home, we hold on to Harichand;
Wherever we dwell, that land becomes ours."³¹)

The lyric fuses displacement with devotion, making memory a claim to belonging. As Shailaja Paik notes in *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India*, such forms of self-articulation are not only pedagogical but affective, they teach communities to feel differently about themselves, to inhabit dignity through remembrance.³² In the absence of institutional recognition, memory becomes pedagogy, a means of cultivating political subjectivity through shared feeling.

The political function of remembrance also emerges in commemorative practices that sacralise ordinary spaces. Across North 24 Parganas, Matua

congregations have established shrines at the sites of refugee settlement, inscribing local landscapes with sacred memory. Annual smriti sabhas (memorial gatherings) honour deceased leaders and martyrs of caste struggles, transforming mourning into an act of continuity. These practices, as Sanal Mohan has shown in his study of Dalit Christianity in Kerala, enable the "affective consolidation of community", the binding of dispersed lives through shared histories of suffering and hope.³³ For Dalits in Bengal, to remember is to survive together; remembrance is the condition of community.

This moral imagination of memory operates beyond the frame of metropolitan politics. Where Calcutta's intellectuals theorised modernity through reason and progress, Dalit communities articulated it through bhakti and ethical relationality. Their songs and rituals speak a language of emotion that is neither pre-modern nor apolitical; rather, it is a critique of the moral poverty of elite modernity. Rao reminds us that "Dalit ethics is not about redemption through suffering but about the refusal to suffer in silence."³⁴ The collective act of remembering, then, reclaims emotion as a mode of political reasoning.

Remembrance in these contexts is inseparable from the regionalisation of ethics. The moral world of the Matua movement shaped by devotional egalitarianism and the shared memory of displacement has translated into political mobilisation across North and South Bengal. When Matua leaders in Bongaon invoke Harichand's dictum, "Ek praan, ek dharma, ek desh," ("One soul, one faith, one nation"), they are not merely repeating theology but reframing the meaning of citizenship.³⁵ The moral imagination of equality forged in religious practice thus enters the sphere of electoral politics, transforming local piety into regional consciousness.

In the broader historiographical sense, the politics of remembering reconfigures the very notion of what counts as political action. Songs, rituals, and collective commemorations often dismissed as cultural residue, emerge as primary sites of historical agency. Through them, Dalit communities in Bengal assert their presence in a public sphere that has long denied their history. Their memory is insurgent not because it rebels against the state, but because it reclaims the authority to define the moral meaning of history itself.

To write such histories, therefore, demands attentiveness to affect as archive to the ways in which pain, faith, and remembrance intertwine to sustain collective life. Dalit memory in Bengal reveals a politics rooted in the ethical, a history animated not only by resistance but by care: for the dead, for the displaced, for those yet to arrive. In remembering, the community not only preserves its past but imagines the conditions of a just future.

Conclusion

Moving beyond the metropolis reveals a different map of historical consciousness, one drawn not by institutions or elites, but by communities whose memory and faith sustain alternative archives of belonging. Bengal's

Dalit pasts, when traced through songs, shrines, oral genealogies, and refugee narratives, disclose a living archive that unsettles both colonial epistemologies and nationalist historiography. These sources do not supplement the official record; they constitute a distinct mode of historical knowing one where affect, morality, and collective memory converge as instruments of critique and survival.

To write Dalit history from the region is to reimagine what counts as history itself. The vernacular archive, whether in the Matua hymns of devotion or the laments of rural poets from Medinipur embodies a historiographical practice that is participatory rather than extractive. It remembers through performance, not preservation; through repetition, not closure. In this sense, the regional archive stands not outside modernity but as its moral corrective. It reclaims historical agency for those rendered mute in both colonial anthropology and metropolitan liberalism, insisting that the moral imagination of the oppressed can also be an epistemic foundation.

Such an approach transforms the very grammar of South Asian historiography. If nationalist history universalised the elite experience and Subaltern Studies privileged the insurgent peasant, the regional Dalit archive restores the continuity of everyday endurance the slow, affective work of making life livable under caste domination. The “local moral worlds” that emerge from these histories, as Veena Das reminds us, are not fragments but ethical wholes: they embody the capacity to remember without bitterness and to resist without forgetting.³⁶ In this light, memory itself becomes a method, an ongoing negotiation between pain and dignity, silence and testimony.

A decolonised historiography of caste and region must therefore learn from these practices of remembrance. It must read history not only in documents but in devotion, not only in archives but in affect. To take Dalit memory seriously is to affirm that the past endures in song and story, in the moral labour of those who refuse erasure. Against the monumental histories of the metropolis, these vernacular archives whisper a quieter truth, that history's heart still beats in the margins, where remembering is itself a form of resistance.

Notes and References (Endnotes)

1. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton University Press, 1993, pp.12-15.
2. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890-1940*, Princeton University Press, 1989, pp.3-5.
3. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*, Routledge, 1997, pp.1-4.
4. Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton University Press, 2009, p.25.
5. Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp.144-47; see also field accounts in Sanal Mohan, “Religion,

- Social Space and Identity: The Dalit Christian Movement in Kerala, 1850–2000,” *Studies in History* 21, no. 2, 2005, pp.189–212.
6. “Editorial,” *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, January 1844, 3–4; “On the Question of Untouchability,” *Somprakash*, June 1860.
 7. Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, Zed Books, 1986, pp.43–48.
 8. “Depressed Classes Demand Separate Representation,” *The Statesman*, July 12, 1932; “Caste Politics in Bengal,” *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, August 5, 1935.
 9. “Harijan Welfare in Bengal,” *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, February 17, 1941.
 10. Chakraborty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*, 1989, pp.12–18.
 11. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 1997, pp.102–107.
 12. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 2009, pp.20–23.
 13. Gyanendra Pandey, *A History of Prejudice: Race, Caste, and Difference in India and the United States*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp.10–12.
 14. Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922–1992*, University of California Press, 1995, pp.6–9.
 15. Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” *Representations* 26, 1989, pp.7–25.
 16. Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp.36–42.
 17. Ranjit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, 1983, pp.13–16.
 18. Sri Sri Harilila Sudhakar, *Matua Mahasangha, Thakurnagar, 1958*; field recordings of Matua devotional songs, Nadia District Archives, collected 1989–1991.
 19. Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, University of California Press, 2007, pp.8–11.
 20. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, p.25.
 21. Sri Sri Harilila Sudhakar (*Matua Mahasangha, Thakurnagar, 1958*).
 22. Field recording, “*Matua Padavali*,” Haroa village, Nadia, collected by Gopal Mondal, 1989, Nadia District Archive.
 23. Jugantar, “*Matua Dharma and the Refugee Question*,” 17 April 1954, p.4.
 24. Bhumi Gan o Namashudra Gitika, *Medinipur District Archive*, 1978, p.32.
 25. Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922–1992*, University of California Press, 1995, p.13.
 26. *Paschim Banga Dalit Sahitya*, ed. Sudhir Das, vol. 2 (Medinipur: 1990), p.6.
 27. Udbastu Barta, “*Our Story*,” vol. 1, no. 3, 1953, p.2.
 28. *Matua Darpan*, “*The Sacred Soil of Refuge*,” 12 July 1965, p. 1.
 29. “*Matua Utsav: Dharma O Rajniti*,” *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 19 March 1975, p.6.
 30. Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, University of California Press, 2009, pp.12–15.
 31. Field recording, “*Ghar Hārāiyeo Harichandke Dhori*,” Barasat, 1988, courtesy of

- Banga Dalit Sanskriti Sangrahalaya.
32. Shailaja Paik, *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination*, Routledge, 2014, pp.22-25.
 33. Sanal Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles Against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala*, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp.208-210.
 34. Rao, *The Caste Question*, p.26.
 35. Matua Darpan, "Ek Pran, Ek Dharma," 2 February 1969, p.1.
 36. Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, University of California Press, 2007, pp.15-18.