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To histories scribbled in the margins, blurred and crossed out.

To be human is to love, to create, and to resist.

—Mahmoud Darwish

The Editorial Board, 2025 - 2026

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Note from the Editors-in-Chief

Dear Reader,

This volume of *Ijtihad*, the annual academic journal of the Department of History at Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi, brings together nine research papers by undergraduate students. As in previous years, the journal remains unthemed, allowing for a range of work that reflects the varied interests and approaches of its contributors. The essays in this volume move across questions of colonial discipline and resistance, literary constructions of identity, and the destruction and recovery of sites of knowledge, among others, engaging with diverse archives and methods of historical inquiry.

Several essays attend to the tension between state narratives and lived experience, while others consider questions of identity and belonging as they take shape across shifting historical contexts. Taken together, they invite a consideration of how histories are constructed, contested, and, at times, silenced.

These papers have been written and edited by undergraduate students, shaped through multiple stages of drafting and revision. We remain aware that this work is situated at an early stage of academic reading and writing. This, along with the constraints of word limits and the demands of rigorous citation, may be kept in view while reading the journal. While the work reflects care and commitment, it remains part of the process of learning that defines undergraduate scholarship.

This year, *Ijtihad* has benefited from the guidance of its new Staff Advisors, Dr Shatarupa Bhattacharya and Ms Priyanka Sharma, whose support and counsel have been of considerable value. We are also grateful to our Teacher-in-Charge, Professor Pankaj Kumar Jha, for his continued support and steady presence throughout the process. Their guidance has been central to the completion of this volume.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the peer reviewers for their time and careful engagement and to the members of the Editorial Board for their assistance over the year. We also extend our appreciation to the staff of the college library for facilitating access to archival materials essential to this project. The time spent in the archives offered not only research support but also an encounter with the layered institutional memory of the college, where materials and spaces alike silently register the passage of scholarly and collegiate life.

Working on *Ijtihad* has been, for us, a way of learning that does not always show on the page – through corridor conversations, moments of uncertainty, indecisions and revisions – and has shaped how we read, how we write and how we think alongside others. If the journal carries a

certain sense of earnestness, it is perhaps because it reflects not only scholarly ambition but also the process of learning how to think historically. We hope that it continues to remain such a space for those who follow. We offer this volume to our readers with that hope.

We would be glad to hear from readers who wish to respond; details for correspondence are included at the end of the journal.

With gratitude,

Amna Haleem and Wardat Masoodi

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Annual Report, 2025–26

During the academic year 2025–26, the editorial board of Ijtihad began its activities with a reading circle titled "Remnants of Home: Poetry, Memory, and Belonging". The Editors-in-Chief, Amna Haleem and Wardat Masoodi, moderated the reading circle. Four poems formed the basis of discussion: Mahmoud Darwish's *The Passport*, Amrita Pritam's *Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu*, Pavel Friedman's *The Butterfly*, and *Agha Shahid Ali's Dhaka Gauzes*. The selection spanned Palestine, Partition and the Holocaust. Though the poems represented different histories, the conversation kept returning to a shared preoccupation with loss, displacement, and how the idea of home persists even when it survives only as memory or absence. Poetry, the discussion suggested, is one of the ways such experience finds form.

The following event was an interactive workshop conducted by Prof. Pankaj Kumar Jha titled "The Historian's Craft: How to Start Research in History". This workshop was particularly helpful for students in the early stages of research, as it addressed how to identify meaningful gaps in existing scholarship, how to frame a focused inquiry, and how to read sources with a critical awareness of the contexts and biases that shaped them.

The third event of the tenure was a reading circle on Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Students engaged with his argument about the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere in eighteenth-century Europe and with its eventual decline. The passages that generated the most conversation were those describing the transformation of public life under mass media and consumer capitalism. Habermas's observation that a critically debating public had given way to one that merely consumed culture struck participants as a useful lens for thinking about the present. The circle was moderated by editors Piha Wakhare and Pragati Singh.

Next, a workshop titled "Is Kingship a Male Institution? Confirmation and Contestation through Ancient Indian Textual and Inscriptional Sources", conducted by Prof. Smita Sehgal and Dr Shatarupa Bhattacharya, was organised. The session focused on how ideas of political authority in early India have often been understood in gendered terms. The speakers pointed to instances where female authority appears, though not always in obvious ways. At the same time, it became clear that these examples are often difficult to interpret, since the sources themselves tend to privilege dominant narratives. This raised a broader question about how historians deal with absence in the archive.

As a pre-event to Maazi-o-Mustaqbil, Ijtihad held a reading circle on Chapter Four of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, titled "On National Culture", moderated by the Baibhabi

Hazra and Promita Sutradhar, the Deputy Editors-in-Chief. Fanon's arguments prompted a particularly engaged discussion. The idea of a "native intellectual" was discussed in depth. At the same time, Fanon's insistence that national culture must emerge from present struggles, rather than a reconstructed past, led to reflections on the relationship between culture, politics, and lived experience.

The annual inter-college Maazi-o-Mustaqbil Paper Presentation Competition was held on 13 November 2025, with the theme "Histories of Destruction and Reimaginings". The range of papers presented reflected different approaches to the theme, both in terms of subject matter and method. The judges for the event were Dr Gitanjali Surendran of Jindal Global Law School and Dr Shashi Bhushan Gupta of the Department of History, LSR. The first prize was awarded to Rajkumar and Puja Jana (Department of English, Ramjas College) for 'Songs That Outlive Chains: Folk Songs, Orality, and Counter-Histories in African and Diasporic Traditions'. The second prize was shared by Kashyap Govind (Department of History, Hindu College) and Archit Mukherjee (Department of History, Hindu College) for 'Demon Worship, Animal Sacrifices, and Self-Mortification: Historical Erasure of Esoteric Rituals Practised by Ezhava Community of Kerala' and 'Memory, Trauma, and Reimagination: The Maratha Bargi Raids in 18th Century Bengal's Cultural Landscape', respectively, while the third prize went to Tamoghna Chowdhury and Indrani Neogie (Department of Economics and Department of Sociology, Hindu College, respectively) for 'After the Fire: The Afterlife of Knowledge and the Reimagination of Memory in the Jaffna Library Burning'.

A methodology workshop on "Reading Primary Sources from Medieval India" was conducted by Dr Amita Paliwal. The session introduced students to different types of primary material, including chronicles and inscriptions, but also focused on the difficulties involved in working with them. Issues of translation and context were discussed. Dr Paliwal also emphasised that interpretation requires a degree of caution, especially when dealing with sources that are removed from us both linguistically and historically.

The final event of the tenure was a guest lecture by Dr Tarana Hussain Khan on the "Historical Arc of Rampur's Culinary Tradition". The lecture traced the development of Rampur's food culture in relation to its historical setting, particularly courtly patronage and changing political conditions. What stood out was the way the lecture treated food as a serious subject of historical study, rather than something secondary or anecdotal. It offered a slightly different entry point into thinking about history, one that focuses on everyday practices.

The events conducted by *Ijtihad* moved between poetry and theory, methodology and material culture, classroom practice and broader intellectual debate. All the sessions were well-attended, with lively discussions and participation from students across years and departments. The events

collectively affirmed the journal's role as a forum for critical engagement with history in its many forms.

by Twisha Prasad

Perforations in the Panopticon: Tracing the order of Panopticon in the Cellular Jail and its Associated Fissures

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Abstract

The Cellular Jail in Port Blair, commonly referred to as Kala Pani, is the site of our investigation to trace Michel Foucault's concept of the panopticon, as outlined in his seminal work, *Discipline and Punish.* The research shall attempt to understand the manner in which the jail sought to establish a regime of disciplinary power premised on visibility, isolation, and control. Interrogating the experiential reality of surveillance and restraints of panoptic discipline as encountered by inmates, meanwhile highlighting instances of resistance and moments where the system's reach fell short, grounded in primary prison memoirs by Bejoy Kumar Sinha and Barindra Kumar Ghosh. Scholars such as Martha Kaplan and Sajal Nag provide us with the secondary frameworks that help us cast light upon the colonial imposition and local negotiations of carceral power. Foregrounding the resolute agency of the prisoners, the analysis divulges that, while the jail concretised the logic of panopticism architecturally and procedurally, it also manifested the culpability and contradictions that undermined "foolproof" surveillance. This study adds to the broader discussions on colonial power, incarceration, and the contested production of discipline, accentuating the complexities embedded in sites of surveillance.

Keywords: *Kala Pani*, Panopticon, Discipline, Punishment, Surveillance, Memoirs, Resistance

Introduction

Representing a dark chapter in the history of Colonial India's penal system is the Cellular Jail in the Andaman Islands, often known as Kala Pani. It was constructed specifically to confine revolutionaries, political dissidents, and all those deemed a threat to British imperial rule. Designed as an instrument of total control, it blends severe isolation with constant surveillance. Its architecture encapsulates a central watchtower from where guards supposedly could observe each prisoner locked in the solitary confinement of the radial wing, emerging as an astute example of Foucauldian panopticon– a symbol of modern disciplinary power.

Through continuous observation and normalisation, there's a reconstruction of the genealogy of disciplinary mechanisms that transform bodies into docile subjects, as outlined in Michel Foucault's Discipline and Punish. Designed as a prison by 18th-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham, the panopticon for Foucault became a discursive metaphor of pervasive surveillance and a medium of power that internalises discipline by reducing its subjects' perpetual visibility, even when unseen at any moment. By placing the Cellular Jail within this conceptual framework, we examine how strategically colonial authorities have sought to impose discipline through architectural surveillance and regimented routines.

The voices of prisoners still reverberated against the all-seeing image of the British authority, revealed primarily in the memoirs of *Bejoy Kumar Sinha's In Andamans, the Indian Bastille, and Barindra Kumar Ghosh's The Tale of My Exile.* These firsthand narratives lay bare the gaps, inhibitions, breaches, and resistances that complicate an uncritical Foucauldian reading. Articulating the lived experience within Kala Pani, to show how solidarity and communication persisted despite the design of the prison, and how surveillance was as vulnerable as it was forceful.

Building on the anthropological and historical perspectives of Martha Kaplan and Sajal Nag, this paper contextualises the jail's disciplinary project within broader colonial strategies and indigenous responses. Together, these sources help open into a nuanced exploration of Kala Pani as not just a panoptic site but also as an ambivalent space marked by ruptures in power.

This inquiry is important for both colonial Indian history and, more so, for contemporary debates about surveillance, punishment, and resistance within carceral and authoritarian set-ups across the world.

Attempting a historical-interpretive approach, primarily drawing on memoirs by political prisoners jailed in the Cellular Jail: Bejoy Kumar Sinha's "*In Andamans, the Indian Bastille*" (1939) and Barindra Kumar Ghosh's "*The Tale of My Exile*" (1922). This provides invaluable firsthand documentation of the lived experiences of colonial incarceration, including descriptions of daily routines, architectural features, surveillance regimes, punishment, and resistance. Their narratives have been analysed thematically to understand and identify patterns of discipline and agency. Our multi-source approach, using secondary works by Michel Foucault, Martha Kaplan and Sajal Nag, allows for a critical triangulation between architectural/intellectual history, biographical testimony, and theoretical critique, enabling a nuanced understanding of both intent and practice in colonial prison discipline. The shortcomings and challenges of panoptic power, as revealed in practice by prisoner resistance and institutional failure, are central to this analysis.

Bejoy Kumar Sinha's *In Andamans, the Indian Bastille,* and Barindra Kumar Ghosh's *The Tale of My Exile,* first-hand narratives of being former prisoners, establish the day-to-day realities through the narration of their testimonial insights, which are often neglected by the official reports of the regime. The revelation of the brutalities of their treatment, shadowing of their medical needs, and the torture inflicted on their psychologies, simultaneously portray the vibrancy of the various myriad of resistances that are presented through the mutual camaraderie, and the strategic evasion of practised surveillance. The critique and fissures hence become visible through these works, giving rise to the dichotomies that emanate between the practised and the theoretical panopticon and the jail's designing, including its 'messy' mode of operation on ground-zero.

The majority of the historical accounts of the panopticism in the Cellular Jail of present-day Port Blair serve as incidents that equalise the jail as a talisman of the nationalist narrative and slightly ignore the knowledge of the operationalisation of the jail as a microcosm of surveillance and discipline in the colonial conjunction. So while the Foucauldian theory at length analyses the prison architecture and disciplinary mechanisms, the specified and niche application of the concept of panopticism largely remains underdeveloped when it comes to the aforementioned Cellular Jail of the Andamans.

The interdisciplinary approach of weaving anthropology, history, and the Benthamite and Foucauldian philosophies aims to bring to the revelation of the masses, the uncharted territories of tensions between a well-designed and fabricated surveillance and the actual practice, highlighting

the role of prisoners' agencies and their followed communication strategies that contribute to the institutions' failures or complicity.

The paper thus attempts to address these gaps and fill the voids by providing a mosaic-ed tapestry of critical readings of the placation of the Cellular Jail as a panoptic site that is critically attentive to the incarcerated voices, highlighting how 'discipline' was a means of recursive negotiation within the carceral-ity imposed by the colonialist regime.

Hence, this research work attempts to establish itself as a discourse that adds vocality to the narratives of the exile that the inmates were subjected to and still have perseverance and expose the fissures in the panopticon system believed to be impermeable by its creators.

The primary facets of this investigation are formulated by:

- The critical assessment of the extent as well as the limits of the discipline and surveillance that are traced by the enriched accounts of prisoners' experiences.
- The analysis of the architecture and routines of the Cellular Jail as a manifestation of Foucault's Panopticon, the spatial organisation as a reflection of the aforementioned.
- Contextualise the carceral disciplinary regime of the Kala Pani historically and anthropologically through the means of scholarship by Martha Kaplan and Sajal Nag.
- Aim to contribute to the wider discourse about the discussions surrounding the probability and the fallibility of the panopticon control vested in the carceral institutions of the colonial regime.

What Is A Panopticon?

Bentham's Panopticon is the architectural figure. The principle on which it was based: at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker, or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in

which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial units that make it possible to see constantly and to immediately. In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which is ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap. Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.[1]

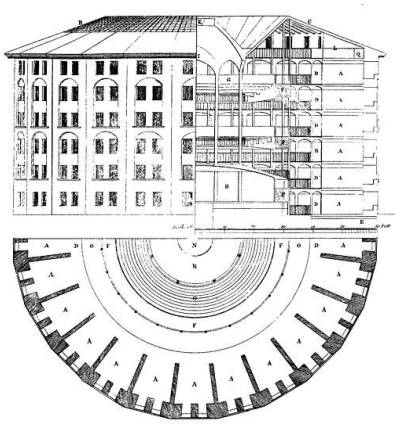

Fig. 1. *This plan of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon prison was drawn by Willey Reveley in 1791*

The Panoptic Archetypal and Cellular Jail Motif

> Picture the Jail as a sort of map in the centre of which there is a point. This point represents a three-storied pillar or minaret. It is the Central Tower or Goomti. The circum-ference of a circle drawn round this centre represents the outer wall of the Jail. From the Central Tower seven straight lines or radii are drawn in different directions to join the circum-ference. These seven radii represent the seven blocks of the prison. Like the Central

[1] Michel Foucault,. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 2nd Vintage Books ed. Translated by Alan Sheridan. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). 200-201.

> Tower, the blocks also have all three stories. In each story there is a suite of some twenty or thirty rooms.[2]

Panopticon, a prison model devised by Jeremy Bentham's brother Samuel Bentham and critically examined by Michel Foucault, was utilised to create the Cellular Jail in Port Blair, completed in the early 20th century. The British colonial administration aimed to install an omnipresent model of surveillance and isolation to discipline the political prisoners and revolutionaries strictly.

The layout of the prison consists of seven radial wings extending from a central watchtower. This star-shaped design allowed for the guards to be positioned in the central tower and observe the numerous "caged individuals" in solitary confinement, spreading across the wings without themselves being seen, thereby instilling in the prisoners an enduring awareness of possible surveillance, even if it was not a continuous exercise. Nearly seven hundred solitary cells, small and dark, were housed within the jail. They were designed to completely isolate the inmates and prevent

Wooden scale model in the Cellular Jail Museum, showing the design of the jail where the Panopticon method was used

Fig. 2. *Wooden scale model in the Cellular Jail Museum, showing the design of the jail where the Panopticon method was used. Photo: Konstantinos Kalaitzis*

them from contacting or communicating either among themselves or with the outside. This exercise was consistent with the Separate System doctrine instituted and advocated by the penal

[2] Barindra Kumar Ghosh, *The Tale of My Exile: Twelve Years in the Andamans* (Pondicherry: Arya Office, 1922). 45-46.

science of that time. Each cell features a secure iron gate with bolts made inaccessible from the inside, which ensured prisoners' dependence on warders for even the most basic needs.

The architecture of the panopticon was further complemented by the firm daily routines of punctual roll calls, forced labour such as oil and coir pounding, and regulated mealtimes, all of which were essentially aimed at producing disciplined and docile bodies. The consciousness of "perpetual visibility" fosters a psychological control, encouraging the prisoners to be self-regulating in anticipation of the ever-watchful colonial gaze.

Foucault states that, as one moves toward the creation of a 'modern' power, there is a need to shift the object and change the scale. Define new tactics in order to reach a target that is now more subtle but also more widely spread in the social body. Find new techniques for adjusting punishment to it, and lay down new principles for regularising, refining, and universalising the art of punishing. Homogenise its application. Reduce its economic and political cost by increasing its effectiveness and multiplying its circuits. In short, constitute a new economy and a new technology of the power to punish; therefore, these eventually become the new essential *raisons d'etre* of the incoming new penal reforms as was witnessed in the eighteenth century.[3]

However, the memoirs of Bejoy Kumar Sinha and Barindra Kumar Ghosh provide instances of when this ideal "colonial gaze" did falter, highlighting the practical reality of discipline within the Kala Pani. Conditions such as overcrowding in certain periods, staff shortages, and prisoners' resourcefulness enabled them to form resistances and fissures in surveillance. Hence, these memoirs complicate a simplistic reading of panopticism by emphasising lived experience, suffering, and the resilience of prisoner agency.

Trials of Surveillance and Discipline

Not just a spectacle of surveillance, the Cellular Jail also acted as a lived space of rigorous discipline, deprivation, and psychological torment. Prisoners incarcerated in Kala Pani suffered from finely detailed routines designed to enforce compliance and suppress any collective resistance.

In the memoirs of Bejoy Kumar Sinha, vivid accounts of the oppressive daily life by means of incessant roll-calls, forced labour, and solitary confinement are found. He writes of mornings

[3] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* 89.

beginning with the clank of cell doors and rounds made by the guards, where the prisoners were counted and inspected, their activities regulated to exterminate any possibility of either rebellion or disorder. To this was added the brutal work regime, wherein inmates were compelled to grind copious amounts of oil or pound the coir fibre. The aim was to exhaust even the strongest and test their mental fortitude. Enduring such labour required immense strength, and many prisoners' bodies bore the bruises and exhaustion inflicted by the punitive routine.

This narrative is further complemented by the prison accounts of Barindra Kumar Ghosh's *The Tale of My Exile.* He highlights, with the help of specific incidents of suffering and tenuous psychological balance, that prisoners struggled to maintain. He notes how, despite the brutal regime, there were moments of solidarity and mutual support shown among the prisoners, as comrades secretly aided each other in completing the labour quotas or navigating the harshness of the jail system. These interactions were a testament to the subversion of the jail's design intended for absolute isolation.

The jail's strict surveillance operated simultaneously at many levels—physical visibility, regimented schedules, and castigatory measures that were intended to produce what Foucault termed "docile bodies" who internalise discipline through the constant trap of visibility. Hence, the architecture, routines, and disciplinary methods all manifested the Foucauldian panopticon ideal.

Yet, both memoirs have successfully revealed the crack within this system. Surveillance was imperfect, at times lax, and intermittently undermined by overcrowding, staff rotations, corruption, and prisoner ingenuity. The guards themselves could have been complicit or overburdened, unable to check and monitor absolutely every inmate continuously. This exposed the limits of panoptic power, allowing prisoners to devise covert forms of communication, subtle resistance, and collective action, including hunger strikes and secret meetings.

Inadequate nutrition, medical neglect, and harsh punishments further complicated the experience of discipline. Illnesses often went untreated, and hunger was a routine; punishments extended beyond the confinement of bodily harm and deprivation. Nonetheless, prisoners' memoirs offer a reflection of the remarkable will to survive and resist, challenging connotations that the panoptic model translated seamlessly into total control.

> Now, there is no love lost between the sentry and the warder...in his fearful anxiety to win the favour of the sentry sahib, takes recourse to so many tricks and contrivances and gestures and attitudes.[4]

Fissures and Limitations in Panopticism

The memoir by Ghosh also presents the collective systematic efforts of the prisoners who exhibited the ambition to resist, evade, and disrupt the surveillance practised by the regime. The conduits to portray these ambitions of resistance were seen in the form of hunger strikes, communicating under the garb of clandestine notes as well as the symbolism behind the gestures carried out to show their refusal to wear the garments as imposed on them by the authorities, along with the dismissal of participation in forced labour, as given in the example of Nanigopal.

In the Andamans, Bejoy Kumar Sinha brings to the masses the brutalities of the prison's structuring while also exposing the cracks in the ceramics of its panoptical claim. The guards were often overworked and oppressed by themselves, which resulted in the seldom faltering of their strict isolation otherwise. The challenges posed by the environment and the geography of the Andamans consequently led to the emergence of gaps in the surveillance in addition to the shortage of staff. Covert communications in the form of exchanging signals amongst the inmates also came to the fore, underscoring the efficacy of the structural separation of the cellular design of the jail.

A combination analysis of both narratives shows us the details of the fallibility of the authorities of the jail, such as wardens and officials, who, although they were basically oppressive, often portrayed emotions of sympathy and fell weak to accept bribes and subterfuge. The human factors of the panopticon, thus, involved the element of unpredictability in the model of the panoptic operative system. The occurrences of the physical deterioration as a result of the harsh punishments and the rationing of rations, opened the Pandora's box of the institution's systematics, further exacerbated as seen by the accounts of maladies, starvation and death. And also serves the platter of political space, as prisons have been aptly called the university of politics.[5]

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[4] Ghosh, *The Tale of My Exile: Twelve Years in the Andamans.* 48.

[5] Bejoy Kumar Sinha, *In Andamans, The Indian Bastille*, (Cawnpore: Prafulla C. Mittra), 1939, 13.

This communication, facilitated by the so-called lenient prison staff, led to an interesting strengthening of the bond that soon took political and national colours, forming a matrix of sustenance of their morale and adding to the complication of panopticon control.

The jail gives birth to paradox, which shows it less as a porcelain panopticon functional model and more as a site of tension between the ambitions of the discipline propagated by the colonial regime and the material human realities that moulded its operation. Even Foucault cautions his audience about the panoptic stereotype that positions that real disciplinary power is never in totality but exists as a ground zero for contestation.

Staging of Resistances, Agency and Counter-conduct

Michel Foucault introduces a concept of counter-conduct, or, in other words, a deliberate subversion of disciplinary power. The inmates' experiences, as portrayed in the narratives, accentuate this destabilisation of the panoptic-controlled conditions, surfacing the voids and moments where power was not absolute but resisted, inverted, and redirected.

Bejoy Kumar Sinha's narrative showcases the tenacity of the psyche and emotions that involve the resistance of despair. He states that–

> In our cells, we were locked up day and night for no other offence but being declared by the government as 'dangerous prisoners'[6]

Specific examples as to how the people in jail developed rituals and coded discussions to harden their belief in their morale and strengthen their shared identity despite being kept in isolation. The revolutionary political prisoners were aided by the ordinary prisoners, who carried messages, notes, etc., who were sympathetic towards them and were not hesitant to face the repercussions.[7] A micro-level analysis of defiance against the regime is seen by the collective acts of

[6] Sinha, *In Andamans, The Indian Bastille*. 27.

[7] *Ibid*. 40.

synchronised refusal to cooperate with the wardens, along with the disruption during labour hours.

In the *Tale of My Exile,* Barindra Ghosh serves his readers a granular description of the organised hunger strikes in addition to the mass protests against the inhumane conditions of their existence in the given spaces, all of which accelerated the attempts to negotiate with the authorities. Hence, staging of such actions, often politically intended, disrupted the colonial narrative of docility and also exposed the prison not merely as a site of control and surveillance but also as a bone of contention as a political space. The resistance was not a product of only physical confinement and subjugation but rather served as a contradiction to the imposition of a false disciplinary identity, reasserting the inmates' self-assertion as political agents. The memoirs compare going to the island not as an exile but like starting on a pilgrimage to a field of battle.[8]

Therefore, both *in the Andamans, the Indian Bastille,* and Ghosh's work paint before us vivid testimonies of a myriad of forms of resistance missions within the confines of the prison. Obviously, the overt political protests and the hunger strikes, due to which lives like those of Mabir Singh, Mohan Kisore and Mohit Moitra[9] were claimed, were out in the open for analysis and studies, serving as rubber stamps of inmates' collaborative camaraderie and the denial of complete submission, fuelling their need for freedom; what was happening simultaneously was the manifestation of subtle, everyday acts of counter-conduct. The extremities of these modalities ranged from the underhand exchanges of contraband and information to the polar end of the usage of coded language and signal signs amongst the inmates confined to solitary cells. Moreover, the mutual help exerted during labour tasks produced a maxima-minima effect: individual suffering and solidarity.

Martha Kaplan, in her analysis of the prison carceral systemics, gives comments on it as being reduced to sites of negotiation and not a monolith of unilateral domination. Hence, the Cellular Jail embodies the paradox; it is an architectural structure aimed to cloak its visibility absolutely, and the imposition of discipline was constantly undermined from within by the very

[8] *Ibid*. 32.

[9] *Ibid*. 133.

subjects that it sought to contain. Even the analyses of Sajal Nag's work resonate with the same propositions.

Theorising through the lens of Michel Foucault, Martha Kaplan, and Sajal Nag, the colonial incarceration

In *Discipline and Punishment,* Foucault mentions the deployment of surveillance, normalisation, and internalisation by modern power regimes, enabling them to construct and control subjects who are socially compliant. The Andaman Jail's architectural construct and style thus clearly embody these principles of indexed radicalised control, political repression, and the imperial authority practised by the colonial empire in India. As Foucault states in his work about visibility being trapped in the solitary cells of the jail, so were the separate spaces that were not just singularly meant for discipline but were also evidence of the colonial subjugation that was being carried out to weed out the nationalist resistive sentiments harboured by the inmates. But as aforementioned, the memoirs of inmates, namely, Sinha and Ghosh, highlight the incomplete realisation of the Foucauldian discipline as discussed in his seminal work.

Martha Kaplan, at length, has analysed the concept of the panopticon chosen by the British Raj's architectural styles. Kaplan studies the Poona prisons in depth in her work. She draws attention to the nature of disciplinary regimes in the colonial empire and how these settings were negotiated spaces, where cultural practices, political identities, and social bonds were present, even under extreme surveillance. She focuses on an ethnographic approach by illuminating how structures like Kala Pani cannot be understood singularly as epicentres of domination but must be dealt with as intersections of power and resistance where the enactment and challenge of the disciplinary power take place. Hence, the analysis underscores the complexities of the social dynamics that undermine institutional discipline; in Kaplan's words,

> Spectacle and capillary action, ritual and panopticon, coexist as technologies of power throughout the entire history of the colonial British [10]

[10] Martha Kaplan. "*Panopticon in Poona: An Essay on Foucault and Colonialism.*" Cultural Anthropology 10, no. 1, 1995. pp. 85–98. http://www.jstor.org/stable/656232. 93

He presents how the power of colonised people to articulate their own projects, to challenge colonial discourses, and to make their own histories constrains the projects of colonisers and – sometimes – remakes the panopticon into a constraint on its constructors, by taking the example of Gandhi's Salt march and his contestation of the panopticism with a proliferating moral theatrics that captivated his observers and ended by reflecting them at themselves, in Gandhi's own light.[11]

Northeastern India was also seen as a giant panopticon through Sajal Nag's studies. He complements the perspectives as stated above by historically situating the Prison in Andaman within the autocratic policing practised by the British and warfare on dissent. Nag's argument suggests that the jails set up by the colonial regime were not to be reduced to objective instruments but should be viewed as politically charged terrains where symbolic and actual battles over sovereignty and subjectivity blossomed. The frequent assaults and other forms of oppression play an integral role in providing a skeleton to the shaping of the nationalist solidarities within the jails that confirm the political incarceration in the Andamans.

The Cellular Jail, hence, being a magnanimous evidence of a colonial carceral institution, calls for a critical reflection on the analysis of its modality through the mosaic of lenses that the authors above provide and transplantation of their theories and examples in the Kala Pani context.

Collectively, these frameworks above offer us a fresh breath of nuanced conceptualisation of the Cellular Jail as a panopticon that is essentially not foolproof and functions as a site of sophisticated disciplinary technology and a bone of contention shaped by the prisoners' counter-conducts. So this rich tapestry of multi-woven yarns of analyses and analogies provided help to the contemporary insights to move beyond the traditional Foucauldian models to an extremely intricate and critical evaluation of the limits and lapses in the colonial power exhibition.

Conclusion

The Cellular Jail at Port Blair, or Kala Pani, stands as a compelling example of Foucauldian disciplinary power implemented within a colonial penal framework. Rooted architecturally and

[11] Kaplan. *Panopticon in Poona*. 94.

operationally in the panopticon ideal, the jail sought to produce total surveillance and discipline through its radial design, solitary confinement cells, and strict routines. As described by Sinha and Ghosh. This regime inflicted severe physical and emotional hardships, embodying the colonial state's resolve to suppress nationalist resistance and assert imperial control.

Yet, what was imagined as a foolproof disciplinary apparatus was not immune to the cracks introduced by resource constraint, administrative fallibility, human complicity, and prisoner ingenuity, fracturing the panoptic ideal. These are detailed well in the memoirs of Bejoy Kumar Sinha and Barindra Kumar Ghosh, illustrating the practical limits of such surveillance. The acts of solidarity, covert communication, hunger strikes, and subtle defiance reveal a dynamic interplay of power and resistance that destabilised colonial domination's totalizing ambitions.

The Cellular Jail served as a laboratory of modern disciplinary power, exploiting visibility and isolation to produce docile bodies, as contextualised by Michel Foucault's theoretical framework. Still, this study counters the notion of discipline being always absolute, highlighting the fissures where negotiation, contestation, and sometimes subversion are made possible within daily practices of power relations.

Further, by integrating the anthropological insights of Martha Kaplan and the historical analysis by Sajal Nag, the Cellular Jail is understood not just as an architectural panopticon but also as a site of cultural and political struggle. It functions as a symbol of colonial oppression but simultaneously as a testament to resilience and agency in the face of surveillance and incarceration.

Ultimately, the Kala Pani experience complicates the simplistic readings of colonial prisons as mere instruments of absolute power; it foregrounds the tensions between discipline and embodied resistance that haunt carceral modernity. The legacy of the Cellular Jail of those who endured and defied it.

Hence, the perforation of human grit, resistance, and passion pierced through the fragile porcelain cups of the panoptic cells.

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Through the Coloniser's Eyes: (Re)constructing the Irish 'Other' in William Thackeray's *The Irish Sketch Book*

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Abstract

This aims to study William Makepeace Thackeray's *The Irish Sketch Book* (1843) not as a neutral record of travel but as a text that actively produces imperial knowledge. It argues that the travelogue constructs the Irish subject for a British readership, shaping how Ireland is understood within a colonial framework. Drawing on the postcolonial insights of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Mary Louise Pratt, the paper examines Thackeray's satirical persona, M. A. Titmarsh, as a mediating voice through which colonial ambivalence is managed. Through this narrative strategy, the Irish "Other" is rendered legible yet contained, familiar yet subordinate. The paper develops this argument along three lines. First, it situates the text within the conventions of nineteenth-century imperial travel writing and the demands of the British literary market. Second, it analyses Thackeray's role as an active participant in colonial discourse, showing how his irony and selective sympathy reshape Irish subjectivity. Finally, it considers how the text provides British readers with a moral rationale for imperial rule. These readings are supported by scholarship from Kevin J. James, Glenn Hooper, and others, grounding the analysis in its historical and literary context.

Keywords: Ireland, satire, travelogue, gaze, colonisation, Thackeray, colonial literature.

Introduction

The Act of Union of 1800 did more than consolidate British legislative control over Ireland; it also set in motion a broader cultural effort to justify that control. Governing Ireland required not only administrative authority but also a way of defining the Irish themselves, and nineteenth-century British literature became central to this process. Long-standing anti-Irish sentiment acquired new coherence and visibility through writing that consistently represented Ireland as a space of disorder, poverty, and irrationality. In these representations, Ireland functioned less as a place in its own right than as a contrast through which English civility and stability could be affirmed. Travel writing played a particularly complex role here. While it claimed the authority of observation and experience, it often reproduced inherited assumptions, turning description into a subtle form of symbolic possession.

It is within this tension that William Makepeace Thackeray's *The Irish Sketch Book* (1843) becomes especially revealing. Published under the pseudonym M. A. Titmarsh, the text makes use of Thackeray's characteristic irony in ways that are not straightforward. Irony allows the narrator to appear detached from overtly imperial claims, yet it also enables those claims to persist in less visible forms. The text thus occupies an uneasy space: it gestures towards sympathy and liberal openness while remaining bound to the very hierarchies it seems to question. What emerges is not a simple endorsement of imperial attitudes, but a demonstration of how deeply those attitudes shape even ostensibly critical or humane perspectives.

This paper reads *The Irish Sketch Book* through the theoretical frameworks of Edward Said's Orientalism, Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of ambivalence and mimicry, and Mary Louise Pratt's notion of the contact zone and the imperial gaze. These approaches help to situate Thackeray's work within a larger discursive formation that constructs Ireland as peripheral and dependent. The analysis is also informed by the historical and literary scholarship of Kevin J. James, Glenn Hooper, B. G. MacCarthy, John McAuliffe, and William H. A. Williams, among others.

The discussion proceeds in three parts. The first situates Thackeray's travel writing within its generic and commercial context, tracing its relationship to established conventions of imperial

travel literature and to the expectations of a mid-Victorian readership. The second examines Thackeray's position as an observing subject, focusing on the rhetorical strategies through which Irish figures are shaped and mediated rather than directly represented. The final section turns to the text's ideological work, arguing that *The Irish Sketch Book* ultimately renders Irish difference consumable for its readers, offering an account that mitigates the tensions of empire without confronting them directly.

Contextualising Imperial Travel in Ireland

The period starting from 1800 to 1842, the year the Irish Sketch Book was published, serves as a window into a rather interesting period of Irish history, before the latter half of the century came to be defined by the Great Famine and its aftermath. Both the Act of Union in 1800 and the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829 are seen by scholars as being instrumental developments when tracing Ireland's colonial history.

Set against this backdrop, travel writing becomes not merely a literary pursuit but, as Glenn Hooper argues, a crucial extension of imperial authority. At this juncture, understanding the ideology and circumstances behind travel and travel literature becomes imperative to discern the colonial gaze that this paper aims to understand. Hooper suggests that travel literature has always been shaped by the times, particularly in the nineteenth century, when the arrival of the railway and better roads invited a new wave of travellers to explore.[1] But one also then asks, what exactly, alongside these technological developments, was the reason for so many British travellers making the journey to Ireland and recording their time?

A level of wonder and awe beckoned them, for a land so close to the colonial motherland and geographically proximate to the rest of Europe, Ireland remained utterly alien.[2] The anxiety around this 'epistemological vacuum' made travel by the British an act in the process of state-making.[3] Kevin James makes the important observation that most post-Union British

[1] Glenn Hooper, *The Tourist's Gaze: Travellers to Ireland, 1800-2000* (Cork University Press, 2001), xiv-xv.

[2] *Ibid*., xxii.

[3] Glenn Hooper, *Travel Writing and Ireland, 1760-1860: Culture, History, Politics* (Springer, 2005), 2.

travellers went to Ireland not for leisure but to "investigate", "delineate" and "explore" the condition of the country.[4]

However, as Hooper notes, the British had been travelling to Ireland for quite some time now, and he argues for an evolution in the manner in which the British writer constructs Ireland. The 'Grand Tour', prevalent during the early 1700s, had led to a neglect of Britain herself, and thus the second half of the century saw a renewed interest in Scotland and Ireland, where they were transformed from aesthetically unattractive regions to rediscovered venues of primitive delight.[5] However, the Act of Union created a wave of reinvigoration for the British traveller, and in a manner similar to Scotland in the decades before, writers approached their 'unknown, Sister Isle' intent on burying the notion of political discord at the root of the Union in favour of hopefully harmonious relations, with writers like JC Curwen and John Alexander Staples being the very exemplification of this bewildering fascination.[6] William H.A. Williams offers how the effort of mapping and knowing Ireland worked in tandem with another goal to 'further a sense of unity.'[7]

Lying beneath their optimistic takes was the undertone of the colonial gaze. The detailed recordings of their journeys into Ireland were nothing less than political evaluations and filled with a sense of genuine patriotism, or as Rana Kabbani suggests, 'for their *patria.*'[8] Ireland here presents an interesting kind of 'Orient' — while not geographically in the East, it still created the same anxieties in the minds of the British owing to its cultural alienation. This proximity created a specific anxiety: the British gaze directed at Ireland had to work harder to construct differences where racial and geographical lines were blurred. Edward Said emphasised the role of travel

[4] Kevin J James, *Tourism, Land and Landscape in Ireland: The Commodification of Culture* (Routledge, 2014), 6.

[5] Hooper, *The Tourist's Gaze: Travellers to Ireland, 1800-2000*, xviii.

[6] *Ibid*., xviii-xix.

[7] William H.A. Williams, *Tourism, Landscape, and the Irish Character: British Travel Writers in Pre-Famine Ireland* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), x.

[8] Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient: Devise and Rule*, 1986, 6.

literature itself playing a crucial role in the development of Orientalist discourse, and that such writing 'strengthened the divisions established by Orientalists."[9]

Ultimately, then, this effort of comprehensively mapping and knowing Ireland — its geography, culture, religion, institutions, and people — was an effort towards correcting and civilising this site of instability and degeneration, stabilising the colonial peripheryand, consequently, the homeland.

But it's also important to acknowledge that there was no singular understanding, as noted by John Urry, who suggests that there 'is no single tourist gaze as such.'[10] To understand a traveller and his writing, one must view it within the context of the literature prevalent at the time and who the author is on his own. Hooper points to the works of multiple travellers across the time period to illustrate the differing motivations and intents of their works. For some writers, the aim was to attract British settlers and investors to the country, and such works reflect a more upbeat tone when dealing with Ireland, while others aim to understand the peculiarities of Irish customs and habits, and as such, their work prioritises information extraction in every encounter they have.[11]

Situating Thackeray and the *Sketch Book* in their context

It is within this complex milieu that William Makepeace Thackeray authored *The Irish Sketch Book*. Thackeray was born in Calcutta; he was sent to England for his education, after which he moved to Paris to work as a writer. It is in Paris that he met his future wife Isabella Shawe, the daughter of an Irish general.[12] The idea of the Irish being barbaric, uncivilised natives was a stereotype that had long taken hold, centuries before Thackeray made his forays into the country. Traci Scully argues that the negative "pariah" image of the Irish was an evolutionary process driven by historical animosity, religious divides dating back to the 1100s, and 19th-century crises like the Great Famine,

[9] Edward W. Said, Orientalism (Vintage, 1978), 99.

[10] John Urry, The Tourist Gaze (SAGE Publications Limited, 2002), 1.

[11] Hooper, *Travel Writing and Ireland, 1760-1860: Culture, History, Politics*, 3.

[12] Hooper, *The Tourist's Gaze: Travellers to Ireland, 1800-2000*, 67.

which allowed the English middle class to biologically reclassify the Irish as an inferior "other" to ease their own charitable guilt.[13]

However, understanding *The Irish Sketch Book* requires placing Thackeray within the specific professional, personal, and literary pressures under which he was writing. At this stage, he was known primarily as a journalist rather than a novelist, publishing under pseudonyms such as "Titmarsh".[14] The commercial failure of *The Paris Sketch Book* left him financially insecure, and he explicitly feared another unsuccessful publication — in the *Sketch Book* itself he refers to his earlier books being "remaindered".[15] Thus, as McAuliffe argues, Thackeray's aim was not merely reportage but securing book sales, which incentivised aligning with an English readership whose expectations about Ireland were decidedly hostile.

This professional pragmatism intersected with considerable domestic strain. BG MacCarthy notes that his turbulent relationship with his Irish in-laws, especially his "horrible" mother-in-law, fed his private anxieties about returning to Ireland. Isabella's mental breakdown during an earlier visit to Cork — including a suicide attempt at sea — had already left deep emotional scars. The contractually obligated return to Ireland while also managing her illness only heightened his distress.[16] Grief, anxiety, and financial necessity thus coloured the disposition he brought to his travel writing. One can thus argue that since Ireland was literally the site of his wife's psychological collapse, the country carried a layer of personal dread that filtered everything he saw. While MacCarthy's argument holds some weight, to chalk up all of Thackeray's hostility towards his relationship with his in-laws can lead to a reductionist understanding of the scale and impact of the colonising project being actively taken up by the British state, that it was not only bureaucrats and army who were actively shaping the colony, common men like Thackeray were also part of it.

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[13] Traci Jane Scully, "From Peasant to Pariah: Changing English Perceptions of the Irish from the 1820s Through the 1860s" (PhD diss., West Virginia University, 2011), 51.

[14] John McAuliffe, "Taking the Sting Out of the Traveller's Tale: Thackeray's Irish Sketchbook," *Irish Studies Review* 9, no. 1 (April 1, 2001): 25–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/713674263, 28.

[15] *Ibid*., 26.

[16] B. G. MacCarthy, "Thackeray in Ireland," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 40, no. 157 (1951): 55-68, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30100363, 57.

It is here that McAuliffe urges caution: we must not collapse Thackeray fully into his travelling persona. Narrating through Michelangelo Titmarsh — a Cockney gourmand who foregrounds appetite, irritation, and cluelessness — allows Thackeray to deliberately undermine the authoritative voice typical of travel literature.[17] Titmarsh's frequent self-insertion, including in the illustrations, foregrounds subjectivity rather than colonial "objectivity". McAuliffe argues that this destabilises the Foucauldian "author function", complicating who is entitled to interpret Ireland.[18] Thus, for him, Titmarsh and Thackeray must be treated as distinct.

But one is inclined to disagree with McAuliffe releasing Thackeray of all responsibility. As Said argues, irrespective of the context, the traveller remains a coloniser.[19] In fact, if one is to contend with Thackeray's financial anxieties surrounding the success of the *Sketch Book*, the commissioning of such a publication and Thackeray playing into this role of a Cockney gourmand remain part of the colonial power fuelling the imperial state-making process. By feeding a carefully crafted degenerate image of the 'other' via representations of the Irish in literature, the British coloniser sitting at home also becomes part of establishing the cultural hegemony over the colony.

MacCarthy describes Thackeray's reactions as oscillating between "amused superiority, unease, repugnance, pity, and... frustration."[20] Though a self-described Radical in England — hostile to privilege at home — he was inconsistent in extending that critique to Ireland, reflecting a common liberal blind spot that left the empire unquestioned. MacCarthy offers how in some sense, Thackeray was predisposed to disliking Ireland, and according to himself, despite his Radical background, by the end of his tour, he had been cured of his liberal tendencies, clearly displaying his identity that reigned superior in this work: he was a coloniser.[21]

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[17] McAuliffe, "Taking the Sting Out of the Traveller's Tale: Thackeray's Irish Sketchbook." 23.

[18] *Ibid*., 30-31.

[19] Said, *Orientalism*, 100.

[20] MacCarthy, "Thackeray in Ireland," 56.

[21] *Ibid*., 66.

Given these layers, it is impossible to situate either Thackeray or the *Sketch Book* neatly on one side of a moral verdict. The result is a text that is overtly self-contradictory and uneven in its judgement of the narrator, Ireland, and the Irish themselves. The publication of and the success of *The Irish Sketch Book* were instrumental in cementing Thackeray as a voice in England for matters related to Ireland. Peter Gray notes that the precise success of *The Irish Sketch Book* led him to become the satire magazine *Punch's* Irish expert; the magazine ultimately became a source of some of the most hostile anti-Irish sentiments circulated during the Famine years.[22]

The Representation of the Landscape: the City and the Countryside

Thackeray's engagement with the Irish landscape is, at its core, an imperial diagnostic exercise. It is mediated through two dominant aesthetic paradigms of the period: the picturesque and the sublime. While Mary Louise Pratt's conceptualisation of imperial eyes suggests a 'monarch-of-all-I-survey' sensibility where the traveller rationalises space, Thackeray's gaze is frequently disrupted by the tension between the land as an aesthetic object ("landscape") and the land as a material resource ("land").[23] As James argues, the travel writer often attempts to stabilise this tension, yet "the material reality of the land—its poverty, its agricultural potential, and its political volatility—frequently punctures the aesthetic frame of the landscape."[24] Thackeray exemplifies this struggle, oscillating between an appreciation for the "picturesque" (which he associates with order and Englishness) and a recoil from the "sublime" (which he codes as savage and unruly).[25]

Thackeray's deployment of the picturesque is inextricably linked to his desire for British ideas of proper structures as being the ideal. Early in the text, he utilises the domestic metaphor of a hotel window held open by a hearth-broom rather than a sash cord to diagnose the national

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[22] Peter Gray, "Punch and the Great Famine," *History Ireland* 1, no. 2 (1993): 26-23, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27724066, 29.

[23] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Routledge, 2003), 197-202.

[24] James, *Tourism, Land and Landscape in Ireland: The Commodification of Culture*, 16.

[25] Williams, *Tourism, Landscape, and the Irish Character: British Travel Writers in Pre-Famine Ireland*, 21-22.

character. He contrasts the "careless, dangerous, extravagant hearth-broom system" of Ireland with the English preference for "ropes and ballast", establishing a binary between British prosperity and stability and Irish impoverishment.[26]

This demand for order aligns with Williams's assertion that British travellers viewed the Irish landscape through a "moral geography", where a "tamed" landscape implied a "civilised" people. Williams notes that for the English observer, "the wildness of the landscape" was often taken to be a signifier of "the wildness of the inhabitants", ultimately creating an imperative for the coloniser to improve both the land and the people.[27] Thackeray fulfils this imperative by reserving his highest aesthetic praise for landscapes that exhibit notably English-style cultivation, imposing the hierarchy of coloniser-colonised through his selective praise. Upon viewing the estate at Kildare, which he describes as "like a well-ordered garden" where "every bit of land... was fertilised and full of produce", he conflates aesthetic beauty with moral virtue.[28] Here, the landscape is "picturesque" precisely because it has been disciplined by the best of English agricultural methods.

Thackeray's impulse to judge the Irish landscape by standards of "discipline" and "improvement" is rooted in 18th-century Enlightenment aesthetics. However, when the landscape resists this discipline, Thackeray resorts to aestheticising ruin to maintain his distance. In Cork, he describes a "grand and tall iron gate leading into a very shabby field covered with thistles", using this dissonance to delegitimise the local gentry.[29] This aligns with James's observation that the colonial tourist's gaze often frames poverty and decay as aesthetic objects, thereby neutralising their political implications, which is probably an effect of the process of colonisation his homeland has undertaken.[30] MacCarthy also notes how Thackeray refuses to critically analyse his observations of poverty.[31] Interestingly however, Thackeray has a tendency to pin the problem not on the coloniser,

[26] William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Irish Sketch Book* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1843), 25.

[27] Williams, *Tourism, Landscape, and the Irish Character: British Travel Writers in Pre-Famine Ireland*, 53-54.

[28] Thackeray, *The Irish Sketch Book*, 43.

[29] *Ibid*., 102.

[30] James, *Tourism, Land and Landscape in Ireland: The Commodification of Culture,* 12.

[31] MacCarthy, "Thackeray in Ireland," 62.

but onto the landowning gentry, harkening back to his antagonistic perceptions of the upper class in England owing to his Radical background, once again negating the role of Britain as a coloniser. By treating the ruin as a tableau of upper-class Irish incompetence, Thackeray validates the colonial presence as the necessary agent of restoration, saving himself from cognitive dissonance.

When the Irish landscape refuses to be framed as picturesque or productive, it enters the realm of the sublime — a category Thackeray views with distinct anxiety. Williams points to how in eighteenth and nineteenth-century aesthetic theory, the sublime was associated with awe, terror, and vastness. He further notes that in the Irish context, the sublime was politically charged; the "wild" mountains and bogs were not just aesthetically overwhelming but represented "spaces of resistance" that defied British governance and rationality.[32]

Thackeray's visit to the Giant's Causeway perfectly encapsulates this colonial anxiety toward the sublime. Confronted by the "savage rock-sides" and the "gigantic desolate scene," he confesses that his feelings are "too near akin to fear to be pleasant" and admits, "I don't know that I would desire to change that sensation of awe... for a greater familiarity with this wild, sad, lonely place."[33] Unlike the Romantic traveller who seeks transcendence in the sublime, Thackeray recoils, retreating to the "genteel" safety of the inn. By describing the landscape as a "remnant of chaos" populated by kelp-burners looking "fierce as Cain", he engages in what Williams calls the "othering of the sublime", where the terrifying landscape serves to justify the exclusion of its inhabitants from the modern, civilised world.[34] [35] Using the biblical imagery of Cain also further drives in the absolute horror and degenerate site in front of him.

Finally, Thackeray's gaze frequently strips the landscape of its aesthetic value to appraise the "land" as a commercial asset. In Connemara, he explicitly rejects the static appreciation of scenery in favour of a developmentalist vision. Viewing the wild beauty of Clifden, he notes that

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[32] Williams, *Tourism, Landscape, and the Irish Character: British Travel Writers in Pre-Famine Ireland*, 135.

[33] Thackeray, *The Irish Sketch Book*, 424.

[34] *Ibid*., 425.

[35] Williams, *Tourism, Landscape, and the Irish Character: British Travel Writers in Pre-Famine Ireland*, 142.

"cultivation of the country is only in its infancy," and pivots immediately to the land's potential value once English capital is applied: "Ireland will be poor Ireland no longer."[36]

This transition illustrates James's argument that the imperial traveller often "looks through the landscape to the land", seeing not what is there, but what *could* be there under a more efficient colonial administration.[37] By re-inscribing the "wild" landscape as a dormant commercial asset, Thackeray erases the current inhabitants' usage of the land and legitimises the "civilising mission" of British industry. The landscape is thus never allowed to simply be; it must always be working—either as a picturesque pleasure garden for the tourist or as a productive farm for the empire and its hunger for what the colony ought to be.

Construction and the 'othering' of the Irish native

Thackeray presents the Irish as "Other," but not in a single, uniform way. Instead, this "Otherness" changes depending on class and location. Rural Irish peasants are often depicted through an almost Orientalist lens as backward, primitive, and fundamentally different. In contrast, urban or upwardly mobile Irish figures are not portrayed as exotic but as objects of ridicule, their attempts at refinement mocked and undermined. This pattern becomes clearer when read through Homi K. Bhabha's idea of "fixity" in colonial discourse. Bhabha argues that colonial power depends on representing the colonised as fixed, knowable, and inherently inferior types or a "population of degenerate types". This rigid categorisation helps justify domination. Thackeray employs this discursive strategy to navigate his anxiety over the Irish subject who threatens to slip out of their designated place. By shifting between depicting the Irish as primitive or laughable, he attempts to keep them confined within certain boundaries. This reveals an underlying anxiety: the Irish subject, especially when mobile or aspirational, risks escaping these fixed categories and therefore threatens the stability of the colonial order.[38] Laura Berol supports this, arguing that Thackeray's deepest colonial anxiety is not triggered by the absolute difference of the peasant, but by the "mongrel"

[36] Thackeray, *The Irish Sketch Book*, 273.

[37] James, *Tourism, Land and Landscape in Ireland: The Commodification of Culture,* 47.

[38] Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 125-133, https://doi.org/10.2307/778467, 18.

status of the Anglo-Irish and the aspiring middle class, whose attempt to assimilate threatens the stability of English identity.[39]

Thackeray's depiction of the "Dublin Dandy" serves as the primary locus for this anxiety. Bhabha posits that the colonial stereotype is a "complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive."[40] Thackeray exhibits this anxiety by compulsively fixating on the costumes of the Dublin youth to prove they are, in fact, not English gentlemen. He highlights the dissonance between their "ferocious" military aesthetic and their economic reality, mocking their use of "pawnbrokers' balls" for pins and their "horn quizzing-glasses[41]". MacCarthy critiques this tendency, noting that Thackeray's specific "sneer" is reserved for "shabby gentility", a condition he views not as a tragic economic reality but as a pretension to be punctured.[42]

By classifying these figures as "bucks" or "dandies", Thackeray engages in what Bhabha describes as the vacillation between "what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated."[43] Thackeray must repeatedly narrate the failure of the Irish dandy to ensure the fixity of the boundary between the metropole and the colony.

Berol argues that this rhetorical strategy allows Thackeray to dismiss the assimilated Irish as "failed Englishmen" rather than acknowledging them as equals, thereby containing the "threat of hybridity[44]". One thus contends that ultimately, even though an obedient colonial subject who attempts at assimilation is needed by the colonial homeland to further consolidate imperial authority, part of that process involves the constant othering of even the most ideal subject to reinforce the colonial superiority over the colony.

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[39] Laura M. Berol, "The Anglo-Irish Threat in Thackeray's and Trollope's Writings of the 1840s," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 32, no. 1 (2004): 103-116, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25058654, 114.

[40] Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," 22.

[41] Thackeray, *The Irish Sketch Book*, 328.

[42] MacCarthy, "Thackeray in Ireland," 56.

[43] Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," 18.

[44] Berol, "The Anglo-Irish Threat," 111.

When the Irish subject refuses to mimic or cannot assimilate, Thackeray shifts his representational strategy to what Bhabha explains as a mechanism to produce the colonised as a "social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible[45]". In rural contexts, the Irish are not portrayed as modern subjects but as relics of a pre-civilisational past. This is starkly evident in Thackeray's encounter with the kelp-burner at the Giant's Causeway, whom he describes as "fierce as Cain", inhabiting a landscape that looks like the "remnant of chaos[46]". This harkens back to the construing of rural Ireland as a lost idyll and a keeper of cultural purity, harbouring a beauty raw and untouched by modernity during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but now this 'purity' becomes a site of decay and backwardness, the nature of which ought to be fixed by the English civil order.[47]

Traci Scully notes that nineteenth-century discourse frequently relied on such "simian" or primitive caricatures to rationalise the Irish as inherently incapable of self-governance.[48] By invoking biblical and mythological ancestors (Cain, Saturn), Thackeray pushes the native out of the modern timeframe. McAuliffe suggests that this distancing serves a specific narrative function: it transforms the potentially dangerous "wild" Irish into a safe aesthetic object for the English reader.[49] Through Bhabha's lens, this is the deployment of the stereotype to ensure the "visibility" of the subject as a savage, thereby confirming the coloniser's knowledge/power over them.

Finally, the construction of the Irish "other" functions as a psychological defence mechanism against the visible trauma of colonialism. Throughout the text, Thackeray is besieged by beggars, yet he frequently responds with "distrust and indifference" rather than charity.[50]

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[45] Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," 23.

[46] Thackeray, *The Irish Sketch Book*, 425.

[47] Hooper, *The Tourist's Gaze: Travellers to Ireland, 1800-2000*, xxiv.

[48] Scully, "From Peasant to Pariah: Changing English Perceptions of the Irish from the 1820s Through the 1860s," 179.

[49] McAuliffe, "Taking the Sting Out of the Traveller's Tale: Thackeray's Irish Sketchbook." 24.

[50] Thackeray, *The Irish Sketch Book*, 52.

Bhabha argues that the stereotype acts as a “fetish”, a mechanism of "defence for the ego," preventing the coloniser from confronting the reality of difference and suffering.[51]

John Lester argues that Thackeray employs a “retrospective” narrative voice to create an emotional buffer between himself and the events he witnesses.[52] MacCarthy sharply criticises this detachment as a moral failure and as being indicative of the typical colonial mindset.[53] However, Bhabha provides a theoretical basis for this failure: the coloniser must project “bad objects” onto the colonised to preserve their own self-image.[54] By characterising the beggars as “cynical” performers and “liars”, Thackeray engages in this projection, absolving the British reader of complicity. If the Irish "other" is inherently deceptive, their poverty can be dismissed as a lack of character rather than a result of imperial policy. Thus, the “othering” of the native is not merely a literary trope but a maintenance of the ambivalence required to sustain colonial rule.

Taken together with the very explicit commercial intent behind the *Sketch Book*, this surface-level understanding of the Irish as nothing but a primitive people who need to be guided by the superior British might have eased any rising discomfort back home as to the conditions in the colonial periphery, all while generating profit for the British industry.

Understanding Irish Institutions

In his examination of Irish institutions, Thackeray employs a gaze that functions as a tool of colonial discipline. By assessing schools, churches, and political bodies through the lens of English rationalism, he slots them into a binary of “good” (imperial/productive) and “bad” (native/disordered). This classification system relies heavily on what Said defines as the fundamental distinction between the “rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” West and the

[51] Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man,” 27-30.

[52] John A. Lester, “Thackeray’s Narrative Technique,” *PMLA* 69, no. 3 (1954): 392–409, https://doi.org/10.2307/460066, 396.

[53] MacCarthy, “Thackeray in Ireland,” 63.

[54] Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man,” 32.

"irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different'" Other.[55] Thackeray applies this orientalist framework to Irish Catholicism, stripping it of its European context and recasting it as a savage, alien superstition incompatible with British modernity.

This discursive strategy is most visibly deployed during Thackeray's visit to Croagh Patrick, a site of Catholic pilgrimage. Confronted with the physicality of the pilgrims' penance, Thackeray recoils, describing the scene as a "frightful exhibition" of bleeding knees and shrieking women. Rather than engaging with the theological significance of the ritual, he engages in explicit orientalisation to distance the practice from his "civilised" Christianity — Protestantism. He asserts that if such rites were performed by "*Fakeers*" or involved "*Suttee*," they would be universally condemned, yet here they are sanctioned by the priesthood.[56] One understands, then, the profound extent of 'othering' inherent to the British imperial project in Ireland. Catholicism, already perceived as doctrinally and politically suspect, was repeatedly aligned with the primitive religions of the East. This rhetorical manoeuvre not only distanced the Irish from the Protestant English, but also inserted them into a wider imperial discourse that cast colonised peoples as spiritually and culturally inferior. In doing so, the British strengthened their claim to religious and civilisational authority, presenting domination as a form of necessary governance and reform.

Pratt describes the strategy of "anti-conquest," where the European traveller secures their innocence while asserting hegemony.[57] Thackeray adopts this position of the benevolent, rational observer who is "shocked and ashamed" on behalf of the natives.[58] By framing Irish Catholicism through the tropes of Eastern barbarism ("*Fakeers*"), he validates the British civilising mission. Thus, Catholicism is not merely a theological error; it is positioned as a physical and social danger—an irrational force that requires the rational intervention of Protestant governance to police and sanitise.

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[55] Said, *Orientalism*, 40.

[56] Thackeray, *The Irish Sketch Book*, 308.

[57] Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation,* 7.

[58] Thackeray, *The Irish Sketch Book*, 311.

This binary of rational order versus irrational squalor extends to Thackeray's comparative analysis of educational institutions. His depiction of Maynooth College, the seminary for Catholic priests, is saturated with the language of abjection. He describes the institution as a place of "ruin so needless, filth so disgusting," and "lazy squalor."[59] Crucially, he links this environmental degradation to the moral character of the students, claiming that a stranger can identify a priest by the "scowl on his face, and his doubtful downcast manner."[60] Through this lens, the native institution produces subjects who are structurally dirty in both mind and body, justifying their exclusion from power.

In stark contrast stands the Templemoyle Agricultural School, which Thackeray presents as the ideal colonial institution. It is secular, productive, and strictly disciplined — a site where the "wild" Irish boy is transformed into a useful imperial subject. Thackeray praises the regimented schedule and notes with approval that "no instance of harm had ever occurred," despite the mixing of religious denominations.[61] He envies these students, suggesting that English capital and discipline have successfully redeemed them from the chaos of their native culture.[62] This aligns with Pratt's observation that the imperial eye often seeks to transform the colony into a "productive" space, erasing indigenous social structures in favour of those that serve the metropole's economic interests.[63]

Finally, Thackeray dismisses Irish political aspirations through the framework of theatricality and mimicry. He describes Daniel O'Connell (then the Lord Mayor of Dublin,) the "Liberator," not as a statesman, but as a performer in a "brilliant robe of crimson velvet" and an "enormous cocked-hat," presiding over a "humbug of a Castle."[64] Bhabha argues that colonial

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[59] *Ibid*., 463.

[60] *Ibid*., 464.

[61] Thackeray, *The Irish Sketch Book*, 448.

[62] *Ibid*., 451.

[63] Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation,* 61.

[64] Thackeray, *The Irish Sketch Book*, 464-470.

mimicry produces a subject that is "almost the same, but not quite," resulting in a partial presence that is often the object of ridicule.[65] Thackeray utilises this to delegitimise Irish political agency. By reducing O'Connell's authority to costume drama and farce, he frames Irish self-governance as a "sham" or pantomime. This representation serves a crucial political function: if the Irish are capable only of mimicry and not "serious" governance, then the Union remains the only viable political structure to ensure stability. This reading of Irish institutions thus becomes the ultimate justification for their continued subjugation.

Conclusion

William Thackeray's *The Irish Sketch Book* stands as far more than a humorous recounting of a writer's holiday; it is a complex artefact of imperial state-making that exposes the fragile psychology of the coloniser. As this paper has argued, Thackeray does not merely observe Ireland; he actively constructs it to fit a British epistemological framework, through the voice of Titmarsh and by virtue of being an English writer. By navigating the tension between his persona as the clumsy Titmarsh and his reality as a financially anxious professional, Thackeray reveals the liberal blind spot of the nineteenth-century British intellect — a worldview that championed radicalism at home while conforming to and perhaps also demanding subjugation in the Sister Isle.

Consequently, *The Irish Sketch Book* performs a vital ideological function for the post-Union empire. It transforms the anxieties of the coloniser—fear of the unknown, guilt over poverty, and political instability—into a digestible narrative of moral and cultural necessity. By rendering the Irish "Other" as either comically inept or dangerously primitive, Thackeray commodified his observations to meet the demands of the English marketplace. He provided his readership with the comforting assurance they were eager to purchase: that the Union was not a harsh political imposition, but a moral imperative. In doing so, he helped cement the very prejudices that would define Britain's catastrophic response to the Great Famine just a few years later. This proves that the travelogue is never a neutral space, but a potent weapon in the arsenal of

[65] Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," 86.

the empire; thus, the argument that the text belongs to the tradition of satire cannot absolve Thackeray of the anti-Irish sentiments so carefully construed within it.

Ultimately, while Thackeray operates as a coloniser, it is reductive to label him as one who harbours nothing but deep disdain for the Irish "Other." One must acknowledge the complexity of Thackeray as a person – a journalist marred with a tragic home life, his pain in some sense rooted in Ireland, doing his best to get by while being swept up, willingly or unwillingly, by the imperial project of his homeland. His mixed attitude toward Ireland — sometimes grateful, sometimes hostile — reflects a blend of confusion, guilt, and ignorance that cannot be judged unilaterally. Perhaps the truth of this complexity we must acknowledge is best put forth by Thackeray himself: "I often think that, in one's intercourse with men, what creates sympathies with some & antipathies with others, the party who hates you & he who loves you, are both right."[66]

Seen in this light, *The Irish Sketch Book* reflects an author negotiating between market demand, personal turmoil, and experimental narrative form – a work that simultaneously participates in and parodies the colonial gaze. Rather than embracing an absolutist interpretation – either that Thackeray was a fully committed racist coloniser or that he was merely a victim of circumstance – The *Irish Sketch Book* reveals the tensions, evasions, and compromises of a writer who was both trying to get paid and trying to work out what he believed in.

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[66] Thackeray, qtd. in MacCarthy, "Thackeray in Ireland," 68.

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Institutionalisation through the Wash: Indo-Japanese Artistic Exchange and the Pedagogic Construction of the Bengal School of Art

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Abstract

During the Meiji Restoration, in response to the imperial government's westernising policies, Japanese intellectuals such as Okakura Kakuzo expressed concerns about preserving their '*true Asian cultural identity'*. Simultaneously, India, in its prolonged struggle against British rule, engaged in the Swadeshi movement to safeguard its national identity. The British frequently dismissed Indian art as an imprint of European models rather than recognising it as 'fine art'. Okakura's visit to Calcutta in 1902 provided a platform for a Pan-Asian exchange of cultural ideals among Indian artists seeking an Indian artistic identity distinct from British influence. Subsequently, Japanese painters Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunso visited India in 1903, introducing the *morotai* style. Though criticised in Japan, this style became foundational for Indian artists. In tandem, a breakaway from colonial shackles was initiated by Ernest Binfield Havell, Abanindranath Tagore, and his students Nandalal Bose and Benodebehari Mukherjee, who, through experimentation, subsequently led to the gradual institutionalisation of the Bengal School of Art after centuries of foreign domination. This paper encapsulates the period from 1896 to 1919, when E.B. Havell played a foundational role in moving beyond the colonial curriculum to the establishment of Kala Bhavan by Nandalal Bose in Shantiniketan. Abanindranath Tagore's role is monumental, as it bridged the theoretical and comprehensive execution of moving beyond the British epistemic conditioning that subsequently resulted in the institutionalisation of art.

Keywords: Bengal School of Art, *Morotai* Technique, Kala Bhavana Shantiniketan,

Introduction

The Swadeshi movement, the inception of which dates to 1905, was a binocular focus of the Indian Nationalist movement against the prolonged colonial rule of the British. Perhaps the desire to assert cultural identity through domestic products and institutions was, in fact, a wider divergence from the Bengal Renaissance[1] that had grown upon the nation since the 1880s. Colonial dismissal was not the sole driver but the primary impetus behind this profound sense of identity. The colonisers did not, however, limit their rejection to self-rule for Indians but also their art and culture.

Indian art, or rather, as the colonisers referred to it, craft and static paintings, ought to be 'civilised' by Western practices of oil painting, life drawing, and European cosmopolitanism, becoming an imprint of Western fine art. With the advent of the twentieth century, Japanese thinkers and artists such as Okakura Kakuzo, Hishida Shunzo, and Yokoyama Taikan began visiting India, deepening their ties with the Tagore family through Sister Nivedita. This marked the birth of fine art in India through the idea of Pan-Asianism. E.B. Havell and, thereafter, Abanindranath Tagore became instrumental in implementing Japanese wash techniques within the Bengal School of Art to create a unique artistic form that accorded with nationalist sentiments. The resultant developments led to the establishment of Kala Bhavana in Shantiniketan in 1919 by student artists, including Nandalal Bose and Benodebehari Mukherjee, which led to the gradual restoration of Indian art.

Methodology

To triangulate the intricate relationship between nationalism and the influx of Japanese brush and wash techniques in India, a comparative analysis of the works of Abanindranath Tagore's Bharat Mata, Hishida Shunso's Sarasvati, and Taikan's Indo Shugojin will be conducted to trace similarities in the composition of elements and brushwork, encapsulated in this paper.

[1] Anindita Ghosh. "Revisiting the 'Bengal Renaissance': Literary Bengali and Low-Life Print in Colonial Calcutta." *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 42 (2002): 4329–38. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4412747

Additionally, it seeks to analyse the initial experimentation of E.B. Havell, Tagore and Nandalal Bose to epitomise the pedagogic transformation of static craft to fine art and the manner in which visual techniques were used as political tools on a broader spectrum.

Historiographical Review

Partha Mitter[2] treats colonial modernity as psychologically double: Indian artists gain access to new media and discourses even as they absorb a devaluing gaze toward their own traditions. Second, he links this double consciousness with the emergence of nationalist aesthetics, not as a reflex of political agitation alone, but as a search for cognitive autonomy. Hence, he coined the condition of 'occidental orientation'. Duara[3] states that the sources of identity were restricted to racism and nationalism only at the dawn of the twentieth century. Nationalism was deeply associated with civilisation, but it also sought its goal of expansion. As the idea of civilisation became increasingly positivist, Japan and China also began to assert themselves. Contrary to the Western standards of civilisation associated with the Enlightenment and realism, Japan centred its alternate conception around Asia. Ishiwaka notes that 'civilisation' became the keyword in Asian intellectual discourses. Okakura Kakuzo[4], the sharpest critic of civilisation, saw Japan as an 'exhibition hall' for Asian cultures, which, despite internal differences, were distinctly incongruent with European civilisation. The modern West made art an 'imitation of the external world' and vehemently ignored 'inner life'. Hence, the idea of Pan-Asianism was born in the backdrop of the fertile grounds of colonial disregard. He preached, 'Asia is one', and art in Asia is an expression of the 'ideals of the human spirit'. Saneto holds that Eastern civilisation emerged in the aftermath of intellectual discourses between Japanese and Chinese scholars and Western philosophers and Indian thinkers, notably Rabindranath Tagore and his nephew, Abanindranath Tagore, a connoisseur of fine art. Thus, Mitter contends that it was a part of transnational artistic exchange between cultural leaders.

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[2] Partha Mitter. *Art and nationalism in colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental orientations*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.

[3] Prasenjit Duara. "The discourse of civilization and Pan-Asianism." *Journal of World History* (2001): 99-130.

[4] Okakura, Kakuzo. *The ideals of the East*. Jazzybee Verlag, 2012.

However, there persisted ideological conflicts. Okawa believed that war and weapons pave the ultimate way towards civilisational progress. Moreover, Japan seemed to have absorbed Chinese and Indian traditions in adherence to their work. Amit Acharya[5], who differs, states that there is no singular idea of Asia as it stands, based on multiple conceptions, where some draw upon material forces and others ideological foundations.

Contextual Background

In 1868, a series of holistic transitions led to the overthrow of the Tokugawa Shogunate and the restoration of nominal power to Emperor Meiji in Japan. The Meiji Restoration was marked by the exercise of real executive powers by an oligarchy of reformist elites, the genro. A series of developments followed, including the Charter Oath, which promised deliberative assemblies and the pursuit of knowledge worldwide. The introduction of universal conscription led to reforms in the military and the navy, modelled on European powers. Industrial progress imitated Western organisational structures. Furthermore, the national education system emphasising science, engineering and civic loyalty also reflected the adaptation of Western ideas and the revalorising of Japanese traditions. However, this shift from a feudal society to a formidable imperial power has been debated. Kohno questions whether these reforms were intended as a quest for sovereignty or an advance geared towards Japanese colonisation in East Asia. Decisively, it enables prevention from Western colonisation.

Okakura Kakuzo: Between Meiji Reform and Asian Solidarity

In the wake of westernising policies in Japan, intellectuals faced deeper anxieties concerning their identity and turned to seek a 'true Asian cultural identity'. Okakura Kakuzo, the strongest proponent of anti-Western cultural philosophy, resigned from his government service and imposed an exile upon himself. He believes that 'the Himalayas divide only to accentuate the two mighty civilisations, the Chinese, its communism of Confucius, and the Indians, its individualism of the Vedas.' This implied that Asia possesses a continuous, shared spiritual aesthetic civilisation, rooted in religion and philosophy, compared to the materialism of the modern West. This idea

[5] Acharya, Amitav. *ASEAN and regional order: Revisiting security community in Southeast Asia*. Routledge, 2021.

incidentally fed into the anti-colonial cultural nationalism, which had taken the form of the Swadeshi movement in India.

Okakura is often described as the historian of art, and he spent his life preaching Japanese art history. In January 1902, he visited Calcutta and met Swami Vivekananda through Josephine McLeod, who explicated the ideals of Advaita that resembled the Pan-Asian spirit, founded by Okakura. Thereafter, he came into contact with Abanindranath Tagore and transmitted to Indian artists the Japanese brush and wash techniques. Spiritually, the brush was an extension of consciousness, and the wash was a philosophy of seeing. This provided a non-Western modern alternative to art that aligned with Vedic concepts of bhava, rasa and spiritual inwardness.

Cross-cultural Encounters

Several other artists, for instance, Yokoyama Taikan's Nihonga painting[6] during the Meiji Restoration of a boy surrounded by four sages: Buddha, Confucius, Laozi and Christ, has been interpreted as moral exemplars encompassing humanity. In 1903, Tagore invited Taikan and Hishida Shunzo. Taikan influenced Indian artists with his dripping technique, incorporated into the wash, which is known as the 'morotai' or 'vague' style[7]. Although criticised in Japan, it was widely accepted and later adopted in India.

Government School of Art and the Role of E.B. Havells

Woodralfe remarks that E.B. Havell, as the director of the Calcutta Art School, elevated 'genuine Indian art'[8] as a counterpart to Europeanisation. The Government Art College, established in 1854, was initially an institution shaped by academic realism. Under the colonial bureaucratic structure, it epitomised cast drawing, anatomical study and mechanical copying. Having assumed

[6] Refers to a style of painting developed during the Meiji period (1868–1912) that uses traditional Japanese materials and techniques.

[7] Shigemi Inaga. "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus in the First Half of the Twentieth Century (1901-1945): Rabindranath Tagore, Arai Kanpō, and Nandalal Bose." *Nichibunken Japan Review* (2009): 149-181.

[8] Ernest Binfield Havell. *Indian sculpture and painting: illustrated by typical masterpieces, with an explanation of their motives and ideals*. J. Murray, 1908.

charge in 1896, Havell acknowledged not an absence of skill but a misdirection of visual intelligence. Realising that the damage was civilisational, rather than curricular, he starts experimenting with the existing pedagogy of the Bengal Art School. This iterative practice took two forms: methodological observation and institutional and ideological testing.

According to him, 'picture painting in art is the same as novel writing in literature.' By focusing on the appreciation of native forms, he wanted to transform art from hobbyist painting to a form of discipline. The inclusion of elementary design remained a key aspect of his inspirational journey. He claimed that students possess 'a great natural aptitude for ornamental design', enforcing the principle of sensory conditioning. It further implied the increased relevance of environmental philosophy, which cemented that art was inseparable from its surroundings. Secondly, the school became a mediator between indian traditions and modernist ideas. Havell aimed to dismantle hierarchical assumptions of the colonial pedagogy, as he held, 'Art of the peasant is as real as a Maharaja's.'

Hence, Havell was foundational in the theoretical rejection of colonial pedagogy by removing the institutional stigma attached to art, but Abanindranath Tagore, who was the Vice Principal of the institution from 1905 to 1909, performed its practical displacement, to an extent.

Abanindranath Tagore and Anti-Colonial Aesthetics

Abanindranath Tagore grew up in their ancestral house, Jorashanko, which was not just a habitat but also a pre-artistic training ground that moulded his perception of art and identity over time. He studied at the Government Art School in the 1890s. His art was heavily influenced by his interactions with the Italian painter Ghilardi, who taught at the school and embodied the academic realist tradition derived from European (including Renaissance) models. However, his experimentation in Indian art was not radical; it was gradual. Although he was stalwart in the restoration of Indian art; the complete transition took place decades later with the advent of Nandalal Bose and Benodbehari Mukherjee.

Early Life and the Shaping of Perception

In his work, Jorashankor Dhare, we notice repeated attention to minor objects, such as jars and odd-shaped items, as well as ordinary necessities that do not hold any artistic value for the untrained eye. This inward-facing, interior-orientated experience of lived space is opposed to Western notions, which then were the standard of fine art in civilisational discourse and emphasised external observation, perspectival realism and mastery over outward form and shape. Furthermore, a linear unease with school and institutional routine hints at his reluctance to and emotional resistance to the said form of experience. School appears as something imposed and externally structured, which does not align with deeper emotional learning and the possible scope of creativity.

> "কারো কাছ থেকে আঁকা শেখা নয়—চোখে দেখা আর মনে রাখা থেকেই হাত চলত।"

This Bengali excerpt from Jorashankor Dhare asserts that he did not learn to draw from anyone; he learnt it by seeing and remembering. Prolonged and repeated looking allowed the objects to be imprinted upon his memory. Hence, art was about his perception of the otherwise mundane and regular objects. In Gharoya, we see descriptions of habitual movements, recurring rooms and arrangements that create a rhythm for shaping his perception of the remembered image.

Emphasis on Process over Outcome

These texts portray Tagore as a keen observer. He recalls moments of drawing and colouring as a child and watching the colours mix and dissolve. Perhaps he took pleasure in noticing colours bleed into one another and how water seeps into the surface of the paper. Hence, he focuses on the process rather than the resemblance of the object to the outcome. This turned out to be strikingly compatible with the Japanese wash technique, where controlled diffusion, tonal gradation and atmospheric effect held prime importance. Ideologically, Kakuzo sheds light on the internal meaning and philosophy of art, which leans towards a non-linear, abstract form of painting.

This is imperative in understanding nationalism in art, which was not a sudden ideological awakening but a lived continuity of differences with Western ideals and notions that were imposed upon it. The remembrance of home reflects how these images arise inherently

and are not consciously summoned, like art and, broadly, cultural nationalism.

Comparative Visual Analysis of Asian Paintings

In 1903, when Japanese Nihonga painter Yokoyama Taikan and his colleague, Hishida Shunso, visited India on the invitation of the Tagore family, it led to the convergence of Bengal patriotism, Indian nationalism and Pan-Asian discourse. This was when Abanindranath Tagore closely observed the techniques of these painters, which resonated with his ideas. Their works executed immediately after their stay in Calcutta illuminated the impact of Bengal iconography on these painters. Simultaneously, they also left behind the ink, wash and vague styles of art that later on shaped the foundation of the Bengal School of Art in 1905.

The Indo Shugonin, which translates to the Indian Guardian Goddess, by Taikan, is often referred to as one of his later works, but the iconographical choices reflect cross-cultural connotations. It portrayed Indian deities and figures through a Japanese, more personalised aesthetic lens. The iconography must have been unfamiliar to the Japanese; however, the symbol of the black goddess with human skulls encircling her waist looks remarkably familiar to the Goddess Kali in Indian mythology. She is often represented, as referred to by Mitter, as a fierce, eminent image of feminine rage with human skulls around her neck and waist. Sister Nivedita presents Kali as the dreadful counterpart of womanhood in India in popular culture. Taikan's depiction shows a toned-down and partly softened version of the deity. A significant aspect of the painting was the morotai, or hazy style, which was the dripping technique incorporated in the wash.

Fig.1. *Yokoyama Taikan, Indian Guardian (Indo shugoshin* 印度守護神*), 1903, ink and colour on silk, 27.6 × 20 in. (7 × 51 cm). Image from Yokoyama Taikan zuroku (*横山大観図録*) published by Dai Nihon Kaiga.*

The Sarasvati by Shunso depicts a delicately modulated feminine figure of a woman in a lotus pond with a veena in her hand, an instrument unknown in Japan. However, it remains a popular classical instrument, often seen in the hands of the Indian deity Goddess Saraswati. These paintings did not have a single stroke but multiple layers of colours with a highly diluted pigment of the ink or watercolour. The tonality was gradual rather than the use of sharp contour lines that are meant to provide more definition to the external form of the figures in paintings. Similar to Taikan's work, it was not a replica of Goddess Saraswati but a remembered image of her descriptions and perceived form.

Fig.2. *Hishida Shunsō, "Saraswati," 1903, tempera on paper, post on Tumblr, Hindu Cosmos, accessed April 21, 2026*

Sato Shino points out that these two paintings shape the perception of Tagore's Bharat Mata in 1905, a crucial element of the Swadeshi nationalist movement. Besides the wash technique, the four-armed image from Taikan's work and the flower petals from Shunso's art were also incorporated. The figure appears ascetic rather than regal, holding elements like cloth, grain, a book and prayer beads that evoke self-sufficiency, learning and discipline. The figure of the nation was already orchestrated as our mother in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's Anandamath[9]. However,

[9] Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. *Anandamath*. Auro e-Books, 2016.

before this, there was no symbolic representation of Mother India as a part of the freedom struggle. It began to be epitomised as the non-Western, culturally resonant figure capable of mobilising political sentiments. As colonial rule was increasingly seen as an attack on the 'motherland', Tagore's image was viewed in hindsight as the ultimate visual representation of Mother India. When carefully evaluated, we also find structural traces of the Renaissance art form, which shows that it was not just Japanese and Chinese art techniques that influenced Indian artists.

Fig.3. *Abanindranath Tagore, Bharat Mata, 1905, gouache, 26.6 x 15.2 cm (Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata)*

Kala Bhavana and Nandalal Bose's Experimental Turn

Nandalal Bose, often reduced to Abanindranath Tagore's most successful disciple or the Shantiniketan artist, was the final brushstroke in the institutionalisation of the Bengal School of Art from the Government Art School, Calcutta. Nandalal Bose entered this environment when this decisive shift from colonial perception had been articulated but had yet to be solidified as an institution. What was truly transmitted to him by Tagore was the mode of perception, evaluative priorities and ethical consciousness of art as a discipline. In his reflective and institutional text, Vision and Creation, philosophical and rhythmic discussions of art are presented that steer imagination towards original creations. Core ideas have been documented, reiterating the balance

between observation and imagination and the primary importance of technical literacy in upholding artistic integrity. The murals of the Ajanta caves particularly moulded his ideas further.

Unlike many contemporaries whose artistic identities remained tied to Calcutta, Nandalal's geographical shift to the rural setting of Shantiniketan became crucial. The philosophical transitions that accompanied it, like the ethos of open space, nature study, and interdisciplinary integration, marked an intriguing rural-pedagogic experiment that embedded art in everyday life. Thus, Shantiniketan became a place where these ideals were tested for institutional durability and not elite transmission. Outdoor studies were a key pedagogic method implemented by Bose, which brought the ideal of observation coupled with imagination into disciplined practicality. Art education was conceived as environmental and experiential, not syllabus-driven or examination-oriented. Thereafter, seasonal cycles and festivals became educational resources where social participation was encouraged through group art like pottery, mural practices and folk practices. This inculcated a regard for indigenous craft traditions and a spirit of collective cultural responsibility alongside individual creativity.

The work of Nandalal Bose, Sati, painted in 1907, represents a phase of consolidation for the Bengal School at large, as its aesthetic strategies have settled sufficiently for one to see a radical shift from its polemical phase at the beginning. The work may be described from a technical point of view by terms such as tonal restraint, linear rhythm, simplified contour, and suggestiveness in handling light and atmosphere, which react against both the naturalism and the ornamentation found in its opponents' work.

Fig.4. *Nandalal Bose, "Sati," 1943, WikiArt, accessed April 21, 2026,*

The mythological subject matter is formally composed and emotionally controlled, more than suggesting that the inward turn of the Bengal School's aesthetic strategies has already been established as a language and no longer as a divergence from them. The shift from Bharat Mata to Sati initiates a discussion on the early establishment of aesthetic strategies by the Bengal School and may be viewed as moving from a polemical approach to conveying a language or strategy with instructional value, which would soon manifest in the Bengal School's establishment at the institution at Santiniketan.

Conclusion

The colonial mark on the culture of the Indian subcontinent was so deep-rooted that it was not plausible for it to evolve overnight. Mirroring the Indian Nationalist Movement, the sense of identity in art was also an eventual transformation that took individual pedagogies and interpretations by various native artists and thinkers. Perhaps foreign influence was instrumental in the process, which is very visible in the original works of native artists. It was not until the Haripura posters, a celebrated series of posters designed by Nandalal Bose and his students at Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan, for the Indian National Congress session held at Haripura (Gujarat) in 1938, under the presidentship of Subhas Chandra Bose. During the last leg of the freedom struggle, they

represented key figures of rural India, like farmers, weavers, potters, fishermen, women at work and musicians, as dignified citizens of the nation. It vividly used flat planes of colour, clear lines, simple forms, and frontality, inspired by folk traditions like patua scroll paintings and kalighat pats, rather than realism. Not elite gallery art, but mass-oriented visual materials were designed to be reproduced, displayed outdoors, and accessible to the general public. These posters represent a project that sought to forge a modern Indian art, built on indigenous aesthetics, which marked an important shift away from European academic art.

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Reimagining Liberation and Womanhood in Indian Indentured Migration

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Abstract

The indentured system in India officially began in 1834, following the abolition of slavery, when the British sought to substitute labour gaps in the plantation economies. Although women were numerically fewer than men, they formed an indispensable part of the migration and settlement process. By migrating, often independently, these Coolie Women transgressed patriarchal boundaries and simultaneously lost their caste and sexuality because of the myth of *Kala Pani*- unlike their male counterparts, whose caste alone was questioned. This paper examines how indentured women's bodies and identities became sites of contestation within both colonial and nationalist discourses- a *Sandwiched Culture*, who often termed their decision to migrate to newer economic settlements as an act of moral degradation, a "fallen" category. The very possibility that women could migrate voluntarily, with informed consent, to improve their life conditions or to earn outside the domestic realm, appeared almost sinful and outrageous in the writings and imagination of both dominant orders. Moreover, adopting a qualitative, interpretative approach, the paper closely studies the work of Gaiutra Bahadur along with colonial reports and parliamentary proceedings as primary sources, tracing a different trajectory altogether. It reconsiders indentured women not merely as victims or moral transgressors but as victorious actors, whose participation in plantation societies contributed to gender-neutral reforms and shaped transnational mobility by reconfiguration of social and cultural consciousness. Ultimately, the paper explores the extent to which migration itself became a form of liberation, allowing women to renegotiate their identities and exercise agency within new plantation economies.

Keywords: Coolie Women, Indenture Labour, Sandwiched Culture, Kala Pani, Liberation, Cultural Baggage

Introduction

Indian women's experience of emigration and indentureship was one of extreme hardship, exploitation and sexploitation. In 1834, when the indentured system began and labourers started to migrate to Mauritius, women became part of the emigrating groups that travelled to far-off shores, crossing Kala Pani[1], to work as *Coolies*[2] – apparently, the word became the inheritable marker of ethnicity more than a job description.[3] They were carried to primarily work in the sugar, rubber, tea, coffee plantations across the globe and travelled from the Caribbean to Fiji under indenture and other forms of recruitment systems.[4] Most often these recruitments placed women in a more vulnerable position with forced submission due to varied reasons of their sexual and physical labour, evident from the more restricted guidelines given by the Section-27.[5]

The composition of women who migrated to these colonies were classified in four main categories as per the colonial reports- (a) wives of emigrants (generally of re-emigrants), (b) widows without friends or families,(c.) married women who have made a slip and who have either

[1] Crossing the Kala Pani meant severing ties not only with homeland but with the codes of caste and purity that defined womanhood in Hindu society. In this sense, the voyage itself became an early act of defiance, one that reconfigured the boundaries of femininity. As Gaiutra Bahadur notes of her great-grandmother's departure in 1903, in context of a villager's remark, "no good Indian girl, much less a good Brahmin girl, would have done that." Here, what was condemned as moral transgression can also be read as an assertion of autonomy- where coercion and courage intertwined, allowing women to step, however unknowingly, beyond the limits imposed upon them. Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), preface, 20.

[2] The term *coolie* derives from the Tamil word *kuli*, meaning "wages" or "hire," first used by Portuguese traders along the Coromandel Coast in the late sixteenth century. Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery* (London: Hansib Publishing, 1993), 42.

[3] Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), preface, 20.

[4] Marilyn Gracey Augustine, "*Title of the Article*," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 81 (December 2022): 1176–84.https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27388866

[5] Section 27 of the Indian Emigration Act (Act VII of 1871) - The act regulated recruitment at the district level by checking the frauds on forced or fraudulent emigration .https://www.abhilekh-patal.in/Category/ItemDetails/ItemDetails?itemId=853a7b52-0adb-4a7b-a219-da7e2449ad98

absconded from their husband's house with or without a lover, or who have been turned out by their husbands, and (d) prostitutes.[6]

The exodus of women was not caste-centric. Evidence suggests that women from upper castes constituted a significant proportion of migrants among both Muslims and Hindus, particularly from the eastern regions of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Despite the shift in the scholarship in the recent decade, the question as to how did women themselves perceive migration, to what extent womanhood offered liberation in its varied manifestation of visible (documented) and invisible (intended but not listed on records) forms, is less explored.

Much of the early and colonial-era scholarship on indentured cast Indian women as degraded, hyper-sexualised or passive victims within what Hugh Tinker termed as a "new system of slavery". This historiography also effaces the position of the colonised and gendered Indian woman as a human agency, thus neglecting women's capacity to resist colonial domination.[7]

Similarly, early nationalist and feminist movements framed women indentured primarily through the language of honour, moral decline and diasporic shame. As was rightly pointed out by Shobna Nijhawan that in a self-reflexive move by Indian middle-class society, the sexual exploitation of female indentured labourers was seen to threaten the honour of women back in India, and with it the honour of the nation as whole.[8]

With the emergence of revisionist historiography, the question of victim-centric framing is constantly challenged and redefined. Works of Prem Misir, Spivak, Carter and others considerably highlight how plantation economies were systematically structured by race, class, gender and power relations where neither metropolitan norms nor Indian norms remained intact.

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[6] Government of Bengal, *Proceedings of the Revenue and Agriculture Department, August 1883: Major Pitcher and Mr. Grierson's Inquiry into Emigration* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1883), chap. VIII, para. 130.

[7] Prem Misir, "Introduction and Overview: Indian Indentured Women as Human Agency," in *The Subaltern Indian Woman: Domination and Social Degradation*, ed. Prem Misir (Singapore: Springer, 2018).

[8] Shobna Nijhawan, "Fallen Through the Nationalist and Feminist Grids of Analysis: Political Campaigning of Indian Women Against Indentured Labour Emigration," in *The Subaltern Indian Woman: Domination and Social Degradation*, ed. Prem Misir (Singapore: Springer, 2018), 181.

Adopting a qualitative, interpretive research methodology, the paper aims to closely examine the work of Guitar Bahadur as a primary text that centres women's voices through testimonies, memory fragments, oral histories and visual sources – to study migration as historical narration from the side of women and try to situate them as a victorious and independent actor, along with colonial reports and parliamentary proceedings. The paper further builds on secondary sources such as works of Marilyn Gracey Augustine, Maria Carter, Charu Gupta, and Prem Misir, who discuss the agency of women labourers, the role of identity and caste, and the effects of the sandwiched culture, which mainly builds the perception around women as labourers and shows how both cultures viewed them.

Sandwiched Culture

Needless to say, Indenture system had myriad of problem ranging from exploitative working conditions, insanitary environment, lack of proper housing facility and higher mortality rate, yet the blame for the real problems was put on the Indian women as they were judged based on the pre-existing norms of the societies both in England and in India.[9] Women crossing boundaries was a matter of concern for both the societies and in a colonial set up where perceptions are interlinked and get influenced by each other , the sociological study of women trying to navigate between two cultures and their respective responses towards it somewhat shaped the whole narrative of women migrating. The paper uses the term *Sandwiched Culture*[10] to analysis how women's identities and lives in colonial India were shaped by multiple, overlapping pressures.

Colonialists disgraced these indentured women by attacking their sexuality for the fact that they had access to the public sphere, demanded fair wages, registered complaints and exercised their personal agency to choose their husband from a different class or race in contrast to ideal Victorian women who followed principles of Christianity, trained only in domestic skills, possessed

[9] Marilyn Gracey Augustine, "Sandwiched between the Constructs – Disgraced Indian Women Emigrants (1834–1920)," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 81 (December 2022): 1179.

[10] The term was given by Yogesh Atal in his articles "*"Outsiders as Insiders: The Phenomenon of Sandwich Cultures"* published in *Sociological Bulletin* 38(1): 23-41 (1989)", to describe diasporic communities of Indians abroad who were socially "sandwiched" between their culture of origin and the host society- neither fully insiders nor complete outsiders.

emotional sensitivity, unlimited selflessness, weakness of intellect, and a lack of sexual instincts and obviously never chose to work in colonial economies, barring the fact that they were never enslaved and enjoyed dignified domestic occupation. According to Marina Carter, British Indian officials divided female recruits into two categories – the respectable wives and daughters of male migrants and two, single women who were widows or destitute women who were the victims of social evils associated with Indian custom and religion and who resorted out of necessity, to prostitution. [11]

Similarly, from the early twentieth century, indenture came to be overwhelmingly represented as a national calamity by middle-class intelligentsia and nationalists.[12] The stories of exploitation and abuse of women coming from the plantations gripped the popular imagination and were used to mobilise anti-indenture activism. For instance, in the extensive writing of Hindi, there was of course deep pity for the 'helpless' woman, perpetually in the state of victimhood, a poem title '*Pravasini Bharatvasini*' soulfully lamented:

> chaati phadti, sir dukhta hai, kehne mein aati hai laaj!
> kintu kahen man ki hum kisse, he bharat ke purush samaj?...
> ha! kya-kya maine bhoga hai, suno, karo pathar chaati....
> mata sita ka hit kitna, racha gaya bhaari sangram,
> ek draupdi ki lajja ka, samar mahabharat tha daam
> aryon ke pavitra shonit mein, nahin ushnta hai kya aaj,
> bhai khada dekh sakta hai, jaati jo behnon ki laaj! [13]

> [Our heart breaks, and head hurts, and we feel ashamed of saying!
> But, oh the men of India, who else do we dare open our soul to?....
> Oh! What all have I gone through, hear with a strong heart....
> A heavy battle was created for the welfare of mother Sita,

[11] Basdeo Mangru, *The Elusive El Dorado: Essays on the Indian Experience in Guyana* (Maryland, 2005), p. 33.

[12] Charu Gupta, "Saving 'Wronged' Bodies: Caste, Indentured Women and Hindi Print-Public Sphere in Colonial India," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 51, no. 4 (2014): 716.

[13] Charu Gupta, "Saving 'Wronged' Bodies: Caste, Indentured Women and Hindi Print-Public Sphere in Colonial India," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 51, no. 4 (2014): 716

The fruit of Mahabharat was the price to pay for a Draupadi's honour....
In the pure blood of the Aryans, is there no fieriness left today,
As the brother stands and watçhes this sisters being shamed.]

It is also noteworthy that Hindi periodicals like 'Stri darpan' became 'a fertile ground for not only 'thinking, speaking, and debating about the indentured women but also putting the context into the larger debates of gendered morality, sexuality, belonging and what is good for indentured women without them having any say in it'.[14]

We can see how the very possibility that women could migrate voluntarily with informed consent, to improve their life conditions or to earn wages, almost appeared sinful and outrageous to the mind and media in India at the time. The stories emerging from the plantation colonies added further disgust to the whole narrative, for example, the story of Kunti, an indentured labourer from Fiji who alleged an attempted rape on her by a white overseer in 1913 sparked a fierce reaction throughout India. Kunti's account of protecting her chastity by diving into a river received extensive coverage in the Indian press and gave an ethical edge to the anti-Indenture campaign and the nationalist discourse. [15]

According to some scholars, "the move to stop the degradation of Indian women on colonial plantations attracted more support among the Indian masses than any other movement in modern Indian history, more even than the movement for Independence." According to Tambe, the morality issues surrounding Indian coolie women in overseas colonies of the British empire were Gandhi's "initial motivation" to assemble Indian nationalists and protest against the colonial government.[16] For nationalist leaders this was a soft point which invited attention and mobilised Indian masses.

The revisionist idea provided enough space for the new idea of indentured women beyond two dominated narratives and gave a rational approach to the whole discourse. According to them,

[14] Amba Pande, ed., *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora* (Singapore: Springer, 2020).

[15] *Ibid*.

[16] *Ibid*.

women were participants in social transformation, not merely recipients of reform. Their experiences cannot be reduced to a simple binary of oppression vs liberation.Many women used the limited spaces available within colonial and patriarchal structures to assert dignity and autonomy.

Within these frameworks both the nationalists and the colonialists validated each other by putting women into a stereotypical frame where her sexuality and nothing else mattered, certainly not her struggle to survive and achieve and her successes as labourers initially and in other fields in later times. Helping her was considered as an altruistic act and not as her right to work and earn in a respectable environment.[17]

Question of Liberation

> "It was emancipation for women who migrated overseas. By so doing they gained many more opportunities than they would have at home to rid themselves of marital, societal and economical oppression[18]."
>
> -Emmer

With the advent of revisionist scholarship, the spectrum of understanding women's agency has broadened; furthermore, the evidence from memoirs, plantation archives, and oral histories reveals what we try to situate as a liberating force based primarily on the work of Bahadur and colonial records.

It is important to note that despite the negative reports about emigration – stories of coercion, exploitation, and the misogynous representation of emigrant women – many still chose to migrate.

Once on the plantations, women's presence had far-reaching implications for the political economy and socio-cultural structures of indenture. According to Brij V. Lal, the absence of

[17] Amba Pande, "Indentured and Post-Indentured Indian Women: Changing Paradigms and Shifting Discourses," in *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora*, ed. Amba Pande (Singapore: Springer, 2020).

[18] Pieter C. Emmer, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Economy, 1580–1880: Trade, Slavery and Emancipation* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1987), 115.

traditional norms and values of the mother country opened up "bittersweet" spaces of empowerment in which women's agency could be expressed in multiple ways. Their demand increased steadily by 1886, due to their lower wages, unpaid domestic services, and the social stability they provided[19]. Archives record women achieving positions such as *Sirdarni*, or receiving small plots of land upon completion of their contracts. These material gains complicate the narrative of total victimhood. Moreover, we can assume that since the majority were from elite upper-class families, the guarantee of caste purity and patriarchal protection that had structured their lives in the mother country no longer operated with the same rigidity in the plantation colonies. Certainly, sexual exploitation and loss of agency remained entrenched. Yet emigration also produced forms of sexual autonomy – a manifestation of human agency that, paradoxically, coexisted with exploitation. In these new worlds, where they were less in number as compared to their male counterparts, women could choose partners, resist them, leave them, and remarry.

> "From the beginning, in all the colonies that turned to indenture to rescue their plantations from ruin after slaves were freed, men enormously outnumbered women. This gave women some sexual leverage. They could take new partners, and frequently, they did. Theirs was often a tale of leaving their country, then leaving their men."[20]

Thus, even within oppressive structures, women enacted choices that disrupted patriarchal expectations.

One must also recognise the cultural subjectivity women emancipated themselves from with the coming of new recruitment acts. They have been for years confined within religious and social traditions – Vaishnavite devotion, complex mixes of victimisation, and societal ostracism often pushed them into holy sites where recruiters later found them[21].

But through the intervention of the British civilising mission – they had banned sati and child marriage, and granted widows rights to property and remarriage – and with Orientalist

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[19] Brij V. Lal, *Chalo Jahaji: On a Journey through Indenture in Fiji* (Canberra: Australian National University, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, 2000), 150.

[20] Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 26.

[21] *Ibid.*

reasoning, indenture similarly "freed" India's most oppressed women and showcase the empire's benevolence. Yet, the archive is full of absences and fragmented presences: *"It's difficult to divine the women targeted to be saved through this rhetoric... In the India Office records they are mostly hidden, or hiding."*[22] Occasionally, figures like Manharni (1872) or Rojha (1873) "flit into view" – both disowned by families who denied knowledge of them. These glimpses emphasise how shame, concealment, and rejection shaped women's migration stories in tales of liberation.

The migrations spanned all classes and social backgrounds: lower-caste women, widows, prostitutes facing exploitation in ashrams, and women criminalised under the Contagious Diseases Act (1864). Bhadur notes that police conducted frequent raids and harassed women, who faced the prospect of jail with hard labour if they failed to register as prostitutes or were examined regularly for venereal disease. The CDA was a law to be resisted and fled, and many women did resist and flee. They resisted by bribing police, in some cases. In others, they produced false marriage certificates or presented evidence before magistrates that they were mistresses rather than professional prostitutes.[23] On the other hand, working women, aware of their exploitation, exercised political consciousness by choosing migration over subjugation. Memoirs reveal headstrong women: an untouchable turned away by her husband for taking another woman was offered shelter by her father, only to refuse it and sign up as a coolie instead. Their motivations are often missing in colonial records, but scattered evidence shows women refusing patriarchal security for uncertain freedom. Moreover, recruiters, driven by labour shortages, altered their rules accordingly, helping women forge identities. Bahadur narrates this in the case of her great-grandmother Sujaria:

> *"So desperate were British administrators for female recruits, they may have bent rules... There may have been lies told about the women's identities and origins."*

[22] *Ibid*.

[23] Ashwini Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct: Regulating Prostitution in Late Colonial Bombay* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 39–43.

Post migration, the harshness of plantation life and the empowerment that came with earning their own income made women assertive not only in private but also in public spheres. Women's activism emerged through Mahila Mandals, women's gangs, and collective resistance.

As Gounder notes, "The women used the positioning of collective agency a lot more than men."[24] They violated discriminatory labour laws, disobeyed colonial authority, and were convicted for offences such as absenteeism, insolence, leaving work without permission, theft, assault, and wilful disobedience. Their actions demonstrated that indentured women were not merely victims or moral transgressors but victorious actors whose participation in plantation societies contributed to gender-neutral reforms and shaped transnational mobility, not merely as a capitalist movement but as a reconfiguration of social, political and cultural consciousness.

Conclusion

The dichotomies of victimhood and liberation cannot adequately capture the history of Indian women who were indentured. Their experiences took place in a complicated "sandwiched culture" that was concurrently shaped by patriarchal norms, caste systems, nationalist concerns, and colonial rule, as this paper has demonstrated. Indentured women were not seen as agents with agency, but rather as symbols of moral decay or national shame in early colonial and nationalist discourses. But a deeper look at testimonies, fragmentary archives, oral histories, and literary analyses, especially in Gaiutra Bahadur's Coolie Woman, reveals a much more complex reality. Even though they were frequently made in difficult situations, women's migration decisions also represented deliberate attempts to flee oppressive social structures, unstable economies, or gendered limitations at home. Contradictory results were produced within plantation societies by new social structures and demographic disparities. While institutional injustices and sexual exploitation continued, women also had to negotiate new opportunities for social renegotiation, economic independence, mobility, and partnership choice. Any one-dimensional interpretation of their lives is complicated by their capacity to obtain positions such as *sirdarni*, obtain small landholdings, or confront abusive overseers.

[24] Amba Pande, "Indentured and Post-Indentured Indian Women: Changing Paradigms and Shifting Discourses," in *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora*, ed. Amba Pande (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2020).

Furthermore, their opposition was not confined to specific tactics. Indentured women collectively challenged patriarchal authority, discriminatory laws, and exploitative labour regimes, as revisionist scholarship and cases like Mahila Mandals show. As a result, they shaped plantation politics in ways that have been understated in previous historiography. These acts represent a small but important change in the perception of indenture as a place where women expressed forms of agency within the limitations imposed upon them, rather than just as forced labour migration.

Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman* has limitations as a primary source, despite being a priceless text for elevating women's voices and following personal micro-histories. The story is based on a single family lineage, and interpretive reconstruction or speculative reading of silences is used to fill in many archival gaps. It cannot be regarded as an exhaustive or representative account of all indentured women due to its reliance on personal memory, fragmented colonial records, and retrospective interpretation. Instead, it should not be used as a stand-alone foundation for evidence, but rather as a critical entry point into women's lived experiences.

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Skin as Script: Tattoos, Memory and Subaltern Resistance in India

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Abstract

Tattoos, often regarded as personal adornments, have long functioned as markers of identity, resistance, and survival for marginalised communities in India. For Dalits, Adivasis, and lower-caste women, tattooing was more than a cultural practice; it was a means of asserting agency in a rigidly hierarchical society and a method of inscribing histories otherwise excluded from dominant narratives. Colonial administrators, ethnographers, and missionaries viewed these practices through a lens of primitivism and criminality, while the postcolonial push for modernisation further stigmatised and erased them from mainstream historical discourse. This paper examines tattooing as a historical record that challenges conventional archives, drawing from legal documents, ethnographic accounts, oral histories, and visual sources. Among the Ramnami Dalits, tattooing the name 'Ram' across their bodies constituted a form of spiritual and social defiance against upper-caste restrictions. Dhanuk and Khasi women marked their bodies to deter sexual violence, transforming tattooing into a survival strategy. In tribal communities, tattoos signified belonging and ritual continuity, yet the colonial gaze reduced these meanings to signs of backwardness, regulating them under laws such as the Criminal Tribes Act (1871). This paper argues that tattooing serves as a radical archive of lived experience, preserving histories systematically excluded from textual records and foregrounding the body as a site of memory and resistance.

Keywords: tattoos, subaltern resistance, embodied archive, *Ramnami Samaj*, colonial ethnography, Dalit memory, *godna*, *likhai*

Introduction

Throughout history, the human body has served as a canvas for expression, identity, and resistance. In India, among Dalit, Adivasi, and lower-caste women, the practice of tattooing, locally known by terms like *godna* or *likhai*, has carried meanings far deeper than adornments. These bodily inscriptions have functioned as acts of memory, spirituality, and survival within violently hierarchical social structures. At a time when these communities were systematically denied access to literacy, land and sacred spaces, the skin became a powerful medium through which to record personal and collective histories. Tattooing, in this context, was not just cultural; it was profoundly political.

Yet these inscriptions rarely find a place in mainstream historical narratives. Dominant archives, rooted in colonial ethnographies, upper-caste textual traditions, and institutional record-keeping, have often dismissed bodily practices like tattooing as primitive, unsanitary, or regressive. The voices of subaltern communities have historically been mediated through the gaze of others, their modes of memory either silenced or pathologised. In such a context, tattoos become crucial artefacts: silent yet insistent records of those denied authorship in textual histories.

This paper proposes that tattoos function as radical, embodied archives and counter-narratives to dominant historiography. For oppressed communities, where literacy was denied and voice was suppressed, the body itself became a canvas for recording identity, ritual, pain, and resistance. These markings not only challenged caste and gender hierarchies but also subverted colonial and postcolonial efforts to erase or discipline bodily expression. The analysis is structured across three distinct temporal phases: colonial criminalisation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, postcolonial decline amid modernisation and nation-building, and contemporary revival as a form of cultural pride and political assertion.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Historical understanding is contingent upon what is considered an "archive", a site of recorded memory, preserved experience, and accessible knowledge. However, the very notion of the archive has historically excluded marginalised voices by privileging written records, elite authorship, and institutional legitimacy. For India's Dalit, Adivasi, and lower-caste women, whose experiences were

seldom documented in dominant historiographies, tattooing emerged as a medium of embodied inscription, one that allowed them to assert identity, communicate memory and resist social erasure.

This study adopts a multidisciplinary framework to analyse tattooing as a counter-archive, combining insights from Subaltern Studies, memory theory, feminist anthropology, and postcolonial critiques of colonial epistemologies. The Subaltern Studies collective reoriented historical inquiry toward the voices and actions of the marginalised. Ranajit Guha's early work emphasised how colonial and nationalist narratives both marginalised "the politics of the people", those who acted collectively and meaningfully but were never documented in formal archives. Guha argued that the colonial archive represented the peasant insurgent "not as an autonomous agent of history but as a dumb, driven herd reacting spasmodically to stimuli" and called for attention to alternative forms of agency, such as rumour, ritual, or rebellion. Tattooing, in this sense, operates like these alternative registers: it is encoded on the body, not on paper, and yet signifies a political consciousness that challenges hegemonic orders. Gayatri Spivak takes this critique further in her foundational essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"[1], where she argues that even well-intentioned efforts to recover subaltern voices risk reinscribing epistemic violence unless they acknowledge the conditions of silencing. Her concept of the "effaced itinerary of the subaltern" is instructive here since tattooing follows a path that avoids traditional systems of power and written language by recording memories directly into the skin. Tattoos, in this view, are neither speech nor silence but something in between: embodied texts that complicate the binary of voice and voicelessness. This paper proposes that tattoos constitute a "living archive", a form of embodied authorship where the subaltern does not speak through institutions but through the marked skin, turning the body into a site of historical inscription.

To further explore tattooing as a historical practice, this paper engages with memory studies, particularly the work of Paul Connerton. In *How Societies Remember*[2], Connerton distinguishes between "inscribed memory", preserved in texts or monuments, and "incorporated

[1] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271.

[2] Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 72.

memory", transmitted through bodily practices, gestures, and rituals. Tattoos, particularly in cultures where literacy was structurally denied, become a mode of incorporated memory—carried on skin, remembered through pain, and passed down in communal rituals. Connerton emphasises that "bodily practices sustain collective memory precisely because they are repetitive, habitual and materially grounded." Maurice Halbwachs' notion of collective memory, where remembrance is always socially framed, also applies. Tattooing in marginalised communities was never a private act; it was embedded in the social structures of caste, gender, kinship, and resistance. The act of tattooing "Ram" by Ramnami Dalits or the ritual tattooing of tribal girls before marriage was not simply a personal mark but a shared language of survival and identity that reinforced group memory even in the face of systematic erasure.

Feminist theory offers crucial tools for interpreting tattoos as more than cultural adornment, especially in relation to women's bodies, which have historically been sites of discipline and regulation. Judith Butler's work on the performativity of the body emphasises that the body is not a static object but a site of repeated acts that both constitute and resist identity. Tattoos, particularly among Dalit and Tribal women, must be understood as performative in this sense: they not only reflect identity but also constitute a form of selfhood that is carved against dominant norms. The decision to tattoo one's face, arms, or chest was an act of reclaiming bodily autonomy and resisting caste-patriarchal objectification. Veena Das similarly insists on attending to the "eventfulness" of everyday practices, arguing that social suffering and resistance often unfold not in spectacular revolts but in subtle, embodied actions. Frederique Apffel-Marglin, writing on South Asian women's ritual practices, warns against viewing bodily customs as "superstitions" or "atavistic remnants." Instead, she proposes that ritual—particularly when practised by marginalised women—often encodes complex social critique. In this framework, tattooing emerges not as primitive art, but as a codified ritual of resistance.

This study adopts a historical-ethnographic methodology. It examines colonial texts such as the Criminal Tribes Act (1871)[3], which regulated and criminalised tattooed communities by conflating bodily marks with deviance. It also analyses the ethnographies of Edgar Thurston and Herbert Risley, who documented tattoos as part of racialised and casteist classifications, often

[3] *The Criminal Tribes Act*, No. XXVII of 1871 (Government of India, 1871).

interpreting them through colonial lenses of degeneration and criminality. To counter these views, the paper incorporates oral histories, contemporary testimonies, and visual analysis. It also engages with activists and artistic revivals of tattooing, particularly among Dalit and Adivasi communities, who are reclaiming these markings as heritage and resistance. The theoretical framework above influences how we understand tattooing, not just as a cultural practice but also as a way of knowing and preserving knowledge.

"Ram on My Skin, Ram in My Soul"

Among the most powerful examples of tattooing as embodied resistance in India is the practice of the Ramnami Samaj, a Dalit community primarily based in Chhattisgarh. In a society stratified by rigid caste hierarchies and religious exclusions, the Ramnamis developed a radical spiritual response to Brahmanical oppression by tattooing the name of Lord Ram all over their bodies—including their foreheads, arms, legs, and torsos. These tattoos, at once devotional and defiant, transformed their bodies into sacred texts that asserted their rights to spiritual equality, human dignity, and divine access.

The origins of the Ramnami movement date back to the late 19th century and are intimately linked to the broader Dalit struggle against caste-based exclusion from Hindu temples and scriptures. Dalits were frequently barred from entering places of worship, accessing religious texts like the Ramcharitmanas, or publicly performing rituals reserved for upper castes. As sociologist Badri Narayan notes, "The Ramnamis created their own religious sphere in which they could worship Ram not only freely but defiantly." The tattooing of Ram's name thus emerged as a spiritual act of self-authentication, a way to embody divinity despite external prohibitions.

Their founder, Parsuram, a leatherworker and sharecropper from Charpara village who was denied access to a temple in the 1890s, reportedly began the practice of tattooing "Ram" on his body after being publicly humiliated. Oral legends within the community describe a moment of intense devotion leading to miraculous or self-initiated inscription, which quickly spread as a mass religious movement marked by egalitarian worship, the rejection of priestly authority, and a theology rooted in bhakti. Ramnami gatherings and festivals, where members chant the name of Ram for days, continue to assert their autonomous claim over the sacred.

The practice of tattooing among Ramnamis blurs the boundary between piety and protest. By marking their bodies with "Ram", adherents redefined the relationship between body, text, and the divine. Scholar Joel Lee argues that for the Ramnamis, tattooing was both "a means of internalising the sacred" and "a direct challenge to the monopolisation of religious symbols by upper castes". This act can be read through Judith Butler's notion of performativity: the repeated inscription of "Ram" becomes not just a devotional act but a performative constitution of Dalit selfhood. The skin becomes scripture; the body becomes the site of authorship and sovereignty. In a context where Dalits were denied the authority to write, read, or interpret sacred texts, they wrote the texts on themselves.

The visibility of these tattoos, often covering the entire face, made them impossible to ignore, turning every Ramnami body into a walking assertion of theological and political dissent. Importantly, these were not isolated or secretive acts but public affirmations made in a hostile social environment, carrying the risk of violence and humiliation. Thus, the act of tattooing also operated as a form of what James Scott calls "everyday resistance", a subtle yet subversive act that contested power without directly confronting it.

Tattooing among the Ramnamis was not only a personal rite of passage but also a communal ritual that reinforced group identity across generations. The practice was often performed during childhood, accompanied by chants and blessings, and served as an initiation into a lineage of spiritual rebellion. This resonates with Paul Connerton's idea of "incorporated memory", bodily practices that transmit social knowledge and identity through repetition. Even the very pain of the tattooing process carried symbolic meaning. As Dalit scholar Kancha Ilaiah writes, "the pain of caste humiliation was transformed into the pain of spiritual engraving, a reversal of the ritual hierarchy." The permanence of the mark underscored the permanence of resistance, anchoring memory not in the written word but in skin.

Despite its spiritual and social significance, the Ramnami practice has been subjected to both direct suppression and subtle marginalisation. During the colonial period, the tattooing of "Ram" by Dalits was viewed by some upper-caste groups as blasphemous and provocative. British administrators documented these practices in caste reports but often failed to grasp their subversive implications. In post-independence India, while formal caste discrimination was outlawed, caste stigma continued to influence how the practice was perceived. As the Ramnami movement aged,

younger generations faced increasing pressure to remove or avoid visible tattoos to access education, employment, and marriage opportunities. Tattooing, once a collective act of resistance, risked becoming a source of social vulnerability.

Yet the movement persists. Annual gatherings in Chhattisgarh still bring together tattooed elders and younger adherents, affirming the continued relevance of embodied faith. Recently, Dalit activists and artists have begun to revisit and reclaim Ramnami tattooing as a symbol of cultural pride and resistance, showcasing the marks in exhibitions and digital platforms. This contemporary revival mirrors Connerton's claim that memory is not just preserved but periodically re-activated, especially in response to threats of forgetting.

The Ramnami case exemplifies how tattooing functions as an embodied counter-archive, recording a history of exclusion, faith, and protest that would otherwise remain unwritten. In a society that systematically denied Dalits access to both sacred texts and historical recognition, the Ramnami Samaj carved their stories into their own skin. These bodily inscriptions disrupt hierarchies of caste, knowledge, and authorship, reminding us that resistance is not always shouted; it can also be etched in silence, word by word, into flesh.

Tattooing in Tribal Communities and the Colonial Gaze

Among India's tribal communities, tattooing has long served as a deeply embedded cultural practice, woven into rituals of kinship, coming-of-age ceremonies, marital transitions, and spiritual affiliations. These marks, often placed on visible areas of the body, signified one's clan, region, life stage, or social role. They were not simply decorative or aesthetic; they were mnemonic devices, protective charms, and embodied testimonies of identity. In Gond, Baiga, Oraon, Santhal, Bhil, and Naga communities, for instance, tattoos (often referred to as *godna*, *likhai*, or *udna*) were inscribed during key life transitions, especially puberty, marriage, childbirth, or initiation into adulthood. These tattoos often symbolised clan affiliations, totemic spirits, fertility symbols, or protective motifs meant to shield women from harm or guide the dead through the afterlife. In Baiga cosmology, women received tattoos across the forehead, arms, and chest to mark sexual maturity and social readiness for marriage. The designs were not merely ornamental but cosmological, linking the individual body to a larger ancestral and environmental order.

Anthropologist Verrier Elwin noted that for Baiga women, tattoos were "marks of honour" and that "to be without them is to be naked and incomplete." Similarly, among the Santhals and Oraons, tattoos were used to bind the individual to the community and were often performed collectively during festivals or family gatherings, underscoring their profoundly social nature. These tattooing practices embody what Paul Connerton calls incorporated memory: memory transmitted not through writing, but through the repetition of bodily acts, often ritualised and community-based. In tribal societies, where oral traditions prevailed and written archives were scarce, the skin became a visible canvas of cultural continuity.

Tattooing in tribal communities, especially for women, was also an act of resilience and social recognition. As Nita Kumar argues, such practices, while painful and often mandatory, were also moments of bodily autonomy and transformation. Tattooing was frequently accompanied by songs, prayers, and community rituals, integrating the individual's experience into the larger collective memory. While upper-caste and colonial accounts often framed these practices as coercive or backward, indigenous interpretations emphasised agency, beauty, and ancestral continuity. The ritual pain of tattooing held spiritual significance, similar to fasting, scarification, or other rites of endurance. In this regard, it reflects Veena Das's observation that social suffering in South Asia is not only endured but "ritually absorbed" and "incorporated into the fabric of personhood." Pain was not simply physical; it was epistemological—it allowed women to know themselves as part of a collective body, bound by ritual and memory.

Despite the social depth of tattooing among tribal communities, British colonial administrators and ethnographers interpreted these practices through racialised and evolutionary frameworks. Ethnographic surveys such as Herbert Risley's *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891)[4] and Edgar Thurston's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (1909)[5] catalogued tribal tattoos in exhaustive detail, not to understand them in a cultural context, but to classify them as biological indicators of race, caste, and criminality. Risley, a firm proponent of scientific racism, used tattoo patterns to substantiate his theory that Indian tribes represented "pre-Aryan" racial remnants. He argued that tattoos were "indelible signs" of primitive ancestry and associated them with

[4] Herbert Hope Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, 2 vols. (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891), 145.

[5] Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, 7 vols. (Madras: Government Press, 1909), 312.

superstition, bodily pollution, and moral inferiority. Similarly, Thurston's descriptions of tribal tattooing, though rich in detail, were embedded within a framework of criminal anthropology. He frequently associated tattooing with communities designated as "criminal tribes" under the Criminal Tribes Act (1871). This Act empowered local governments to notify entire communities as "addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offences" based on suspicion rather than proven criminal acts, leading to mandatory registration, surveillance, restrictions on movement, and forced settlement. Tattoos were discursively constructed as visible markers of inherited criminality or deviance, reinforcing colonial mechanisms of control and biometric identification. These readings not only decontextualised tribal tattooing but also actively contributed to the policing of marked bodies. The colonial state often photographed and documented tattooed individuals as part of its biometric surveillance apparatus, further reducing living cultural practices to visual evidence of degeneracy. Tattoos became, in the colonial gaze, not signs of belonging, but signs of threat.

Despite these misreadings, many tribal communities continued to uphold tattooing traditions well into the postcolonial period. While some groups saw a decline due to Christian missionary influence, caste assimilation pressures, and state-led modernisation, others retained these practices as markers of ancestral pride and ritual obligation. Today, there is a growing movement to document and revive tribal tattoo traditions, especially among Adivasi artists, scholars, and activists. For example, the contemporary work of artist Venkat Raman Singh Shyam (Gond) incorporates tattoo motifs into his visual art, reclaiming these marks as sacred and sovereign. Documentaries and digital projects such as *Godna: Bodies of Resistance* have also begun to archive oral histories and visual records of tattooed elders, ensuring that these living archives are not lost. Tattooing in tribal communities challenges dominant narratives of what constitutes historical evidence and whose bodies are worth remembering. For centuries, these marks functioned as living archives of identity, community, and cosmology, encoding histories that the colonial archive sought to erase or distort. By recentring indigenous interpretations and interrogating the colonial gaze, we begin to see tattoos not as symbols of primitiveness but as layered, resilient expressions of cultural belonging and embodied resistance.

Postcolonial Erasure and the Contemporary Revival of Tattooing

While tattooing in Dalit and tribal communities historically signified resilience, belonging, and ritual authority, the postcolonial era witnessed a marked decline in these practices. With the rise of modernity, nationalism, and aesthetic conformity, traditional tattoos began to be viewed not as cultural memory but as remnants of a backward past. Many marginalised communities, particularly those striving for upward mobility, were pressured to abandon visible bodily markers associated with stigmatised identities. Post-independence India was marked by a state-driven emphasis on modernisation, nation-building, and homogenised citizenship. Within this developmentalist framework, bodily practices like tattooing were increasingly seen as signs of superstition, tribalism, or lack of education. As Aishwarya Kumar notes, postcolonial governance inherited many of the visual and epistemic codes of the colonial regime, which associated visible bodily marks with social disorder.

Among upwardly mobile Dalit and Adivasi groups, the abandonment of traditional tattoos was often a strategic act of caste negotiation. Gopal Guru points out that visibility, once a form of resistance, became a liability in contexts where jobs, education, and inter-caste interactions demanded conformity to upper-caste aesthetic norms. Tattoos, particularly those on the face, hands, or neck, were stigmatised not only by dominant society but increasingly within the communities themselves. This internalisation of stigma resonates with Frantz Fanon's account of the colonised body as a "site of inferiority" that must be disciplined to gain recognition in the world of the coloniser. In many ways, the postcolonial body had to be cleansed of its visible signs of subalternity to participate in a society structured by caste-privileged aesthetics. The historical body, scarred, tattooed and ritualised, was overwritten by the modern, neutralised body of the citizen.

With the decline of tattooing, especially among younger generations, entire knowledge systems began to disappear. Traditional motifs, techniques, chants, and tattooing rituals, usually passed down orally and through apprenticeship, were no longer preserved. As Assa Doron notes in his fieldwork among the Dom community in Banaras, tattooing was once a rich semiotic practice that linked individuals to their spiritual and occupational worlds, but in its absence, "the skin becomes mute, the archive unreadable." This disappearance mirrors Michel-Rolph Trouillot's

theory of "silencing in the archive," where power determines not only what gets recorded but what ceases to be transmitted. As oral and embodied traditions vanish, historical memory becomes fragmented, and the politics of visibility is replaced by a politics of absence. The loss of tattooing, then, is historiographical.

In the past two decades, however, there has been a powerful resurgence of interest in traditional tattooing, especially among younger Dalit and Adivasi individuals reclaiming their histories. Visual artists such as Venkat Raman Singh Shyam (Gond), Pushpa Kumari (Mithila), and Dalit performance artists have integrated *godna* and ritual tattooing patterns into their work, reviving both their aesthetic and political potential. Digital platforms and community archives, such as the 'Dalit History Month' project and the 'Godna Lives' series curated by tribal cultural collectives, have begun documenting the oral histories of tattooed elders, decoding their symbolism, and reinterpreting these marks through contemporary frameworks. These initiatives echo Diana Taylor's concept of the "repertoire", a form of embodied transmission that survives outside the archive but can be activated through performance, storytelling, and embodied memory.

In this context, the tattoo becomes a counter-colonial and anti-caste visual language, a mark of resilience rather than shame. The resurgence is also distinctly political. As historian Anupama Rao observes, "the Dalit body has historically been a site of imposed inscriptions, of untouchability, stigma, and pollution. To inscribe it on one's own terms is to overturn the semiotics of caste."

Conclusion: Skin as Script, the Body as Archive

The stories etched into the skins of Dalit and Adivasi communities reveal a radical truth: history does not remain confined to texts or state archives. It is also inscribed in bodies, through marks that carry memory, resistance, and identity. From the spiritual defiance of the Ramnami Dalits to the ritual tattooing of tribal women, these bodily inscriptions challenge the erasures of dominant historiography. They are not merely adornments but forms of authorship, non-textual, embodied archives that must be read on their own terms.

Drawing from Subaltern Studies, this paper has shown how tattooing functions as a counter-archive, a medium of historical agency when formal records silenced subaltern voices.

Memory theory and feminist anthropology further illuminate the tattoo as a performative act of remembrance, grounded in pain, ritual, and resistance. These marks made visible what the dominant society sought to suppress: the dignity, faith, and historical presence of marginalised people.

Colonial and postcolonial regimes worked to erase or stigmatise the tattooed body, branding it primitive or unsophisticated. Yet today, a powerful revival is underway. Dalit and Adivasi artists, activists, and scholars are reclaiming tattooing as both cultural heritage and political assertion. These revivals transform erased bodies into living texts, mobilising memory in public, performative, and defiant ways.

In recovering the tattoo as an archive, this paper calls for a more imaginative historical method, one that acknowledges the body as a legitimate site of knowledge. To read the skin is to confront histories that dominant systems have tried to erase – histories written not in ink and paper, but in pain, pigment, and profound persistence.

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Sectarian Authority and the Politics of Image-Making in the Early 19th-Century Marwar

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Abstract

While paintings have long functioned as a medium of political and religious articulation in Rajput courts, the early nineteenth century marks a moment of heightened strategic deployment, where visual culture became increasingly central to the reconfiguration of kingship and sectarian authority under conditions of imperial decline and colonial encroachment. This paper examines the transformation of the Marwar school of painting particularly during the reign of Maharaja Man Singh of Jodhpur (r. 1803–1843), focusing on the royal patronage extended to the Nath sect and its implications for visual culture, social hierarchy, and state polity. It argues that Man Singh's personal devotion to the Nath yogis, produced a decisive reorientation in artistic themes, iconography, and patronage structures in Marwar. Through the analysis of miniatures, murals, and illustrated manuscripts, the paper showcases how sectarian affiliation is articulated in visual culture. The study collocates artistic transformation with the changes in the socio-political standing of the Nath sect.

Keywords: *Nath* patronage, Sectarian politics, Marwar painting, Visual Culture, Aesthetic Authority

Methodology

This study employs art historical visual analysis supported by historical contextualisation. A select few Marwar miniatures, murals and manuscript paintings are closely analysed for iconography and composition. This visual analysis draws on *Nainsi ri Khyat* as a source for longue durée social structures in Marwar, allowing for a comparative assessment of how sectarian hierarchies were reconfigured by the early nineteenth century and Colonel James Tod's Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan to situate artistic production with contemporary political hierarchies. Secondary scholarship on Marwar paintings and early modern Rajasthan provides an interpretive framework. The approach treats paintings as historical sources embedded in structures of power.

Introduction

The Marwar school of painting, centred in Jodhpur has long been recognised for its distinctive aesthetic vocabulary with bold lines, combinations of red and yellow, application of folk art, depiction of feudal splendour, the drawing of palatial buildings and Rajput architecture highlights its style.[1] While earlier scholarship has often treated Rajput paintings as an expression of courtly taste or devotional sentiment, this study seeks to emphasise their embeddedness in power relations and sectarian affiliations. Within this framework, the reign of Maharaja Man Singh emerges as a particularly significant moment of transformation.

Man Singh's rule coincided with a period of political uncertainty for the Jodhpur state, marked by Maratha pressure, British intervention, and internal factionalism. In this context, his intense devotion to the Nath sect, especially to the yogi Jallandharnathji, assumed political as well as spiritual significance. Nath yogis, traditionally associated with asceticism, liminality, and yogic power (*siddhi*), were drawn into the heart of the Marwar court, receiving land grants, monastic patronage, and unprecedented visual representation.[2] This paper investigates the ways in which Maharaja Man Singh's patronage of the Nath sect reshaped the Marwar school of painting,

[1] Rosemary Crill, *"Marwar Paintings: A History of the Jodhpur Style."* (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1999),15-25.

[2] B. N. Goswamy and Eberhard Fischer, *Pahari Masters* (1992), 145–47; Mahesh Sharma, "Religious Mobility in Early Modern North India," *IESHR* 48, no. 3 (2011): 340–42; Molly Emma Aitken, *The Intelligence of Tradition* (2010), 88–92.

examining both its visual consequences and its broader social implications. It analyses how this patronage contributed to the alteration in the social and political status of Nath yogis while also exploring the conflicts and negotiations that emerged with other influential groups, particularly the Charans and Ramanandi Vaishnavas. Further, the study attempts to situate these artistic and sectarian transformations within the evolving political structure of the Jodhpur state. Through these interconnected questions, the paper seeks to reinterpret Marwar painting as a visual articulation of sectarian authority and kingship rather than merely an aesthetic tradition.

The Marwar School before Man Singh: Context and Continuities

Since the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, Mughal influence has been prominent. The realism in paintings certainly emerged from Mughal art. Scholar Andrew Topsfeld describes the patron of *Pali ragmala,* Bithal Das, who was in Mughal service under the Akbar court. Therefore, the Mughal style started taking place after that time.[3] However, these elements were never adopted wholesale. Instead, they were selectively reworked to articulate Rajput ideals of kingship and artistic expression. Murals from Nagaur and Jodhpur forts as documented by Ramavatar Agarwala, reveal a courtly world less concerned with imperial grandeur than with embodied kingship depicted through pleasure, ritual, and proximity. Architectural settings are flattened, colours intensified, and figures rendered with expressive immediacy rather than Mughal restraint.[4] This aesthetic shift anticipates what William Dalrymple describes as the 'liberation' of Rajasthani painting from Mughal formality, a process already underway before the Nath ascendancy but not yet philosophically radicalised.[5]

Debra Diamond, an art historian, who rediscovered and realised the significance of the remarkable Man Singh Nath paintings- began two generations earlier, in 1752, during the reign of

[3] Andrew Topsfield, "The Pali Ragamala," in *Court Painting in Rajasthan*, ed. Andrew Topsfield (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2000), 63–78.

[4] Agarwala, Ramavatar. "The Marwar Murals." *Artibus Asiae* 39, no. 3/4 (1977): 268–72. https://doi.org/10.2307/3250168. 31/1/2026.

[5] William Dalrymple, "Pleasure palace," *The Guardian*, 20 June 2009. 26/1/2026.

Maharaja Bakhat Singh.[6] Bakhat Singh came to the throne just as the Mughal empire was beginning to collapse and the Jodhpur state was reclaiming its independence from Delhi. His patronage foregrounded *śṛṅgāra rasa* (the erotic aesthetic), positioning the ruler not as an ascetic or epic hero but as a sensuous hedonist. The richly decorated Badalamahala is an unparalleled example of his taste. His beloved *pasavana* (consort), Gayana Jan Mahtab[7] was also enthusiastic about art and music. As Agarwala notes, these murals are remarkable for both scale and thematic audacity, privileging pleasure as a legitimate mode of royal representation.[8] Dalrymple further observes that sexuality here is not frivolous but philosophically grounded within the Hindu aesthetic system, where *kāma* stands alongside dharma and artha as a fundamental goal of life.[9] The Marwar school under Bakhat Singh thus articulated kingship through abundance, vitality, and sensory plenitude, establishing a visual language that was expressive, experimental, and unapologetically non-Mughal. Yet despite this stylistic autonomy, the ideological framework remained court-centred. Authority still flowed from the ruler outward; religious figures, when present, remained subordinate to royal narrative.

On the contrary, Maharaja Vijay Singh was a devout Vaishnava and depicted himself as a pious monarch. He commissioned many temples like Natavaraji and Madanmohanji. Similarly, the images commissioned by him were designed to illustrate the great Vaishnavite epics, especially the Ramayana and Krishna lila. These poster-sized folios were likely used in public recitations, demonstrating an intensification of narrative dynamism rather than a retreat into austerity; these paintings functioned as visual pedagogy. [10]

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[6] Debra Diamond, *Garden and Cosmos: The Royal Paintings of Jodhpur*, ed. Debra Diamond, Catherine Glynn, and Karni Singh Jasol (Washington, DC: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and Freer Gallery of Art, 2008).

[7] B.M.Javalia, *"Jodhpur ke Maharaja Bakhat Singh Ki Preyasi Gayana Jan Mahatab Krta Mandira Ki Prasastiyan"* Sodha Patrika, XXIV, 36-37.

[8] Ramavatar Agarwala, "The Marwar Murals." *Artibus Asiae* 39, no. 3/4 (1977), 269 https://doi.org/10.2307/3250168. 31/1/2026.

[9] William Dalrymple, *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*, 186–88.

[10] Molly Emma Aitken, *The Intelligence of Tradition* (2010), 120–25; B. N. Goswamy, *Essence of Indian Art* (1986), 168–70.

Despite differences in thematic emphasis, the reigns of both Bakhat Singh and Vijay Singh share several continuities. What is absent, however, is the metaphysical abstraction and sectarian inversion that defines Man Singh's period. Yogis appear in Vijay Singh's paintings as sages or forest ascetics, not as political actors or cosmic sovereigns. Understanding this pre-Man Singh context is crucial, for it establishes both the continuities that Man Singh's atelier inherited and the precise points at which Nath's patronage produced a radical visual and ideological rupture.

Nath Patronage and the Reordering of Visual Power under Maharaja Man Singh

The Naths, who were the disciples of Jallunar Nath, were called in Marwar as *Jogeshur Sarup* or *Aisji*. Their ears were slit and they wore peculiar cylindrical rings. They were generally considered as gurus to some Rajput clans.[11] The origin of the growing Nath influence could be traced to the days when the ruler was caught in a long siege against Bheem Singh's forces at the fort of Jalore. He was on the verge of surrendering to the troops of Bheem Singh when Ais Deo Nath assuming the mantle of prophecy, pronounced that "no capitulation was inscribed in the book of fate whose page revealed brighter days for Mann"[12]. Deo Nath asked Man Singh to continue and to his surprise, Bheem Singh died unexpectedly in December 1804. Man Singh attributed his success to his *'guru'* Deo Nath. "The gratitude of Maharaja Man had no limits, no honours, no grants were sufficient to mark his sense of obligation".[13]

Extensive jagirs were conferred upon the Nath, his income accounted for a tenth of the revenue of the state. For the next few years, Deo Nath held the keys to his master's conscience, which was employed in promoting the Nath influence till it became dominant in the state.[14] He constructed about eighty-four *mandirs* with monasteries, Mahamandir- the chief monastery became one of the largest religious institutions. Deo Nath took great advantage of his elevated

[11] *Report on the Census of 1891*, Vol. II ; *The castes of Marwar*, 93.

[12] James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan, or the Central and Western Rajpoot States of India*, vol. 1 (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1829), 565.

[13] *Ibid*., 565.

[14]James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan, or the Central and Western Rajpoot States of India*, Vol. I (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1829), 565.

position, extending his sphere of influence to the political and administrative side too. Most of the *thakurs* and the nobility, displaced from their hereditary roles, got annoyed to see Nath elevated to such a high status.[15] When Ais Deo Nath was at the height of his power and influence, he was assassinated by Amir Khan.[16]

This reconfiguration of power found its most sustained articulation in visual culture, and provided a 'visual break'. Now the paintings illustrate a philosophical world, higher spheres of mystical yogic speculation. Images now attempted to reflect on eternity, and to address the great mysteries of human existence: what are we doing here? How did we come? Who created us?. The *Nath Charitra* series (c.1824), a corpus of sixty-three paintings produced for Nath monasteries and royal patrons alike, stands as the most extensive visual record of this shift. Stylistically, these works silently depart from the narrative density and descriptive naturalism of Vijay Singh's time. Colour fields expand and flatten; figures are more isolated within vast planes of gold, indigo or ochre.[17]

The story of the growing pride and arrogance of the Nath order is also told in paintings. In the early paintings, Nath yogis are shown closeted in their monastic institutions, performing their austerities. Later, they emerge to take over the kingdom. In *Maharaja Man Singh Worshipping Jallandharnathji* (c. 1828), this reordering of visual power is displayed. This painting has everything typical of a 19th-century Jodhpur painting - sharp almond-shaped eyes with a tinge of red, intricately painted costumes, dark-blue skies with swirling clouds and pink-maroon rocks with golden contours. But what makes this intriguing is how the artist has played with the size of both the figures clearly portraying hierarchy - Nathji looks proportionately bigger than Maharaja Man Singh, conveying his higher status than the Rathore ruler. Among lush green landscape and a shimmering river, Nathji is seated on a tiger skin holding a trident and a cup. He smiles at Maharaja Man Singh who is in complete surrender, with his hands clasped in Anjali Mudra. The hierarchy is stressed by the absence of the halo around the powerful Rathore ruler. Bulaki's mastery over his

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[15] Jodhpur State Records, *Haqiqat Bahi* No. 10,89 ;Tod, Vol. I, pp. 563-64.

[16] James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan, or the Central and Western Rajpoot States of India*, Vol. II (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1829), 115.

[17]Debra Diamond, *"Painting, Power, and Devotion in Marwar," in Garden and Cosmos: The Royal Paintings of Jodhpur*, ed. Debra Diamond, Catherine Glynn, and Karni Singh Jasol (Washington, DC: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and Freer Gallery of Art, 2008).

brush is apparent as he does exactly what his patron wanted- to portray him as a true devotee of his Guru, without the garbs of power.

The available records at the two existing sites of Mahamandira and Caukelāo-ka-mahala prove Man Singh's interest in wall paintings.. One striking feature of the Marwar murals is the visual description of the fashionable feudal way of living in the 18th and 19th centuries. The presence of Radha–Krishna imagery within this visual field should be understood within the broader context of Vaishnava devotional traditions that had long been embedded in Rajput courts, rather than as a direct reflection of royal lifestyle. Such imagery, associated with themes of devotion and *śṛṅgāra*, offered a familiar and culturally sanctioned framework for representing emotion, intimacy, and divine authority, and at times intersected with the gendered spaces of elite life, including the zenana. In this sense, Nath's patronage under Man Singh represents more than a stylistic change, where paintings became a site for political experimentation. The Marwar school articulated a vision of sovereignty rooted in yogic power- one that ultimately proved unsustainable within the emerging colonial order, but left behind a corpus of images unparalleled in Indian art history.

Charans, Ramanandis, and Sectarian Contestation

The rise of Nath authority under Maharaja Man Singh did not occur in a social vacuum. Rather, Nath's patronage profoundly destabilised the existing religious ecology of Marwar, particularly displacing groups that had long mediated between kingship, caste society, and ritual legitimacy. Among these, the Charan bards and the Ramanandi Vaishnava sect emerged as the most visibly marginalised constituencies, their loss of status mirrored not only in court politics but also in the visual record produced by the Man Singh atelier.

The Charans, traditionally revered as genealogists, poets, and moral arbiters of Rajput polity, had occupied a unique position within the Rathore state. As custodians of lineage memory and oral history, they were integral to the symbolic reproduction of kingship. They were socially powerful intermediaries whose endorsement could symbolically legitimise a ruler's lineage and honour. Often they received land grants and ritual privileges in exchange for their services. Their

authority rested on a fusion of caste sanctity, literary production, and proximity to the court.[18] The growing dominance of Nath yogis posed a direct challenge to their close relationship. This displacement is subtly registered in paintings. Earlier Marwar miniatures frequently visualised Charans within courtly settings- reciting genealogies, accompanying rulers on campaigns, or presiding over ritual moments. For instance, Prithvi Raj Sandu- a Charan poet, alongside Maharaja Abhay Singh. In contrast, paintings from Man Singh's reign markedly reduce Charan presence, *Portrait of Bard (Charan) Ishwardas* (c. 1830) confirms that Charans still held occasional visibility at court, this representation is an exception rather than the rule. Most of the surviving paintings from Man Singh's period, especially the *Nath Charitra* series, are dominated by yogic cosmology and Nath figures, with genealogical intermediaries like Charans conspicuously absent. This relative visual absence aligns with the broader sectarian reordering of the Jodhpur polity under Nath patronage.

Parallel tensions emerged with the *Ramanandi* Vaishnava sect. Rathore rulers had cultivated close ties with Vaishnavism, particularly through the Pushtimarg and broader Vaishnava devotional networks as a means of aligning kingship with Brahminical ritual order. Ramanandi ascetics, unlike the antinomian Naths, upheld temple-centred worship, scriptural orthodoxy, and a moral economy rooted in dharma.[19] Their influence is visible in the large-scale narrative paintings commissioned under Vijay Singh, especially Ramayana and Krishna-lila manuscripts that reinforced Vaishnava cosmology and royal piety.[20]

The Nath ascendancy under Man Singh represented a sharp rupture from this devotional regime. Nath philosophy rejected temple ritualism in favour of interiorised yogic practice, emphasising the body as the site of cosmic knowledge. This ideological shift found striking visual

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[18] (a) Nandita Prasad Sahai. *"Crafts and Statecraft in Eighteenth Century Jodhpur."* Modern Asian Studies 41, no. 4 (2007),pp. 683–722. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4499799.
(b) *'The Position of Charans in the Social Life of the Rajputs and other People'*. Rajasthan History Congress, 1978, vol XI, March 1970, Jaipur, pp. 87.

[19] William R. Pinch, *"Remembering Ramanand: Caste and History in Gangetic India," Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 8, no. 1 (1999): 1–17 https://ivsjournal.com/index.php/files/article/view/349 28/1/2026.

[20] Rohan Yadav, *Stylistic Divergence in Rajasthani Miniature Painting: A Comparative Study of Mewar and Marwar Manuscripts.* Visual Culture Innovations. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/399447243_Stylistic_Divergence_in_Rajasthani_Miniature_Painting_A_Comparative_Study_of_Mewar_and_Marwar_Manuscript "26/1/2026"

expression in the *Nath Charitra* series, where cosmology is mapped onto the yogic body and divine hierarchies are reconfigured to place Nath *siddhas* above orthodox Hindu deities. Such imagery implicitly undermined Vaishnava theological authority, recasting gods like Vishnu and Shiva as subordinate within a Nath-centric universe.[21] The displacement of Vaishnava iconography from the court atelier thus mirrored the sect's declining influence in political life.[22]

The replacement of Charan and Ramanandi motifs with Nath images thus signals a broader ideological shift in the sources of legitimacy. Where once genealogical praise, epic narration, and Vaishnava devotion provided social and visual frameworks for legitimising kingship, the Nath period foregrounded direct spiritual experience and ascetic authority as the bedrock of political identity.

Colonial Encounter and the Afterlife of Nath Visuality

The Nath reordering of kingship under Maharaja Man Singh unfolded at a historical moment increasingly shaped by colonial intervention. After Deo Nath, his son Ladoo Nath succeeded. After him came Bhim Nath and soon became so powerful that in all state affairs only he mattered. The Governor-General reported to the Court of Directors that, "the system of plunder prevailing in that quarter is traceable to the ascendency which an individual named Bhim Nath, the Gooroo or spiritual guide of Rajah Man Singh, had acquired over the councils of that prince."[23] The British believed that because of this Nath's influence 'maladministration' of the state prevailed. The payment of the tribute to the British government fell lamentably in arrears.[24]

The deteriorating relations between Man Singh and the British ultimately resulted in the march of a field force against Jodhpur headed by Colonel Sutherland in 1839. While negotiating from the position of strength, Sutherland soon learnt that expulsion of the Naths and their partisans was the most unpalatable thing that could be urged to the Maharaja. Regarding this affair,

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[21] Deborah S. Hutton, "Monastic Patronage and the Construction of Sacred Authority in Western India," *Archives of Asian Art* 62 (2012): 92–96; James Mallinson, "Nāth Sampradāya," *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, vol. 3 (2011), 410–12.

[22] Norbert Peabody, *Hindu Kingship and Polity* (2003), 118–20.

[23] India Political Despatch to the Court of Directors, No. 32 of 1837, para 36.

[24] Abstract from Jodhpur Akhbar dated 9th January 1833. 7 March 1838, No. 27.

Man Singh expressed with great remorse that, 'the measure was of character calculated to destroy his hopes of salvation in the next.'[25] However, the sense of the danger aroused by the advancing Field Force and the adamant attitude of Sutherland ultimately resulted in the submission of the Maharaja to the dictates of the British Government.[26] The Naths' bid to regain their influence and power continued right up to the year 1843.

The British authorities also continued to follow the determined policy of keeping the Naths under check and even to cause their expulsion by force, whenever thought necessary. Between the years 1839 and 1843, several attempts were made by the British detachment from the Jodhpur Legion to expel the undesirable Nath element. Man Singh was extremely hurt by these developments. The British government, however, remained firm in its position. The whole history of Man Singh's relations with the Naths depicts a sense of sincerity and devotional feelings towards this sect. In his own enthusiasm and blind faith in his *gurus*, he undermined the greater responsibility that he had to yield regarding the business of the State and the welfare of his people.[27]

This disjuncture is reflected in the gradual disappearance of Nath themes from courtly visual production after Man Singh's reign. This visual silence does not indicate failure so much as historical foreclosure. Nath visuality represented an alternative grammar of power, one that challenged both Brahmanical orthodoxy and colonial rationality. Its decline underscores the narrowing of political imagination under colonial modernity, where sovereignty became increasingly divorced from metaphysical and ascetic frameworks. Yet, the surviving paintings continue to bear witness to a moment when Marwar's rulers experimented with radically different models of legitimacy, using art as a site of political thought rather than mere representation.

Conclusion

The Marwar paintings produced under Maharaja Man Singh invite a reconsideration of the relationship between art, sectarian authority, and political power in early nineteenth-century

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[25] Sutherland to Maddock dt. 20th October 1839, R.A. O.^H.R.-227, File No.14A, Jodhpur 1839. Collection No. VI,12-13.

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] Singh, Zabar. "INFLUENCE OF NATHS ON MAHARAJA MAN SINGH OF MARWAR (1804—1843)." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 33 (1971): 535–39.

Rajasthan. Far from serving as passive reflections of royal taste or devotional inclination, these images functioned as active sites where power itself was imagined, negotiated, and reconfigured. Through the visual elevation of Nath yogis and the deliberate subordination of the ruler within his own courtly imagery, the Marwar atelier articulated a radical experiment in kingship, one grounded not in genealogy, ritual orthodoxy, or epic lineage, but in spiritual mediation.

This transformation was not merely aesthetic. It emerged from a moment of profound political uncertainty, when the collapse of Mughal authority and the encroachment of colonial power destabilised older frameworks of legitimacy. In this context, Man Singh's patronage of the Nath sect can be understood as formulating a distinct conception of sovereignty which operated outside conventional brahmanical structure. The Nath yogi, endowed with *siddhi* and cosmic knowledge, became the axis of political authority, while painting became the medium through which this metaphysical hierarchy was rendered visible and persuasive.

At the same time, the very radicalism of this vision exposed its limits. Nathan's authority at court was intensely personal, dependent on the charisma of individual *gurus* and sustained through the ruler's devotion rather than through durable institutional structures. Its ascendancy destabilised long-standing intermediaries of Rajput polity-the Charans and Ramanandi Vaishnavas, whose authority had rested on genealogy, narrative, and temple-centred ritual. Their marginalisation, subtly but decisively registered in the visual record, marks a profound reordering of Marwar's religious and social landscape. Yet this reordering remained fragile.[28] With the assassination of key Nath figures and the consolidation of colonial governance, yogic sovereignty proved difficult to sustain within a political order increasingly defined by bureaucratic rationality and legal documentation.

The decline of Nath's visuality in the later nineteenth century should not be read as a failure of the Marwar experiment, but as evidence of the narrowing horizons of political imagination under colonial modernity. British administrative regimes could not accommodate forms of authority rooted in ascetic charisma, metaphysical speculation, and embodied knowledge. As a result, the ambitious cosmological claims of Nath painting gave way to more legible, regulated forms of representation like portraits, architectural surveys, and treaty-bound imagery. What was

[28] Mahesh Sharma, "Religious Mobility in Early Modern North India," *IESHR* 48, no. 3 (2011): 345–48; Norbert Peabody, *Hindu Kingship and Polity* (2003), 112–15; Lindsey Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women* (1992), 67–69.

lost in this transition was not merely a style, but an entire way of conceiving power as something that flowed through the spiritual body as much as through the state.

By foregrounding Nath patronage, this study argues for a re-evaluation of Rajput painting as an arena of ideological experimentation rather than a decorative or devotional tradition. Marwar painting under Man Singh stands at a historical threshold between empire and colony, ritual kingship and bureaucratic sovereignty, embodied ascetic power and modern political authority. These images remind us that the early nineteenth-century Indian court was not merely reacting to imperial decline, but actively imagining alternative futures of rule. In doing so, they leave behind a visual archive that captures sovereignty not as a fixed institution, but as a fragile, contested, and profoundly imaginative enterprise.

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Maazi-o-Mustaqbil 2025
Paper Presentation Competition
Histories of Destruction and Reimaginings
Concept Note

"These fragments I have shored against my ruins."
— T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land

The transient nature of empires and civilisations is perhaps the primary marker of permanence in history. Every epochal shift, whether through war and colonisation or through nature and revolutions, is accompanied by destruction and renewal. Since time immemorial, wherever there is destruction, there is also a paradoxical duality: every ruin is at once a trace of loss but also a site of reconstitution. It is progress that propels humanity forward, even amidst an ever-growing heap of wreckage. In popular discourse, destruction is given an array of pejorative connotations, yet in the annals of history, it has been an essential driver for change. The ruptures in traditions do not mark finality, nor are catastrophes mere collapses. This dual nature of destruction, thus surpasses simplistic binaries of beginning and end, it is a process that simultaneously ruins and revives.
To study destruction, therefore, is to attend to absence. It is to look at vanished archives, find records of displaced peoples, hear silenced voices, and recognise that within these voids lie seeds of renewal. The histories of destruction and reimaginings compel us to see endings not as closures or shutdowns, but rather as unsteady thresholds where ruins meet recoveries and recreations.

Collective memory can be studied empirically to understand how groups remember significant occurrences, such as wars or political leadership. Howard Zinn argued that traditional historical narratives often reflected the memory states want to curate rather than the collective experience of communities. This 'bottom up approach', highlights how significant societal changes often stem from grassroots struggles and resistance. Similarly, Gyanendra Pandey, based on 20th century Indian history, asserted how certain histories became accepted as a nation's "real" history and how this process could lead to violence and collective amnesia regarding that violence. His work suggests

that large-scale violence, like the partition, can establish the boundaries of 'community' through shared memories of such intense moments. Shahid Amin detailed how a specific historical event, the Chauri Chaura incident, was remembered, interpreted, and utilized as a metaphor for India's struggle for independence. Amin analysed how local memory interacted with official historical accounts, revealing discrepancies and misinterpretations that shaped a nation's narrative.

Maurice Halbwachs noted that memory was never a solitary echo but a resonant symphony, conducted in the vast theater of society where each note was attuned to the chords of collective life. Time, in his vision, ceases to be a mere linear passage and becomes a shared horizon — a luminous canvas upon which past and present are ceaselessly intertwined. Remembrance, he shows, is not the passive retrieval of what has been but the active, almost ritual reweaving of meaning, giving continuity to the fragile identities of families, faiths, and nations. Through Coser's masterful curation and lucid introduction, Halbwachs's thought becomes newly accessible, revealing memory as both mirror and stage — at once preserving tradition and inventing its renewal. It contemplated memory not as a static relic entombed in history, but as a living, breathing flame, a vigilant guardian of identity, and a bridge of light spanning the chasm between yesterday's shadow and the yet- unwritten dawn.

It is a truism now to say that history is much more than the story of kings and empires — it is a quiet record of how ordinary people lived, loved, and endured. By turning our gaze from palaces to village fields, from grand battles to everyday struggles, the discipline of history enthuses us to write a narrative that breathes with human dignity. In doing so, we move closer to a past that belongs not just to the victors, but to all of us.

This theme aims to explore destruction not only as an endpoint but also as a generative force. What histories are created when collective memory is fragmented ? How have societies across time and space reimagined themselves in the aftermath of ruin? In what ways does destruction reshape how we engage with archives, how we understand power, and how we form identities?

This *Maazi-o-Mustaqbil*, we hope to initiate conversations around the ideas of destruction, anarchy, violence, and popular reimagination across the fields of history, literature, sociology,

philosophy, political thought, culture and film studies and interrogate literary, textual and oral archives. We invite you to add to this conversation.

"The old world is dying, and the new one struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters."
— Antonio Gramsci

Memory, Trauma, and Reimagination: The Maratha Bargi Raids in 18th-Century Bengal's Cultural Landscape

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Abstract

This paper will try to understand how the memory of the Maratha *Bargi* raids in eighteenth-century Bengal has been recorded and reimagined within the region's vernacular literature, in both secular and religious traditions. Between 1742 and 1751, the incursions led by Raghūjī Bhonsle and Bhāskar Pandit devastated Bengal's agrarian countryside. The popular memory of the raids and atrocities has survived in Bengali literary traditions and cultural practice. The Persian chronicle *Siyar-ul-Muta'akhkhirīn* framed the Bargi invasions in terms of imperial politics, diplomacy, and fiscal disputes. Bengali vernacular texts, on the other hand, portray a radically different idiom which transforms historical trauma into a moral allegory and a dramatic narrative closely intertwined with religion. Texts like *Annadāmaṅgalakāvya* by Bhāratcandra and Mahārāṣṭrapurāṇa by Gaṅgārām project the raids as acts of divine retribution for moral decline, where the goddess and Śiva themselves sanction and later revoke support for the Marathas. Through these reinterpretations, the *Bargīs'* and their raids are transformed into a theological instrument of divine justice. This study situates these literary transformations within the larger *Mangalkāvya* tradition and examines how memory, trauma, and faith intersect to domesticate historical violence into Bengal's sacred moral order. Analysis of Bengali devotional literature and Persian chronicles reveals how regional cultures reimagined empire, catastrophe, and divine will in the eighteenth century. Contextualisation of the narratives within contemporary economic conditions and the dynamics of the *zamindars* and the peasantry also helps us understand the formation of *Bargi* violence-related literature from agrarian Bengal.

Keywords: Maratha *Bargi* raids, Eighteenth-century Bengal, Vernacular literature, *Mangalkāvya* tradition, Cultural memory, Historical trauma.

The Historical Trajectory of Maratha Bargi Raids in Bengal

The Course of the Invasions, 1742–1751

The Maratha incursions into Bengal were a series of raids, lasting nearly a decade from April 1742 until May 1751. These invasions have been recorded with widespread devastation and suffering in the provinces, especially the agrarian countryside of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. Towards the latter half of the seventeenth century and early eighteenth century, Maratha power had already expanded, frequently raiding into territories of smaller states in provinces like Gujarat, Malwa, and Bundelkhand, taking advantage of political instability in the aftermath of the decline of Mughal authority. The expansion further provided an opportunity to raid the wealthy province of Bengal. Detailed discussions on the reasons for the relentless pursuit of the Bengal province by the Marathas are not relevant to our discussion. It is sufficient to note that the Marathas aimed to expand their authority and, more importantly, extract *cauth*, a levy amounting to one-fourth of the provincial revenue[1]. The Maratha military engagement in Orissa, Gondwana and Bengal was led by Raghūjī Bhonsle, a commander in the Maratha army, directly related to the household of Shahu I. Raghūjī might have been invited by domestic enemies of the Bengal *subah*. Some accounts suggest that Mir Jafar sent a hint to the Marathas, encouraging them with the prospect of plunder and the extraction of *cauth* due to the perceived weakness of Bengal. The raids were also politically justified by the Mughal Emperor, who, according to Maratha leader Shahu Raja, had complained about not receiving *cauth* from Bengal. The Emperor was also allegedly motivated by a desire to chastise the *Nawab*, Alivardī Khān, for usurping power by murdering his predecessor, Sarfaraz Khan, in 1740.[2]

[1]Jadunath Sarkar, *Fall of the Mughal Empire*, vol. 1, 1739–1754 (Calcutta: M. C. Sarkar & Sons, 1932), 46–69. Sarkar relies primarily on Persian sources, most importantly the *Siyar-ul-Muta'akhkhirīn* of Ghulām Ḥusayn Khān, for his account of the Bargī incursions and cites vernacular literature like the *Maharashtapurana* of Gaṅgārām for descriptions of the atrocities.

[2] *Ibid*.

The incursions were led by Bhāskar Pant Kolhatkar (Bhāskar Pandit), Raghūjī Bhonsle's Prime Minister, commanding an army of up to 25,000 horsemen. Bhāskar Pandit appeared in the Bardwān district and initiated the first incursion in April of 1742. *Nawab* Alivardī Khān, who was in Orissa at the time, hurried back, but his small army (3,000 to 4,000 cavalry and 5,000 foot musketeers) was surrounded by the Maratha horde near Bardwān and had its food supplies cut off. Mīr Habīb was previously an officer of Alivardī Khān, who treacherously suggested to Bhāskar that he should capitalise on the Nawab's absence and plunder his capital at Murshidābād. In May 1742, 700 Maratha horsemen crossed the river near Murshidābād in a night march and plundered the city. They specifically targeted the house of the chief banker, Fatechand (Jagat Seth), and ransacked several mansions of the rich. Following this raid, Mīr Habīb was installed as the conqueror's governor. The Nawab's authority was destroyed in West Bengal. Bhāskar's main force rested at Katwā, while smaller predatory parties penetrated north of Murshidābād and eastward towards East Bengal, though Mīr Habīb's authority was weak east of the Ganges[3].

Alivardī Khān, despite his troops suffering from low morale, decided on a decisive counter-attack. He planned a surprise attack on the Maratha camp at Katwā. Alivardi chose to launch the attack during the Durga Puja festival. Alivardi crossed the Ajay River secretly and attacked the unsuspecting Maratha camp at dawn on September 27, 1742. The Marathas fled, and the province was cleared of the raiders by December 1742. In March 1743, Raghūjī Bhonsle himself entered Bengal with a large army to demand the *cauth* that he claimed for Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. To counter Raghūjī, Alivardī Khān appealed to his rival, the Peshwā Balaji Rao, for assistance. Alivardi signed a pact with the Peshwā, paying him a subsidy and promising to remit the *cauth*. Bālāji Rāo pursued Raghūjī, defeated him, and drove him back toward the Deccan. The second Maratha invasion repeated the misery of the previous year but lasted only from March to May 1743. In March 1744, Bhāskar Pandit renewed the invasion, characterised by exceptional

[3] Jadunath Sarkar, *Fall of the Mughal Empire*, vol. 1, 1739–1754 (Calcutta: M. C. Sarkar & Sons, 1932), 46–69. Sarkar relies primarily on Persian sources, most importantly the *Siyar-ul-Muta'akhkhirīn* of Ghulām Ḥusayn Khān, for his account of the Bargī incursions and cites vernacular literature like the *Maharashtapurana* of Gaṅgārām for descriptions of the atrocities.

brutality. However, Alivardī Khān, weary of the conflict and financial demands, lured Bhāskar Pandit and his chief officers to a supposed diplomatic interview and had them massacred[4].

Raghūjī returned in February 1745 to avenge Bhāskar's death. He captured Katak and Durlabhrām and later plundered parts of Bihar. Although Raghūjī was forced to retreat after a severe battle near Katwā, he left Mīr Habīb, supported by Maratha and Afghān troops, to continue the raiding. Mīr Habīb maintained control over Medinīpura and Hijili. The constant campaigning and political turbulence eventually led to a negotiated settlement, finalising the Maratha claim on Orissa and the payment of *cauth*. The Maratha incursions ended in May 1751 when Alivardī Khān signed a treaty with Raghūjī Bhonsle, and Alivardi forfeited Orissa to Raghūjī. Orissa was essentially divided: the northern part (including Medinīpura and Jalesar) was retained by Alivardi, while the southern part (Cuttack, Balasore, and Puri) was governed by Maratha officers, effectively under Maratha control. Alivardi agreed to pay Raghūjī Bhonsle an annual sum of twelve lakhs of rupees as *cauth* for Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. The frontier of Bengal was officially fixed at the river Suvarnarekhā,[5] near Jālesar, and the Marathas were bound never to cross this line again. Although the official incursions ceased, the sources indicate that post-1751, non-governmental, predatory raids continued sporadically, sometimes attributed to unruly Maratha soldiers (*Bargīs*) acting independently, particularly affecting the southern fringe areas of Bengal, such as Medinīpura and parts of Bardwān.

Patterns of Violence and Devastation

The *Bargīs* became synonymous with terror and destruction throughout Bengal. The Maratha hordes conducted "wanton destruction and unspeakable outrage"[6]. They plundered villages,

[4]Three variant narratives of Bhaskara's assassination appear in Yūsuf ʿAlī, *Tārīkh-i Maḥābat Jang* (n.p., ca. 1750s); Ghulām Ḥusayn Khān, *Siyar-ul-Muta'akhkhirīn*, trans. Muḥammad Hāshim (Calcutta: Nawakīlit Press, 1841); and Gaṅgārām, *Mahārāṣṭrapurāṇa* (n.p., 18th century). The accounts differ slightly but narrate a similar story.

[5]Ghulām Ḥusayn Khān Ṭabāṭabā, *Siyar-ul-Muta'akhkhirīn*, trans. Muḥammad Hāshim (Calcutta: Nawakīlit Press, 1841), 440–48.

[6]Sir Jadunath Sarkar, *Fall of the Mughal Empire*, Vol. 1: 1739–1754, 3rd ed. (Calcutta: Orient Longman, 1964; repr., 1971), 457–458. Sarkar notes that "the roving Maratha bands committed wanton destruction and unspeakable outrage," citing contemporary eyewitnesses like Gangaram and Vaneshwar Vidyalankar, who detailed the looting, physical mutilation, and violence perpetrated against the civilians of Bengal.

causing the peasantry to flee. They looted all types of traders, blacksmiths, potters, and land-owning *Rājputs*. Supplies like rice and pulses became prohibitively expensive, leading to starvation. The *Bargīs* tied up victims and tortured them to extract money, sometimes mutilating them by cutting off their hands, ears, or noses, or drowning them. A contemporary Sanskrit source noted they were "pitiless slayers of pregnant women, infants, and Brahmans". Women were subjected to sexual violence and were abducted. They set fire to houses, small and large, temples, and dwelling-places. Brahman *pandits* fled with loads of manuscripts.[7]

The Mangalkāvya Tradition and the Vernacular Imagination

Vernacular Bengali literature, particularly the *Mangalkāvya* tradition, is useful in understanding shifting dynamics of perceptions, often propagated through new narratives within the fold of goddess worship. Kumkum Chatterjee demonstrates that these texts, especially *Caṇḍīmaṅgalakāvya* and *Annadāmaṅgalakāvya*, used the idiom of goddess worship to encode local perceptions of conquest, power, and legitimacy. In the late sixteenth century, when Mughal armies were still subduing Bengal, they appeared in the Bengali imagination as monstrous invaders. In Dvija Mādhava's *Caṇḍīmaṅgalakāvya* (1579), the goddess Caṇḍī slays a demon named 'Mongol daitya', a literary invention whose name echoes "Mughal" and symbolises the terror of the imperial military advance. The poet's wordplay on Mongol/Mangal (meaning both "Mughal" and "auspicious") allowed the demon's destruction to become a moral and cosmic victory for Bengal's protective goddess. Yet, paradoxically, the same poet praised Emperor Akbar as a just and noble ruler, "a reincarnation of Arjuna", revealing both fear and admiration within the vernacular perception[8].

By the eighteenth century, after Mughal rule had become normalised, this antagonism gave way to accommodation. In Bhāratcandra Ray's *Annadāmaṅgalakāvya* (1752), Emperor Jahangir, once punished by the goddess, ultimately becomes her devotee, even presiding over a Durga Puja at

[7]Gaṅgārām, *Maharashtapurana* see p - 29-31.

[8] Kumkum Chatterjee, "Goddess encounters: Mughals, Monsters and the Goddess in Bengal," *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 5, 2013: 1450–1453.

his court.[9] Similarly, in Gangaram's *Mahārāṣṭrapurāṇa*, the Muslim Nawab of Bengal is depicted as a righteous ruler blessed by the goddess for protecting his people[10]. Thus, Bengali vernacular texts register a striking transformation, from portraying the Mughals as demonic conquerors to integrating them within Bengal's sacred moral order. Through the *Mangalkāvya* idiom, Bengal's regional culture embodies imperial power, portrayed as another expression of the goddess's divine will (for the protection and prosperity of Bengal).

Theological Reimagination: The Bargīs in Bengali Vernacular Literature

Bhāratcandra's *Annadāmaṅgalakāvya*: Divine Wrath and Conspicuous Silence

The perceptions of the *Bargīs* vary across the *Mangalkāvyas*. Bhāratcandra Ray writes about the *Bargi* raids in the prologue to his trilogy – *Annadāmaṅgalakāvya* [11]. In the *Granthasūcanā* (Introduction), the section detailing the Maratha invasions, the "Maratha king" (Raghūjī Bhonsle) has a dream in which *Śiva* appears to him, deeply angered by the "wickedness" and "sins" of the rulers of Bengal (specifically Alivardī Khān), who have stopped showing respect to the gods and have oppressed the people.

> The dream which the Maratha king saw made him angry; Raghūjī Bhonsle sent Bhaskara Pandit, and with him an army of men, ugly and fierce-troopers from Maharashtra, Saurashtra [Surat and surrounding areas], and other places. They robbed the people of Bengal and made them beggars, and making bridges of boats they crossed the Ganges.[12]

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[9]Ibid, 1435–1487. Chatterjee explains that in Bharatchandra's narrative, the Mughal Emperor Jahangir is initially hostile but is eventually forced to acknowledge the power of the goddess Annapurna. The text then depicts the Emperor as a devotee who establishes a Durga Puja at the Mughal court.

[10]*Ibid*, 1471–74.

[11]The *Annadā Mangal* of Bhāratcandra (or *Nutan Mangal*) is a highly significant Bengali narrative poem in three parts, in praise of Annapurna, a form of Parvati, who is widely worshipped in Bengal. The narrative intertwines Puranic myths with historical and regional contexts.

[12]Bharatchandra-Granthabali, Bangiya Sahitya Parishat,1942. Exact translations to this work are not available except one furnished by Edward Dimock and Pratulcandra in their introduction to the translation of Maharashtrapuran.

He holds accountable the misdeeds of Alivardi's forces, for which the goddess divinely intervenes by sending the armies of Raghūjī to punish the nawab.

> After the desecration of the holy place by the Nawab 'Alivardi's troops, Šiva's attendant Nandi became violently angry and was about to destroy the universe. He was prevented from doing so by Śiva, who directed him to appear in the dream referred to in the verse above to the Maratha king Sahu at Satārā, who would then set forth to punish the Nawab[13]

The work of Bhāratcandra surprisingly lacks a detailed account of the Marathas. He made only a few brief references to the Marathas, including a brief mention of their destruction of Bhubaneśvar in Orissa. This silence is surprising for several reasons. First, Bhāratcandra hailed from Bardhamāna in West Bengal, a region that had suffered heavily during the Maratha invasions (the *Bargi* raids). As someone directly from an area devastated by these incursions, he would have had a firsthand understanding of their impact. Second, biographical accounts suggest that in his youth, Bhāratcandra was even sheltered by a Maratha cavalry officer who saved him from the wrath of the local ruler, the *Mahārājā* of Bardhamāna. This personal connection, along with his regional background, meant that he was better placed than most of his contemporaries to comment on the Marathas in his writings[14].

Gaṅgārām's *Mahārāṣṭrapurāṇa*: Sin, Sanctioned Punishment, and the Goddess's Withdrawal

Gaṅgārām, in his *Mahārāṣṭrapurāṇa*[15], an 18th-century Bengali narrative poem concerning the Maratha invasions, refrains from blaming the armies of Alivardi solely as the cause of divine wrath.

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[13] *Ibid*.

[14] Gaṅgārām, *Maharashtapurana* translation by Edward C Dimock, Pratulacandra Gupta. see-Introduction, origins of Maratha invasions.

[15] The nature of the Maharashtrapuran is debated. Kumkum Chatterjee argues for its consideration within the Mangalkavya tradition. It is structured to mimic puranic literature, typical of other texts in the Mangalkavya tradition, and has a narrative rooted in religious tones. However, Dimock and Pratulcandra highlight that the text is largely secular, despite its usage of religious elements, and focuses on material topography and narration of events beyond the realm of religion.

Here, the conflict is rooted in divine justice and ethical failure. The *Bargīs'* arrival is sanctioned by the goddess Durga (Pārvati) and Śiva. This divine mandate was to punish the Nawab of Bengal ('Alivardī Khān) and to punish the people of Bengal because they had become corrupt, abandoning worship and indulging in amorous sport and injuring others. The Maratha leader, Shahu Raja, was directed in a dream to punish the Nawab for his sin. Political justifications, such as the Nawab's failure to pay the *cauth* (revenue) to the Mughal Emperor, are also acknowledged within this religious context, highlighting the interconnected layers of guilt.

Śrīśrīkrṣṇa

rādhākrṣṇa nāhi bhaje pāpamati haiñā /

rātradina krda kare parastrī laiñā //

śrīngāra kautuke jiba thake sarbbakṣana /

hena nāhi jāne sei ki habe kakhana //

parahinsa paranindā kare rātridine /

ei sakala kathā bine anya nāhi mane //

eta jadi papa haila prthibi upare /

*pāpera kārane prthi bhāra bhāra sahite när*e //

The people of the earth were filled with sin, and there was no worship of Rādhā and Krsna. Day and night the people took their pleasure with the wives of others. No one knew what might happen at any time. Day and night were spent in amorous sport, and in abusing others and doing injury to them. There was no thought of anything else. So great was this burden of sin upon the earth that Earth was unable to bear it

Here, Gangaram frames the extreme violence as a divine punishment sent by the gods to cleanse the earth, which had become physically weighed down by the "burden of sin" and the religious neglect of the Bengali people. He then narrates that the earth requests Brahma to put an end to the reign of Adharma, who takes the matter to *śaṅkara.*

andīke dākīyā siba baliche bacana /

dakşina sahare tumi jāha tatakşana //

sāhurājā nāme eka änche prthibite /

adhisthāna haya jāiā tāhāra dehete//

biparita pāpa haila prthībi upare /

duta pāthāiñā jena (pāpe loka māre)//

Some time later, Siva remembered these things and called Nandi and said to him: Go now to the city in the south. There is a king on earth, Sāhurājā by name. Go to him, and enter into his body. Much sin and evil have come upon the earth. Let him send his agents, that the sinners and evildoers be punished.[16]

As the narrative progresses, the *Bargīs* cease to be instruments of divine will and become known for indiscriminate plunder and brutality. They are depicted as cruel marauders who commit widespread atrocities: they tortured people who could not pay money, sometimes cutting off hands, noses, and ears, or drowning victims in tanks. They looted gold and silver, seized and committed gang-rape on women, and burnt villages; large houses (*Bāngālā*, *Chāuārī*), and pavilions for worship (*Viṣṇu mandapas*). This extreme cruelty eventually leads the goddess to withdraw her patronage and support the Nawab of Bengal instead, ensuring the defeat of the *Bargi* general, Bhaskar Pandit.

lokera bipatya deikhā rūsilā pārbbati //

pāpişţa mārite adesilā pasupati /

brahmaṇa baişṇaba haitya kaila pāpamati //

brāhmaṇa baişṇabera himsā dekhibāre nāri /

eteka kahiyā tabe rūsilā sankari //

bhairabi jogini jata nikaţe chila /

jodahasta kairā tārā chamute dārāila //

[16]Gaṅgārām, *Mahārāṣṭrapurāṇa*, trans. Edward C. Dimock and Pratulacandra Gupta.

tabe durgā kahe suna jateka bhairabi /

bhāskarake bāma haiñā nabāke sadaya habi //

When she saw the dire straits of the people, Parvati was very angry. Paśupati [Siva] ordered that the sinners should be killed. The evil-minded ones had killed Brahmans and Vaisnavas. Sankari was also angry, and said: -I cannot countenance such injury to Brahmans and Vaisnavas. There were many Bhairavīs, and Yoginis around her, making gestures of obeisance with joined hands, standing in front of her. Sańkarī spoke to them in this way: -Hear, O Bhairavīs. Be hostile to Bhāskara; be gracious toward the Nabab.[17]

The *Madanamohana-bandanā*: Local Devotion and Divine Warrior

One of the lines in the text of the *Maharashṭă Purāṇa* reads: *"But Gopal defended Bonabişnupur and defeated the Bargīs, and against him the Bargīs could do nothing."* The reigning king of Vishnupur at the time of the Maratha raids was Gopal Singh. But the allusion is to the presiding deity of Viṣṇupura-Gopāla, a name of Kṛṣṇa or Madanamohana. The poet might have intended a play on the word *Gopal*. The story is narrated in detail in the *Madanamohana-bandanā*, written probably in the eighteenth century by Jayakrşṇadāsa. The manuscript of the work which we have is dated 1267 B. S. (A. D. 1861). The narrative goes like this-

Hearing the people's prayers, Madanamohana takes on a divine warrior form, mounts his horse, and rides out to battle. He appears at the yuja-ghat, where the Bargi general Bhaskara Pandit sees his immense, godlike figure and flees in terror. The Lord then lights the cannons himself, killing the Bargis' elephants and driving them off. When the king later hears that the guns were fired without his orders, the soldiers say they don't know who did it, but one remarks that he smelled the sweet scent of Krishna's body when the shots were fired. Realising *the miracle, the king trembles with devotion and sorrow, lamenting that he was too unworthy to see Krishna himself.*[18]

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[17]Gaṅgārām, *Mahārāṣṭrapurāṇa*, trans. Edward C. Dimock and Pratulacandra Gupta.

[18]*Ibid*.

Political Economy and Literary Production: The Zamindars and the Poets

The theme of divine intervention is common across these texts. The violence of the *Bargīs* has been explained as an act of divine wrath. However, the onus of the destruction brought by the Marathas is not necessarily thrust upon the Marathas themselves but rather as divinely sanctioned punishment against Alivardi's forces and the people of Bengal. The poets who wrote these texts came from the courts of local zamindars and aristocracy, which were not necessarily satisfied with the "usurpation" of Alivardi. Some of them could have benefited from the earliest raids. The raids led to severe financial demands upon the zamindars. Alivardī Khān was able to raise an enormous contribution of one crore rupees at one time and fifty lakhs on another occasion from the zamindars during the invasion.[19] After capturing territory, the Marathas themselves started diplomatic negotiations with the zamindars in an effort to consolidate their hold, even if they did not pursue direct control of these territories. Ratnalekha Ray argues in favour of a closer alliance between the Zamindars and Alivardī Khān that had already materialised by the 1740s, on the eve of the first incursions. The financial accumulation and large armies maintained by *zamindars* during the time of Alivardī Khān proved crucial contributions to the defence against the Maratha invaders. The *Rajas* of Bardhamāna and Bishnupur set aside their hereditary enmity and unified with Alivardī Khān for the common defence of their territories[20]. However, despite the support they provided, the invasions led to heavy financial demands on the nobility. Some corroboration can be drawn from here in the shifting narratives about the perception of Maratha raiders in Bangla texts.

The Imperial Gaze: The *Siyar-ul-Muta'akhkhirīn* and the Persian Chronicle Tradition

The *Siyar-ul-Muta'akhkhirīn*, a detailed Persian chronicle, portrays the *Bargīs* primarily as swift, capable, and politically instrumental military forces. The *Bargīs* are identified as Maratha light horsemen renowned for their marvellously swift horses. The narrative focuses strictly on imperial

[19]Ratnalekha Ray, *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society c. 1760–1850* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979,, 35–36.

[20]*Ibid*.

political mechanisms and revenue disputes. The *Siyar-ul-Muta'akhkhirīn*, typical of the Indo-Persian tarikh tradition, foregrounds the actions and calculations of rulers and nobles. The *Bargīs* (Marathas) were agents commissioned to exact the *cauth* for the province, a tribute traditionally belonging to the Emperor of Delhi, which the *Nawab* was withholding. The invasion is discussed in terms of strategic military manoeuvres, such as the general Bháskara Pandit coming with nearly 20,000 horsemen and the eventual political resolution where Alivardī Khān secured a treaty, ceding Orissa and agreeing to pay twelve lakhs of rupees annually in tribute[21].

The *Siyar-ul-Muta'akhkhirīn* generally refers to the Marathas' overall rise, noting the "elevation of the Mahrattas" and the process by which Nizam-ul-mulk excited them "to invade Hindoostan". Regarding the raids in Bengal specifically, the history speaks of the time following Alivardi-khan's takeover of the viceroyalty of Bengal, Behar, and Orissa. At this point, the Marathas had already focused on the region: The Marathas had "already cast their eyes upon these rich provinces" of Bengal. The author notes that it was "lucky... for the inhabitants that those merciless freebooters had to deal with such a governor as Ali-verdi-khan". The text asserts that Alivardī Khān, by his talents both for war and government, "found means to repel those ravagers, and at last to drive them entirely out of Bengal". This occurred in the context of the Marathas having already secured their conquests in Malwa and Guzerat.

Conclusion: Memory, Trauma, and the Survival of the Bargi in Bengal's Cultural Consciousness

The vernacular remembrance of the *Bargi* invasions reveals how Bengal's literary culture mediated the intersection of memory, trauma, and theology. By reinterpreting historical devastation through the idiom of divine justice, texts such as *Mahārāṣṭrapurāṇa* and *Annadāmaṅgalakāvya* transformed political catastrophe into a moral allegory. This process of reimagination not only preserved collective memory but also offered a framework for reconciling suffering with faith. Against the bureaucratic detachment of Persian chronicles, these Bengali narratives foreground the

[21]Ghulām Ḥusayn Khān Tabātabāī, *The Siyar-ul-Mutakherin, a History of the Mahomedan Power in India during the Last Century*, rev. from the trans. of Hājī Muṣṭafā and collated with the Persian original by Lt. Col. John Briggs, Madras Army, London: Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland, 1832.

emotive and ethical dimensions of history, showing how regional literature reconstituted power, piety, and community in the face of the raids. Though nearly three centuries have passed since the *Bargi* raids, their memory still lingers in fragments of Bengal's collective consciousness as history, and folk memory. The figure of the *Bargi* survives in lullabies, idioms, and oral traditions that transform terror into cautionary and cultural memory. The most enduring example is the Bengali lullaby:

খোকা ঘুমালো, পাড়া জুড়ালো,

বর্গি এলো দেশে।

বুলবুলি তে ধান খেয়েছে,

খাজনা দেব কিসে?

Khoka ghumalo, para juralo,

Bargi elo deshe.

Bulbulite dhan kheyechhe,

Khajna debo kishe?

The child has slept, the village is still,

The Bargis have come to the land.

The bulbul birds have eaten the paddy—

How shall we pay the tax?

Historians and folklorists view this lullaby as a unique "fossilisation" of 18th-century collective trauma, where a specific decade of political instability was permanently etched into Bengal's oral culture. Tapan Raychaudhuri interprets the lyrics as corroborative evidence of "scorched earth" tactics of the Maratha cavalry, the "Bulbul eating the paddy" could be a folk memory of the literal burning of the granaries (the *Golas*), which led to localised famines.[22] Kumkum Chatterjee further notes that the poem's unique focus on economic anxiety reflects the

[22]Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir: An Introductory Study in Social History* (Calcutta: A. Mukherjee & Co., 1953; repr., Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1969), 14–18.

inability to pay taxes after being looted. She suggests that the comparison of the Marathas to "*Bulbul*" birds is a way of "othering" the invaders[23]. Bengali folklorists like Ashutosh Bhattacharya have commented on the "domestication" of the *Bargi* figure. Over generations, the "*Bargi*" has been transformed from a literal cavalryman into a metaphorical term used to discipline children.

This haunting rhyme, still known in parts of rural Bengal, carries echoes of famine, fear, and helplessness under raid. In villages across Burdwan, Medinīpura, and Bankura, ruins and local legends still mark the "paths of the *Bargīs*," while temple narratives recall divine intervention against their assaults. The *Bargīs* persist as echoes of a collective trauma that Bengal could neither forget nor fully historicise, embodying how a society transforms violence into memory and memory into moral reflection.

[23]Kumkum Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 116–121.

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Situating the Sacred: Ezhava Esotericism, Ritual Participation, and the Reform-Induced Reconfiguration of Possession and Propitiation Rituals in Kerala

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a historical appraisal of the esoteric, ritual landscape of the Ezhava community in Kerala, situated within broader socio-historical frameworks of caste, reform and religious change, through an analysis of festivals, deity cults and domestic rituals, and understands their transformations due to aspirations of upward mobility. Through this study, the Ezhava ritual world is studied as a site where caste and religiosity are constantly redefined through external stigmatisation and internal reform. The analysis of Ezhava's engagement within broader esoteric traditions prevalent in Kerala showed the complex position Ezhava occupied within the ritual hierarchy of Kerala, as votaries but not ritual specialists, similar to upper castes such as Nairs. The impact of reforms led to the suppression and disappearance of certain traditions such as Maadan worship, while it created conditions for the selective reformulation of other practices such as ancestor worship. The re-adoption of rituals can be viewed through the lens of Hidden Transcripts, wherein traditions can convey meanings concealed from power holders in society.

Keywords: Ezhava ritual practices, caste and religiosity, social reform and mobility, esoteric traditions (Kerala).

Introduction

This paper undertakes a historical appraisal of the esoteric[1], ritual landscape of the Ezhava community in Kerala, situated within broader socio-historical frameworks of caste, reform and religious change, through an analysis of festivals, deity cults and domestic rituals, and understands their transformations due to aspirations of upward mobility. Through this study, the Ezhava ritual world is studied as a site where caste and religiosity are constantly redefined through external stigmatisation and internal reform. The Ezhavas are an *avarna* caste, whose religion is regarded as professedly Hinduism, but includes animism and Kali worship[2], and were known as practitioners of devil worship, sorcery, and 'barbaric' rituals, such as hook swinging.

The esoteric rituals' characterisation as belonging to 'polluting' castes as opposed to higher forms of worship, is found in the works of colonial ethnographers and other historians of Kerala who continued that tradition; with them dismissing it as barbaric superstitions and devil worship. These external valuations provoked an internal reaction from within the community, in the form of a reform movement beginning from the late 19th century and continuing into the early 20th century, under the behest of Nanu Aashan (Sree Narayana Guru), who sought to change the community's collective consciousness as an *avarna* caste known for backward socio-religious rites. An attempt was made to discard non-Sanskritic practices, which was a socio-political strategy to shed the avarna stigma.

This paper will attempt to understand esoteric traditions, as articulating the religiosity of an *avarna* caste, to understand how ritual expressions of Ezhavas which were dismissed as 'superstitious' or 'polluting'. It also seeks to examine the consequences of the reform movement in suppressing certain ritual forms while inadvertently setting the stage for the re-articulation of esotericism within a 'Sanskritized' framework. In this process, the case of Ezhavas is situated within the broader theme of reform and erasure producing new forms of continuity.

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[1] In this paper, I've used the term *esoteric* referring to the domain of ritual practices, beliefs, and symbols that are restricted to initiates or confined within localized, non-Brahmanical religious traditions. It denotes forms of knowledge and worship—such as possession, propitiation, and spirit invocation—that operate outside scriptural Hindu orthodoxy, often marginalized as "superstitious" or "polluting" by colonial and upper-caste discourses.

[2] L. K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, *The Tribes and Castes of Cochin* (Delhi: Casino, 1981), 162.

Objectives

This paper identifies a literature gap in terms of phenomenological analysis of the performance of esoteric rituals by Ezhavas in pre-modern Kerala, examining them within a continuum of religious experience that connects them with their modern, rationalised counterparts. It aims to identify and analyse the major esoteric ritual forms associated with the Ezhava community–mainly those involving possession, propitiation and ancestor worship; and examine their representation within colonial ethnography and early Kerala historiography. This paper will also analyse the impact of the SNDP-led reform program on the disappearance and rationalisation/transformation of esoteric rituals, while exploring the persistence of certain forms such as serpent and ancestor worship, and interpret the re-emergence of propitiatory rites using James C Scott's concept of *Hidden Transcripts*.

Methodology

This paper will use a textual-historical analysis combined with ethnographic observation. Primary data is drawn from colonial ethnographies (Samuel Mateer, Edgar Thurston) and early Kerala historiography (L K Anantha Krishna Aiyer and K P Padmanabha Menon), alongside the *Travancore State Manual*. These descriptive sources which contain information on the typology of esoteric practices of Ezhavas will be juxtaposed against anthropological works such as those by M Gentes, Gilles Tarabout and Simon John, which details on the performance of the rituals themselves (by other social communities, or at a broader societal level) to arrive at an idea of how Ezhavas might have engaged with these rituals in the past. The impact of reforms will be assessed by synthesising anthropological studies (Osella and Osella), with supplementary evidence collected through personal interviews.

Locating the Ezhava Within the Phenomenology of Esoteric Rituals

1) *Kodungallur Meenam Bharani festival*

The Meenam Bharani (cock festival) at Sree Kurumba Kavu[3] in Kodungallur, is a unique festival of the subaltern sects where a ritualistic 'pollution[4]' of the goddess' shrine is conducted, augmented by the recital of bharanipattu which is filled with vulgar, sexually-charged slurs directed at the goddess, under the notion that it pleases her.

Logan's Malabar Manual describes the Meenam Bharani as one of the most popular festivals in Malabar, which is accompanied by unmeasured levels of abuse at the goddess; upon arrival at the shrine, they desecrate it in every conceivable way, including throwing stones and filth[5]. Edgar Thurston mentions that the festival begins with the headman of the fisherman caste opening the festival by solemnly making 'foecal-deposit' on the image[67]. On the other hand, Samuel Mateer describes a festival called *Parmy* related to the goddess at the Kodungallur shrine occurring at the same time as Bharani[8]. These accounts are influenced by Brahmanical sensibilities, and we can see pathologisation of popular worship patterns, but they are ethnographically valuable nonetheless.

Ezhavas and Tiyyas[9] are included among the social groups who participated in the festival[10]. Jacob Canter Visscher mentions that the Bharani festival was 'thronged by Ezhavas', who worshipped Kali as *Aghorashakti*[11]. Thurston states that in ancient times every Tiyya household in

[3] Kurumba Kavu is a shrine dedicated to Bhadrakali, but also has associations with the Jain goddess Kannaki, ethnographers such as T V Induchudan contend that during Bharani worship of Bhadrakali takes a back seat and the latter emerges as the object of worship.

[4] The shrine is thrown open to the untouchable castes who ritually pollute the sanctum-sanctorum, hurling insults and on the day of Bharani, upon the arrival of the chief of Kodungallur the masses of polluting castes are released to race around the shrine, while performing acts of self-mortification. (Tarabout, 1986).

[5] Logan's account, despite being highly influential, is regarded by future commentators as based on hearsay, and garbled, but on the subject of Meenam Bharani his account is corroborated by other colonial ethnographies, therefore we can take what he states at face-value.

[6] Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol. II (Madras: Government Press, 1909), 407.

[7] This point is fiercely contested by T.K. Krishna Menon, who claims it exists only in the wild imagination of informants.

[8] Samuel Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1883), 82–83.

[9] Although official records since Zamorin's period categorise Ezhavas and Tiyyas as the same caste, this position is highly contested. In this paper I've treated them as separate groups (albeit similar in social position), unless stated otherwise.

[10] M. J. Gentes, "Scandalizing the Goddess at Kodungallur," *Asian Folklore Studies* 51, no. 2 (1992): 295–322.

[11] K. P. Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, vol. 3 (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1993), 424, 442.

the Malabar region attended the festival because it was compulsory during the times of the Chera Perumal, and carried a live chicken with them for sacrifice[12].

Among the subaltern communities, the Araya, goldsmith clans had important duties to dispel in association with the festival. The head of the Araya clan led the pollution after the arrival of the chief of Kodungallur, Pulayas possess the Pulappadam or keezhkavu(lower temple) and the main priest comes from this community. The festival begins with the goldsmith circumambulating the sanctum sanctorum and ringing a bell. Ezhavas, although they are mentioned as among the participating masses do not serve any ritually important function.

However, Ezhavas today have one of the largest population sizes among the social groups of Kerala and did so in the pre-modern period as well[13]. The heterogeneity of their population is also attested in the sources, the 1891 census recorded 22 subdivisions of the caste and Ezhavanas generally formed an umbrella term encompassing groups like Ilavan[14], Thandan, Vathi, Kavutiyan and Tiyyan[15]. Therefore, historically speaking this demographic spread suggests that the Ezhavas encompassed multiple sub-lineages and occupational clusters that represented the principal non-elite population of the coastal belt.

The ties Kurumba Kavu possesses to Shramanic religion[16] offer a compelling framework for interpreting Ezhavas' attachment to the shrine. The community's association with Buddhism are described in colonial texts with reference to their origin[17], if the shrine can be identified as non-Brahmanical, then Ezhavas participation can be interpreted as the endurance of a ritual memory rooted in Kerala's non-Brahmanical religious substratum. This association strengthens

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[12] Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol. VII (Delhi: Cosmo, 1975), 424.

[13] Edgar Thurston quotes Friar Bartholomew, who writes about 'Chegoes' forming a numerically significant of the army of the Raja of Travancore, around 100,000 along with the Nayars, which when juxtaposed against the total population of Malabar region in 1771 (2 million) underscores the demographic importance of the community.

[14] In this paper, terms like Ezhavan, Iluvan, Izhuvan and Izhavan all refer to the same community.

[15] P.V. Sreebitha, "The Making of 'Ezhava': Caste, Communities and Gender among North Malabar Thiyyas and Thiruvithamkoor Ezhavas" (PhD diss., University of Hyderabad, 2013).

[16] The shrine at Kurumba Kavu is described by T V Induchudan as the original shrine constructed by Cheran Senguttuvan in the honour of Kannaki-the heroine of the Tamil Epic *Shilappadikkaram* and is associated with the Jain Pattini goddess cult.

[17] William Logan regarded Ezhavas as descendants of Buddhist immigrants from Ceylon.

our understanding of the symbolic continuity between non-Brahmanical cults of the past and the ecstatic goddess worship of later times.

2) *Maadan Worship*

The origins of the cult of *Sudalai Maadan are* traced back to the megalithic phase of South India, where a Tamil war hero was transformed into a Hindu regional deity as the son of Shiva, in the process of its absorption into Sanskritic Hinduism[18]. This is inferred from the mud-altar structure in honour of Maadan, which is shaped like a trapezoid found near a funeral ground, which is similar to hero stones erected in Tamil country in honour of war heroes 16.

Samuel Mateer in his description of the festival at *Mangalattukonam* in southern Travancore organised by Ezhavas; where he records a *tani-maram*—a wooden pillar resembling a pigeon house—serving as an altar and residence for the demon Maadan, resembling the structure erected by Pulayas[19]. Mateer also notes an anecdotal story about a foolish 'Ilavan' who was tricked by another into believing that if he built a pit for *Nina Maadan,* he could find a pot full of gold inside a pit[20]. L.K. Anantha Krishna Aiyer includes Maadan, *Esakki Amman*, *Iyanar* and Bhadrakali among the chief deities worshipped by Ezhavas in the 19th century[21].

Understanding Ezhava participation in the Maadan cult requires situating it within the broader network of ritual specialists—specifically the Kaniyan community. Kaniyans in the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu served as shamanic officiants and the principal ritual performers

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[18] Laxmi Vadivoo, *Anthropological Study of Sudalai Madan: A Village Deity in Southern Districts of Tamil Nadu* (PhD diss., University of Mumbai, 2018).

[19] Madan is widely worshipped by the Pulaya community, their importance in the cult is reflected in a specific origin myth of Sudalai Madan, which features a key figure named Pulayan, identified as a famous magician from Kerala, whose daughter is married to the deity. (S. Simon John, "Kaniyan: Ritual Performers of Tamil Nadu, South India," *Asian Ethnology* 67, no. 1 (2008): 123–135, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25135289)

[20] Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, 570.

[21] L. K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, *The Tribes and Castes of Cochin*, Vol. II (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1981), 307–308.

at the festival for Sudalai Maadan—a folk deity worshipped by non-tribal communities[2223]. The close association of Ezhavas with Kaniyans can be proved by studying K. P. Padmanabha Menon, who mentions that Kaniyans had customs similar to the 'Chogans.'[24] The Travancore Census of 1875 groups Kaniyans and Pananas as a division of the 'Elavar' tribes; the Madras Presidency Census (1871) clubbed together *Thiyyas*, *Shannars* and *Kanisan*[25]. Shannars are also mentioned as worshippers of Sudalai in Tirunelveli district, who were also a toddy-tapping caste regarded as the functional equivalent of Ezhavas[26].

This adjacent but distinct ritual position of Kaniyans and Ezhavas suggests that the latter were among the main votaries, but not the ritual specialists of Maadan worship. The complementary function of the two castes—Kaniyans as untouchable but had an indispensable ritual function and Ezhavas, also avarna but were devotees of Maadan, as evidenced by the description of the *Mangalattukonam* festival.

This can be substantiated by using Gilles Tarabout's observation of Ezhavas as occupants of an 'intermediate ritual space', where they shared cultic practices with lower castes but aspired to the purity codes of upper castes[27]. This can be extended to Ezhavas sponsoring or hosting esoteric rituals at their domestic shrines but actual performances were conducted by other lower-caste specialists, thus revealing the negotiated nature of Ezhava religiosity.

3) Serpent Worship

Samuel Mateer observed that Ezhava temples possessed serpent groves, linking them to Bhadrakali, them being the goddess's favourite creature. He also notes that in the south-western

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[22] S. Simon John, "Kaniyan: Ritual Performers of Tamil Nadu, South India," *Asian Ethnology* 67, no. 1 (2008).

[23] Kaniyans performed important shamanic tasks such as tying of the sacred thread, sacrificing blood, graveyard hunting and food offering; their main function being to invoke the spirit of sudalai and have it possess the komarathadigal, or the male medium. (*Ibid.,* [131-133])

[24] Menon, *History of Kerala*, 3:484

[25] P.V. Sreebitha , "*Making of Ezhava"*, 30.

[26] Laxmi Vadivoo, *Anthropological Study of Sudalai Madan: A Village Deity in Southern Districts of Tamil Nadu* (PhD diss., University of Mumbai, 2018).

[27] Gilles Tarabout, "Ritual Rivalry in Kerala," in *Flags of Fame: Studies in South Asian Folk Culture*, ed. H. Brückner, L. Lutze, and A. Malik (New Delhi: Manohar, 1993), 81–108.

corner of every household of Nayars, Izhuvans or other castes held a serpent grove, whose neglect would cause illness and misfortune[28]. Edgar Thurston noted that at an Ezhava temple near Chakki, Trivandrum, Bhadrakali was represented as surrounded by serpents[29].

Studies on serpent propitiation in Kerala have focused almost exclusively on the Nairs, details of Ezhava participation in the same are scarce. An elaborate possession ritual known as *Nagam Tullal,* where the family serpent gods are invited to possess two female members of the *taravadu*, at the mediation of a ritual specialist from the Pulluvan caste, was prevalent among Nairs[30]. On the other hand, Edgar Thurston suggests that Ezhava temples were officiated by Ezhavas themselves (Ezhavattis)[31].

The account of early historians of Kerala for serpent worship has a marked difference between how they interpret its meaning for upper castes and lower castes: The Travancore State Manual associates the Nairs with the Nagas, the purported original inhabitants of Kerala who were pacified by Parasurama when he brought Brahmana settlers, and serpent worship is believed to be a concession mandated by Parasurama to pacify these original Naga settlers[32]. On the other hand, Anantha Krishna Aiyer explains Ezhava's cultus as being rooted in Bhadrakali worship, and serpent worship is explained on account of them being favourites of Kali[33]. When K P Padmanabha Menon discusses rituals such as *Pambin Tullal and Noorum Paalum,* he states that 'serpent propitiation is essential for the prosperity and well-being of the household[34].' While, Aiyer mentions Ezhava worship of serpents performed primarily to avert calamities attributed to the serpent's anger, such as leprosy, barrenness, etc[35].

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[28] Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, 92.

[29] Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, 2:406.

[30] Deborah L. Neff, "Aesthetics and Power in Pambin Tullal: A Possession Ritual of Rural Kerala," *Ethnology* 26, no. 1 (January 1987): 63-71.

[31] Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, 400.

[32] V. Nagam Aiya, *The Travancore State Manual,* Vol. 1 (Trivandrum: Travancore Government Press, 1906), 215.

[33] Iyer, *The Tribes and Castes of Cochin*, 314.

[34] Menon, *History of Kerala*, 476.

[35] Iyer, *The Tribes and Castes of Cochin*, 314.

This contrast shows how ritual forms were differently portrayed across caste lines. For Nairs, the meanings they inferred from the ceremonies were tied to their identity as a superior caste[36], while for Ezhavas it merely meant appeasing potentially dangerous forces, reinforcing the idea of demon worship.

4) Ancestor Worship

Ancestor worship is one of the oldest enduring rituals that persisted even when its performative elements have changed. K Rama Pisharoti describes the practice of reserving a room within the household as the abode of the manes, who are supposed to safeguard the interests of the family, a practice chiefly current among the Nair community[37].

Details of Ezhava ancestor worship patterns are found in colonial ethnographies: Edgar Thurston lists the 'ghosts of ancestors' as among the deities propitiated by Ezhavas, while L K Anantha Krishna Aiyer notes that 'Izhuvans' holding annual *sraddham* ceremony, with offerings of rice, coconut and plantains to prevent neglected souls from turning into *pisachas*—malevolent spirits.

Personal interviews with a senior member of the *Charanparambu* Ezhava family in Alappuzha (September 2025) corroborate these accounts. The family maintains a shrine for their ancestor, a former commander of *Chempakasseri* Raja's Ezhava militia[38]. The shrine preserves manuscripts and a sword attributed to the ancestor, and annual pujas are held. The ancestor, addressed as *apoopan*(grandfather), is enshrined beside a Shiva temple belonging to the family, but was previously dedicated to Naga Yakshi[39]. The temple's records are closely guarded by the family and remain inaccessible to outsiders.

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[36] Deborah L Neff interprets that Nairs feared the power of lower castes, and the act of commissioning Pulluvans as specialists to perform the ritual, might be them attempting to further their control over their power, and to transform them on behalf of the taravadu. (Neff, 70.

[37] K. Rama Pisharoti, "Notes on Ancestor-Worship Current in Kerala," *Man* 23 (July 1923): 99–102.

[38] Verified by cross-checking with the Travancore state manual, which contains description of an Ezhava militia maintained by the Chempakasseri Raja, before the conquest of Marthanda Varma, which was completed by 1753, which should place 'apoopan' somewhere in the early 18th century or before. However, the state manual records a lineage called 'Ambanat Panickers' as the traditional chieftains of the Ezhava force. Ambanat family exists today, in Ambalapuzha region, and is not related to the Charanparambu family.

[39] Surendran Charanparambu, interview by the author, telephone, September 24, 2025 and October 9, 2025.

This description—the portion of the house separated as the domain of the manes-exemplifies the domestication of the sacred[40]. Ancestor worship transforms the domestic space into a ritual space, making religiosity lineage-based, rather than temple-based orthodoxy. This is particularly significant for Ezhavas, who lacked access to Brahmanical temples and sought alternative forms of worship.

Secondly, ancestor worship as seen among Ezhavas can be understood as a mnemonic strategy used to legitimise a subaltern past. The Charanparambu family's veneration of their ancestor, while unclear about the historicity[41] of the figure, is used to retain the memory of martial participation and royal favour. Broadly applying it to Ezhava ancestor cults across Kerala, it can be elevated from a ritual performance rooted in superstitions to one serving an important social function, such as constructing lineage pride.

The Dialectics of Reform: Ritual, Transformation and Resurgence

Ezhava reforms under the leadership of Sree Narayana Guru in its early stages included the appropriation of Sanskritic symbols (the consecration of Aruvippuram Shiva temple), framed as a hegemonic challenge. Over time, his broader philosophy evolved into a universal critique of caste itself. Guru opposed the *durmutis* (evil spirits) and the favourite deities of Ezhavas—*Chathan, Chamundi, Maadan, Poothanathan*, and Kali[42]. Elite sections of Thiyya society were also drawn to the ideas of the 'Ezhava' Guru and sought to discard their traditional rituals[43].

Thus, we can see a conscious rupture with the community's esoteric past. How did these changes manifest in the conduct of traditions already mentioned?

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[40] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959, 36–45.

[41] The interview results showed that little consciousness existed about the historicity of their ancestor or his achievements, their existence was more of a semi-legendary type, with numerous fantastical tales about them, acting as a great source of family pride.

[42] Francois Houtart, and Genevieve Lemercinier. "Socio-Religious Movements in Kerala: A Reaction to the Capitalist Mode of Production: Part One." *Social Scientist* 6, no. 11 (1978): 3–34. https://doi.org/10.2307/3516609.

[43] V. A. Shiju, "Of Hunting and the Hunted: Vayanattu Kulavan Theyyam and the Enunciation of being Backward," *History and Sociology of South Asia* 11, no. 2 (July 2017): 122.

For Meenam Bharani, any categorical statement about Ezhava withdrawal remains uncertain due to a lack of quantitative data. *Mithavadi*—Book of 1916 records a resolution of the 13th committee of SNDP, where it condemns Kodungallur Bharani as against the community's increasing moral uprightness and 'satanic'[44]. Since the SNDP movement was led by the educated middle-class[45]reform injunctions were more likely to be followed by them than the poorer Ezhavas, who remained disconnected with the movement.

M Gentes (1991), drawing on Tarabout, states that 'mass of *Izhava, Araya, Pulaya*...race around the shrine 3 times while performing acts of self-mortification'[46], indicating their continued participation. Since the poorer Ezhavas are proven by Osella and Osella to not be great receptacles of the reform program, we can reasonably assume that their participation in the Meenam Bharani continued.

Worship of Maadan and other deities has largely vanished from mainstream practice; former shrines were destroyed or reconstituted as Hindu temples[47]. Osella and Osella cover the account of community elders who recounted how in the 1920s many Ezhava temples were destroyed due to the impact of SNDP's reform. The rituals associated with Madan worship, such as animal sacrifice and hook swinging[48] disappeared.

They also note many families replaced old autochthonous figurines removed or placed as secondary deities, upon the recommendation of an astrologer who divined that the shrine belonged to higher, usually Puranic gods. The shrine belonging to the *Charanparambu* family was originally

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[44]Jayan K., *Living Cult, Contested Meanings: A Study of the Yam Cult in Kerala* (PhD diss., University of Calicut, 2011), 266.

[45] Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, *Social Mobility in Kerala: Modernity and Identity in Conflict*, London: Pluto Press, 2000, 194.

[46] Gentes, "Scandalizing the Goddess at Kodungallur," 303–304.

[47] Osella and Osella, Social Mobility in Kerala, 158

[48] While some Ezhavas claimed ignorance of tukkam tullal (hook swinging) or denied that it had ever been practised, others said that in the 1930s the community withdrew from the ceremony during the protests for full temple access. (Ibid., 175)

dedicated to *Nagayakshi* and sometime in the mid-20th century was reconstituted as a Shiva temple[49].

Serpent worship is one of the few worship modes with non-Brahmanical roots that persisted even after reforms. As K P Padmanabha Menon notes, while *avarnas* practised it to avert misfortune[32], its practice by upper-caste households, gave it legitimacy and was not grouped with other 'polluting' esoteric rituals.

Ancestor worship too persisted in a way, Osellas mention that shrines of autochthonous deities were reconstituted as ancestor shrines, called '*apoopan'* or '*yogiswaran*'[50]. This transformation suggests that several of the ancestor shrines visible today may have been sites of esoteric rituals in the past, rationalised under reformist influence.

A concurrent resurgence of non-Vedic divinity emerges along Tantric lines. Following C F Gough Osellas note how Ezhavas who were denied ritual parity with Nairs temporarily withdrew from mainstream temple festivals, to venerate lower, blood-thirsty deities[51]. At *Kairalipuzha* [52]temple, live cockerels were dedicated to Kali in her fierce form[53].

The continuation of apotropaic and propitiatory rites within reformed contexts, through personalities such as Swami Shubhananda[52] and Tengannoor Amma[52], the former conducting healings and exorcisms without resorting to magic or help from 'fierce deities', and the latter offering Bhadrakali's direct intervention through possession trances [54].

The reform process—while it certainly contributed to the decline of worship of deities belonging to the non-Brahmanical substratum, its rational-modernist outlook did not fully eradicate tendencies within the community for resorting to propitiatory rites and seeking

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[49] Surendran Charanparambu, interviews by the author, telephone, September 24, 2025 and October 9, 2025.

[50] Osella and Osella, *Social Mobility in Kerala*, 158.

[51] *Ibid*., 159.

[52] The names of places and of people described by the Osellas in their book are false-names, in order to protect the identity of the informants and to prevent readers from identifying the real location of the village where the Osellas conducted their ethnographic research.

[53] *Ibid*., 170.

[54] *Ibid*., 171–172.

intervention of divinities for removing maladies and achieving goals. After the eradication drive of the early 20th century, while the movement's grip faded, the conditioning it created for self-determination within the community did not. Their inability to appropriate Sanskritised worship led to a reaction, represented by the withdrawal from local temples and a switch to worship lower, blood-thirsty deities[55].

The post-reform, tantrically framed resurgence of esoteric practices can be interpreted using the concept of 'Hidden Transcript' by James C Scott, which refers to the realm of hidden meanings articulated by subordinated groups, often deliberately concealed from power holders in society, in contrast with the public transcript, which involves outward performance of compliance and respectability[56].

Ezhavas' appropriation of elite Sanskritic culture, and Tantric practices in Izhava shrines preserved the rhetoric of a reformed, enlightened community; especially the performance of high-status Vedic rituals, which helped cement their status as Hindus on an equal footing. Participation in major public temples by the wealthy, rituals which were previously limited to Nairs demonstrated that their offerings could be acceptable to the deity. This is the public transcript, presented before mainstream society. However, for the less wealthy sections of the community, the rationalist teachings of reformers like Guru were unsatisfactory for their immediate needs. As Osella and Osella note, those whose economic situation forced them into devalued manual labour possessed a status 'too obviously low to aspire modification by public displays of ritual worth[57].

Figures like possessed oracles (Tengannoor Amma), exorcism provided them with an alternative path of religious action away from the gaze of the reformist elite, which can be considered a 'hidden transcript', shielding away from the reformists and the external Hindu

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[55] *Ibid*., 159.

[56] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[57] Osella and Osella, *Social Mobility in Kerala*, 164. As the authors note, "For many Izhavas, especially those struggling daily to make ends meet...those whose economic situation forces them into devalued manual work, often in the paddy fields shoulder to shoulder with Pulaya labourers, have status and prestige too obviously low to aspire to modification by public displays of ritual worth..."

orthodoxy. For these working-class and agrarian segments, reliance on older, more accessible vernacular worship forms provided an inexpensive arena for spiritual negotiation.

The resurgence of popular, inexpensive rituals such as *naranga vilakku*, and attendance at performances of exorcism and propitiation indicate the retention of the older logic of esoteric negotiation with the divine[58]. Therefore, even when Ezhavas participated in reformed rituals, their embodied content carried residual meanings of older non-Brahmanical ritual modes. This can be connected with what Gilles Tarabout states about the persistence of private ritual life, which was redefined as cultural tradition or ancestral duty, rather than religion[59].

Conclusion

The examination of Ezhava participation in esoteric rituals reveals a complex religious consciousness situated within an intermediate ritual space (Tarabout) where they shared practices with lower castes but aspired for access to Sanskritized forms of worship. Their role as votaries but not ritual specialists best illuminates this dynamic, as esoteric and aspirationally Sanskritic. It also points towards their positioning in a ritual landscape embedded in Kerala's non-Brahmanical religious substratum, their participation serving as a signifier of the continuing links with the region's Sramanic heritage.

The framing by colonial ethnographies and early historians of Kerala of the ritual landscape of Ezhavas as 'devil worship', added to the internalised sense of shame the Ezhava middle class carried with them and was further propagated by the SNDP reform movement's attempt to redefine religiosity along Sanskritic norms. The disappearance of esotericism, but only those associated with avarna-ness, is emphasised by the survival of serpent and ancestor worship, partly due to their linkages with upper-caste ritual conduct. The persistence and re-articulation of esoteric rituals, such as the *velicchapaadu* tradition, reflects the outward compliance with Sanskritic worship while inwardly carrying the older ritual logic, which can be articulated as an instance of a 'hidden transcript'.

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[58] Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, *Social Mobility in Kerala: Modernity and Identity in Conflict*, London: Pluto Press,2000, pp. 168–173.

[59] Gilles Tarabout, "Persistence through Transformation: The Case of Kerala," in *Asserting Religious Identities: India and Europe*, ed. Christiane G. Hartung and Margit Thiessen (New Delhi: Manohar, 2009),(177-210).

Thus, the religious transformation of Ezhavas was a dialectical process; it created conditions for both Sanskritised reform and re-emergence of hidden ritual memory. This study highlights the need for prolonged ethnographic research—to unearth subterranean meanings hidden in Ezhava religiosity—which can shed light on the ritual landscape of Kerala in the distant past.

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After the Fire: The Afterlife of Knowledge and the Reimagination of Memory in the Jaffna Library Burning

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Abstract

In 1981, the Jaffna Public Library in the northern Sri Lankan city of Jaffna was set ablaze in what has since come to symbolise more than the loss of a building or a collection of books. This paper approaches fire as both an act of ethnic biblioclasm and a moment that led knowledge to survive in new, improvised ways. Using Tamil poetic responses and witness accounts, it traces how memory reorganised itself when its physical anchors were gone. The discussion centres on the idea of knowledge after ash – that in the wreckage of cultural loss, imagination begins to do the work of preservation. The Jaffna Library, read in this way, is not simply a ruin to be mourned but a space where remembrance continues to invent its own forms.

Keywords: Jaffna Public Library, ethnic biblioclasm, libricide, knowledge after ash, Tamil literature, reimagination of loss

Introduction

"Wherever they burn books, they will also, in the end, burn human beings."

— Heinrich Heine[1]

Heinrich Heine's dictum anticipates a recurring logic in modern history: that the annihilation of knowledge often precedes the annihilation of lives. The 1981 burning of the Jaffna Public Library[2] exemplifies what Rebecca Knuth terms *ethnic biblioclasm* – the calculated destruction of a people's intellectual infrastructure as a prelude to their cultural erasure. Within this taxonomy of violence, *libricide*, as Richard Ovenden argues, functions not as an accident of war but as a performative assertion of power: a means to dominate the past by obliterating its material record. The flames that engulfed Jaffna's repository of Tamil learning – nearly a hundred thousand manuscripts, chronicles, and palm-leaf texts – were therefore not incidental acts of vandalism but ideological gestures aimed at silencing plural epistemologies. In the aftermath, the destruction of the written archive produced an unforeseen corollary: the *reconstitution of memory* through other media of survival. This paper explores how, within the desolation occasioned by ash, Tamil society reconceptualised its intellectual legacy – poetry, testimony, and collective remembering – through which loss per se came to be a generative epistemological condition. The Jaffna Library is thus a ruin and an origin: a place where knowledge was destroyed and reborn in the imagination.

[1] Heinrich Heine, *Almansor: Eine Tragödie* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1823), act I, line 245. Author's translation: "Wherever they burn books, they will also, in the end, burn human beings."

[2] The Jaffna Public Library was located in the city of Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka, a region that has historically constituted the cultural and demographic centre of the Sri Lankan Tamil community. Established in 1934 and rebuilt in phases (in 1984 initially and with a major government-funded renovation in 2000) after its destruction in 1981, the library held one of the most significant collections of Tamil manuscripts and printed works in South Asia.

The Jaffna Library: Archive, Annihilation, and Historical Continuity

The Jaffna Public Library had, by the mid-twentieth century, become an institutional cornerstone of Tamil print-era public culture[3] in northern Sri Lanka. Founded through public subscription in 1934 and expanded under the professional guidance of S. R. Ranganathan, the library amassed a singular corpus of secular and vernacular learning: colonial newspapers, nineteenth-century journals, medical treatises, palm-leaf manuscripts and the unique regional chronicle *Yalpanam Vaipavama*[4]. Its reading rooms and catalogues signalled an aspiration to civic literacy: a shared public sphere in which knowledge underwrote social mobility and regional cosmopolitanism.

The destruction of that repository was therefore more than the loss of volumes; it was the rupture of an epistemic infrastructure. On the night of 31 May 1981, police and paramilitary elements set the building alight; roof trusses collapsed, and fragile manuscripts turned to ash as the blaze consumed nearly ninety-seven thousand items[5]. Contemporary witnesses described the scene in terms that combined incredulity and moral injury; Cheran later called the next morning *the most hurtful* of his life, a personal testimony that registers communal bereavement as historiographical loss[6]. Scholars have emphasised the symbolic dimension: the library's destruction operated as a performative negation of Tamil cultural presence – one shaped in the twentieth century through print networks, educational institutions, linguistic self-assertion and the consolidation of Tamil

[3] The phrase "print-era public culture" refers to the expansion of vernacular journalism, missionary and secular education, associational life, and literary production in northern Sri Lanka from the late nineteenth century onwards. Scholars such as Karthigesu Sivathamby (1995; 2005) have noted how these developments fostered new forms of civic participation and intellectual exchange among Sri Lankan Tamils, even as caste hierarchies and elite formations continued to shape access to education and public authority.

[4] Rebecca Knuth, "Destroying a Symbol: Checkered History of Sri Lanka's Jaffna Public Library", in *72nd IFLA General Conference and Council*, August 20–24, 2006, 2.

[5] Rebecca Knuth, *Burning Books and Leveling Libraries: Extremist Violence and Cultural Destruction*, Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2006, 84.

[6] Rudhramoorthy Cheran, "Poetry After Libricide and Genocide". *Indialogs: Spanish Journal of India Studies* 3 (2016): 212.

political identity[7], and thus as a prelude to broader political violence[8]. In its ruin, the library made absence legible, forcing subsequent practices of remembrance to compensate for what material preservation could no longer hold.

Immediate Grassroots Documentation: Cyclostyles, Pamphlets, 'Jaffna on Fire'

National newspapers did not cover the event or the pogrom that accompanied the burning of the Jaffna Public Library[9], yet the Sri Lankan Tamils identified the consequences of this erasure – the invisibilisation of the Tamil cultural genocide. The fire was meant to be a bold spectacle and a display of power, intended to instil terror; yet its circulation beyond the Tamil-speaking regions remained uneven, with much of the early documentation occurring through regional, partisan, and community networks rather than sustained national attention[10]. The Tamils in Jaffna displayed prudence in promptly producing alternative mnemonics to record the facts of the incident.

In an interview with Aparna Halpe, Cheran Roodhramurthy reveals,

> [...] It wasn't just the library that they burnt; there were hundreds of other business establishments and the newspaper offices of Eelanadu. Immediately after this, on the

[7] M. S. S. Pandian's work on the genealogies of the Tamil political present demonstrates how "Tamil" as a cultural and political subject was not primordial but produced through twentieth-century contestations around caste, language, print culture, and non-Brahmin mobilisation. While Pandian's analysis centres on Tamil Nadu, his argument that Tamil identity emerged through discursive and institutional consolidation rather than timeless continuity helps frame "cultural presence" here as historically forged and politically meaningful rather than essential (see Pandian 2007). Sri Lankan Tamil political formations developed within distinct colonial and postcolonial trajectories, yet similarly relied on educational institutions, vernacular print, and symbolic assertion to articulate collective identity.

[8] Maryse Jayasuriya, "Terror, Trauma, Transitions: Representing Violence in Sri Lankan Literature", *Indialogs* 3, 2016: 196.

[9] Rebecca Knuth, *Burning Books and Leveling Libraries: Extremist Violence and Cultural Destruction*, Westport, CT: Praeger (2006): 84.

[10] While coverage in sections of the mainstream national press appears limited, further research into left-affiliated publications such as *Deshabhimani* (Kerala), *Ganashakti* (West Bengal), and the CPI(M)'s *People's Democracy* may reveal forms of ideological reporting and solidarity that circulated within specific political networks. Mapping such coverage would help distinguish between mainstream national visibility and circulation within partisan or transregional leftist publics.

> second day, we started publishing a cyclostyled newspaper called Jaffna on Fire in Tamil and English. This was the beginning of my life as a journalist. We published until Eelanadu started publishing again. In that small bulletin, we reported the number of establishments burnt and the number of people killed. [...] This was to show our resistance; we wouldn't give up.[11]

In *Poetry after Libricide and Genocide* (2016), Roodhramurthy explicates how '*Jaffna on Fire*' was conceived not long after the Library Burning. Roodhramoorthy, then an undergraduate student of the Jaffna Public University, along with other students, displayed a solemn resolve to simply spread awareness of the incident as well as create a medium of remembrance of the unspeakable brutality that ensued. It reflects resilience and a deep desire for self- and cultural preservation and the preservation of the truth.

> We returned to the Jaffna University students' council room after spending several hours in the Jaffna town. An emergency council meeting ensued. For the whole of next week hundreds of us did not attend classes – opting instead to travel village by village with the message that the time for our national liberation struggle had come. Eelanadu was the only Tamil daily newspaper published in Jaffna at that time. Since its office had been burnt down, there was no longer any reliable media in town. We decided to publish a newspaper in Tamil and English until Eelanadu could resume publication. No printer in the town was prepared to print our newspaper, so we had to rely on old cyclostyle machines to issue our newspaper, Jaffna on Fire out. This was a formative experience in political journalism and reporting from a war zone. Several of my friends, fellow students and youths from various parts of the Jaffna peninsula and the East were involved in these activities.[12]

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[11] R. Cheran and Aparna Halpé, "On Responsible Distance: An Interview with R. Cheran by Aparna Halpé," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2015): 94. On Responsible Distance: An Interview with R. Cheran by Aparna Halpé | University of Toronto Quarterly.

[12] Rudhramoorthy Cheran, "Poetry After Libricide and Genocide". *Indialogs: Spanish Journal of India Studies* 3 (2016): 214. https://ddd.uab.cat/pub/indialogs/indialogs_a2016v3/indialogs_a2016v3p211.pdf.

The publication of *Jaffna on Fire* emerged in the immediate aftermath of the burning as a student-led act of documentation, undertaken in response to the collapse of local media and the urgent need to record what had occurred[13]. In producing a record independent of state-controlled channels, the Tamil community actively resisted epistemic erasure. The bulletin's recording of personal experiences at a point when official histories were absent or were yielding to the state's influence put Tamil testimony on an equal pedestal as an authentic form of history. This, in a way, disrupted the usual dynamic wherein state institutions have the power to determine what goes into the archives and what does not. The labour that went into making *Jaffna on Fire* transcends an act of rebellion; it also represents an attempt to reclaim who writes history and who has the power to do so in the midst of the destruction.

Poetry as counter-archive: Poet as witness, chronicler and mouthpiece of the community

Rebecca Knuth in *Burning Books and Levelling Libraries* opines that "*Destroying a library is a satisfactory way to lash out at a despised group and express contempt for its purpose and goals [...] The Jaffna attack was a malicious, vindictive act that was interpreted by Tamils as having tactical and ideological components.*" After the burning of the Jaffna public library in 1981, the Tamil consciousness started to exhibit itself through poems[14]. Tamil poetry, which had a rich and continuous tradition previously, became a catalytic symbol after this incident. The utility of examining poetry in this paper lies in the ability of aesthetically crafted works to shift, or at least temporarily suspend, the imagined boundary between 'us' and the 'other' and facilitate the understanding of occluded histories through cultural expressions of remembrance (memoirs,

[13] *Jaffna on Fire* was conceived within days of the burning during an emergency meeting of the Jaffna University students' council. With the offices of *Eelanadu* – the only Tamil daily in the town – set ablaze, students resolved to document the destruction and circulate accounts in both Tamil and English. Unable to secure access to local printing presses, they relied on cyclostyle machines to produce and distribute copies across villages in the peninsula. As Cheran Rudhramoorthy later reflects, this initiative was not only an act of reporting but a formative moment in politically committed journalism, undertaken to preserve testimony at a time when institutional media had collapsed. Rudhramoorthy Cheran, "Poetry After Libricide and Genocide", *Indialogs: Spanish Journal of India Studies* 3, 2016.

[14] Sanskriti K., "Violence, Devastation and Pain in the Poetics of Rudhramoorthy Cheran", *International Journal of Current Advanced Research* 10, no. 04(B) (April 2021): 24179.

poems, documentaries, and so on) – ones made with artistry and imagination[15]. Communal autobiography[16] frames the Tamil writer's voice as intrinsically collective, since individual experience is produced within shared conditions of marginalisation. As a numerical minority subjected to systematic cultural debasement and structural dispossession, the Tamil polity cannot be extricated from the self. Thus, the expression of personal experience becomes coextensive with communal circumstances[17].

In recognition of one of the worst episodes of cultural genocide in the world's history, Cheran Roodhramurthy's anthology, *The Second Sunrise,* translated from Tamil into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom and Sascha Ebeling, originates[18]. The titular poem, *Second Sunrise* (1981), captures the carnage ablaze as the poet's town and *his people* are massacred, and he experiences a different, new and second sunrise – the flames rising from the burning library.

> I saw another sunrise. / In the south, this time. / What happened? / My town was set on fire, / my people lost their faces; / upon our land,"
>
> "Who were you waiting for, / your hands tied behind your backs? / The fire has written its message / upon the clouds. / Who waits, even now? / From the streets upon which / the embers still bloom, / rise, march forward.[19]

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[15] Ann Rigney, "Remaking Memory and the Agency of the Aesthetic", *Memory Studies* 14, no. 1, 2021: 15.

[16] The notion of *communal autobiography* expands the autobiographical mode beyond the singular self, situating the writer as both subject and representative of a collective experience. Hornung and Ruhe (1998) identify this as a defining feature of postcolonial life-writing, where the boundaries between individual and community are deliberately blurred. The self becomes a lens through which the history, trauma, and resilience of a people are narrated. As Gilmore observes, such works remain autobiographical while simultaneously functioning as cultural testimony, reflecting the networks – familial, regional, and national – that shape identity (quoted in Lo, 2011: 12).

[17] Isabel Alonso Breto, "'Only Sow Words': Cheran's *A Second Sunrise* as Postcolonial Autobiography", *Le Simplegadi* 20, no. 22 , 2022: 32.

[18] Rudhramoorthy Cheran, "Poetry After Libricide and Genocide", *Indialogs: Spanish Journal of India Studies* 3, 2016: 211.

[19] Rudhramoorthy Cheran, *In the Time of Burning*, trans. Lakshmi Holmström and Sascha Ebeling, Arc Publications, 2013, 35. https://share.google/f92d3WUZMLj2VGkns.

The speaker mistakes the red glow of the burning library for a sunrise. But what is really happening becomes clear in an instant: the loss of civilisation and the loss of identity. The people become outsiders, aliens; their land becomes alien territory, and the very air now becomes contaminated. Then an idea of renewal, of a new dawn, is prophesied. There is, written into the fiery sky, a clear message that a new time has come. No time for lamenting what has been lost, but the time to try and prevent further losses.

The poet poses many stirring questions to the community, which finds itself at the focal point of ethnic violence. He then sounds a clarion call that beckons the Tamils to solidarity and resistance against the deliberate destruction of the intellectual heritage of '*the Other*'. The poem signals the start of a new age of political consciousness and activism and calls for mobilised action from the Tamil community in Sri Lanka. This poem was etched into the memory of many young Tamils during the 1980s and 90s, as they knew these lines by heart[20]. Several Tamil authors were prey to censorship, exile, relocation, or surveillance. Their words, frequently in precarious situations, spread through pamphlets, small magazines, and public recitations. Writing was inextricably linked to risk in such an environment. Composing a poem implied consciously participating in a larger conflict over identity, memory, and belonging.

In an interview with Aparna Halpe, Roodhramurthy reveals,

> My poem 'The Second Sunrise,' [...] speaks to the burning of the Jaffna Library. I didn't specify the burning of the library because other things were burning as well. But I said, 'My city was burnt, and my people lost faces.' This describes the entire scenario of fire and death. Yes. First, they burnt the books, and later in May 2009, they burnt the people![21]

Second Sunrise may be contrasted with another famous Tamil poem written on the occasion of the Jaffna Library Burning by a friend and student of Cheran's father, M.A. Nuhman,

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[20] Sascha Ebeling, "Love, War, and the Sea Again: On the Poetry of Cheran", in Peter Schalk, ed. (2011): 75.

[21] R. Cheran and Aparna Halpé, "On Responsible Distance: An Interview with R. Cheran by Aparna Halpé," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2015): 94. On Responsible Distance: An Interview with R. Cheran by Aparna Halpé | University of Toronto Quarterly.

titled *The Murder of the Buddha*. It appears to be slightly less emotionally involved and somewhat more detached, wherein the poet expresses indignation by reconciling to the doomed fate of his community with the death of Compassion.

Last night
I had a dream
Lord Buddha was shot dead
by the police—
guardians of the law.
His body lay drenched in blood
On the step
Of the Jaffna Library!
Under the cover of darkness
came the ministers.
'His name— not in our lists!
Why did you kill him?'
they ask in anger.
'No, sirs, no!
There was no mistake.
Without bumping him off
it was impossible
to even harm a fly
Therefore...,' they stammered.
'Okay, okay!
Hide the corpse.'
The ministers vanish.

The men in civvies

dragged the corpse

into the library.

They heaped the books,

rare and valuable,

ninety thousand in all.

They lit the pyre

with the Cikalokavada Sutta.

Thus the remains

Of the Compassionate One

Were burned to ashes

Along with the Dhammapada.

The speaker dreams that the Buddha, who preached non-violence, has been shot dead by the police. This event in the poem is understood as the destruction not only of Tamil culture but also of the beliefs and values, perhaps the very humanity, of the majority of the Sinhalese who profess to be Buddhist.

The poem shifts the focus away from the books and the library and instead reveals a crime committed against humanity. Together with the books in the Jaffna Library, the Buddha was burnt, and so were his scriptures and his teachings of peace and respect towards other beings. In a world where Lord Buddha is alive, such atrocities cannot be committed. In order to go through with their scheme, the government police first had to discard their belief and their morality. What dies, then, is not only the Tamil cultural heritage but also the Sinhala religion and morality. The killing of the Buddha is, therefore, a metaphor for negating humanity.

It is interesting to note, however, that Sinhalese identity was explicitly marked in ethnoreligious terms. Aggressive Sinhala Buddhist ethnonationalism is continually reproduced in the post-independence era through school textbooks, political speeches, Buddhist sermons, and

popular culture. In the Buddhist epic, the *Mahawamsa*, the dying Buddha nominates Lanka as the future domicile for the true faith.[22]

Popular culture, in the South Asian context, encompasses more than just entertainment; it also includes state-sponsored media such as radio, street theatre, patriotic music, newspapers, and public commemorations, all of which contribute to the nation's overall perception. By normalising and integrating majoritarian narratives into daily life, these cultural forms serve a pedagogical purpose. This cultural consolidation began in the 1970s and coincided with the spread of coercive state power throughout South Asia. Governments were prompted to bolster executive authority, enact emergency laws, and militarise law enforcement by economic crises, insurgencies, and Cold War pressures. Such events solidified a security-focused government in Sri Lanka that associated national unity with Sinhala Buddhist guardianship and portrayed dissent as a threat.

The murder of the Buddha, at the designated site for the protection and propagation of authentic Buddhism, truly captures the moral decay in the Sinhalese. It is the convenient death of conscience, as *"Without bumping him off / it was impossible / to even harm a fly."* It marks a symbolic point of no return, where ethnic hatred collapses the ethics of coexistence entirely.

The suffering that followed was not episodic but sustained, inscribing itself into the landscape and the psyche of those who survived. It is in this atmosphere of enduring devastation that Roodhramurthy composes *In a Time of Burning* (1986), a poem that does not merely recount destruction but attempts to inhabit the affective terrain of a community confronted with the sight of their world reduced to smoke and ashes.

> Smoke, / fear, cruelty, / sorrow, terror. / Everything is black; / the colour of demons / when dark shadows / and hostile omens / envelop / the bodies and the hearts / which lie there, burning / at this time. / Even the birds have lost their song, / their voices suppressed...[23]

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[22] Suvendrini Perera, "Landscapes of Massacre", in *Torture and the Human Body*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011, 227.

[23] Rudhramoorthy Cheran, *In the Time of Burning*, trans. Lakshmi Holmström and Sascha Ebeling, Arc Publications, 2013, 75. https://share.google/f92d3WUZMLj2VGkns.

The macabre imagery encapsulates the anomie where the survivors are disoriented by the billowing fumes as mangled remains are spread all over. This aesthetic immobilisation mirrors the paralysis of a community confronted by catastrophic destruction. The poet's suggestion that even birds fall silent is not a mere absence of sound; it is the suppression of expression itself. The Tamil community is similarly deprived of voice and parallels the enforced muting of Tamil cultural life following the burning of the Jaffna Library, where the destruction of knowledge and language becomes an assault on the conditions of existence.

"at this moment / when bodies and hearts are burning — / at this moment / how can I speak of hope?[24]*"*

This question does not function as rhetorical despair but as a recognition that collective futures have become temporarily unthinkable. The loss suffered by the Tamil community is profound, leaving a psychic wound that disrupts any easy imagining of the future. Yet the poem's act of representation becomes a means of endurance. By rendering the experience of destruction in language and image, the poet establishes a counter-archive that defies the libricide's intended erasure. Poems circulated through small magazines, public readings, and exile networks as embodied remembrance rather than institutional records. The mimesis not only preserves the memory of what was lost but also generates a shared framework through which future generations may understand and inherit the significance of that loss. In doing so, grief becomes a source of cultural continuity.In *Apocalypse* (1991), the poet writes, *"Kafka was denied the chance / to set fire to his works. / But Sivaramani burnt hers. / Poetry is destroyed in mid-air. / What others write now / refuses to live.*[25]*"*

As clouds of smoke rise, not all poetry vanishes. By contrasting Kafka and Sivaramani, destruction is reframed as both personal and historical. Sivaramani, a young University of Jaffna graduate known for her feminist and political poetry, is said to have burnt many of her works

[24] Rudhramoorthy Cheran, *In the Time of Burning*, trans. Lakshmi Holmström and Sascha Ebeling (Arc Publications, 2013), 75. https://share.google/f92d3WUZMLj2VGkns.

[25] *Ibid*, 87.

before taking her own life in 1991, if Kafka's wishes for destruction were fulfilled. The poet documents a time when expression itself appeared suspended, susceptible to both internal despair and state violence, while writing from within a militarised and contracting public sphere. The fact that some of Sivaramani's poems have survived, however, challenges finality; by naming her, the poem transforms attempted erasure into remembrance, turning into a delicate yet resilient counter-archive in and of itself. It is not clear how many of her poems she burnt before her death, but some of her poems have survived[26].

The poem registers a crisis in the very conditions of expression. After libricide, poetry appears fragile, susceptible to disappearance before it can even take form, and scorched by the surrounding violence. Yet, the reference to Kafka and Sivaramani complicates this apparent hopelessness. Even when burnt or meant for destruction, their works have survived beyond physical paper. The poem recognises that while poetry may seem momentarily impossible, the act of writing remains a refusal to let cultural memory be extinguished.

It was, therefore, at this conjuncture of history, when Tamil voices were being muted, and an artificial lacuna in Tamil literary heritage was being engineered through biblioclasm, that poetry emerged as an act of defiance and resilience. Poetry bore witness to its suffering while affirming the community's cultural continuity. In such a context, poetic expression was a sort of agency that aimed at memorialising angst and preserving the emotional veracity of the event. Instead of preserving history in the archival sense, these poems turned it into a lived, transmitted practice where memory endured through performance, repetition, and the affective transmission of grief across generations and places rather than in written records. We see these patterns repetitively. In Rwanda, following the genocide, community storytelling and testimonial theatre served as remembrance tools both in support of and occasionally in opposition to official memorialisation. In the absence of sovereign archives, poetry and song have long served as repositories of dispossession within Palestinian communities.

[26] Sascha Ebeling, "Love, War, and the Sea Again: On the Poetry of Cheran", in Peter Schalk, ed., 2011: 59.

Oral Histories and Eyewitness Narratives

Eyewitness accounts and oral testimony provide the affective weight of remembrance that captures moral shock and psychic rupture, which are obscured or denied within written state histories. These are local memory practices that affirm the reality of the violence.

In an interview with Aparna Halpe, Cheran Roodhramurthy recalls the immediate shock and helplessness felt as a young student witnessing this burning:

> We saw that it was burning, and we tried to go there to help, but we couldn't because they started firing at us. It was the next day that was the most hurtful moment in my life. In the morning, we all went to see what had happened. It was totally gone. Right next to the library was the Duraiappah Stadium where the police and army were stationed. As people went to see what had happened to the library, the soldiers were standing there in the stadium mocking us. They would say, "Aney, it's gone. Now what are you going to do?" This was the moment when I felt that the only way forward was to wipe these soldiers out. We were angry, but we were helpless because we were just young students, and they were the armed forces.[27]

This memory emphasises that the destruction was not incidental but publicly enacted and guarded, with the intention of being a spectacle of humiliation. The visible enjoyment of the perpetrators in the act of destruction articulates a psychological assault working alongside the physical violence. This is reaffirmed in Roodhramurthy's later reflection in *Poetry after Libricide and Genocide*:

> Then they started laughing at the people and began dancing to the tune of Baila – a popular Sinhala music of Portuguese origins. I had no inkling that celebrating the destruction of a cultural icon then was a harbinger of events to come in the next thirty years.

[27] R. Cheran and Aparna Halpé, "On Responsible Distance: An Interview with R. Cheran by Aparna Halpé", *University of Toronto Quarterly* 84, no. 4, 2015: 94. On Responsible Distance: An Interview with R. Cheran by Aparna Halpé | University of Toronto Quarterly.

> I vividly remember that day. We were helpless and angry. Thousands of us were mourning the deliberate destruction of a cultural symbol and the repository of knowledge while the very forces responsible for the carnage were celebrating our tears and sorrow.[28]

The atmosphere of grief and rage expressed here signals a profound violation of cultural dignity. The burning of the library was perceived not simply as arson but as an assault aimed at erasing Tamil civilisational presence. Historian and literary critic Karthigesu Sivathamby articulates this significance in *Burning Memories* (dir. S. Someetharan),"*We have lost our intellectual heritage.*"

In *Being a Tamil and Sri Lankan* (2005), he further states:

> In the Tamil psyche, the burning of the Jaffna public library in 1981 constitutes a major symbol of what was aimed at them – the total annihilation of all their intellectual resources. [...] The burning of the library mobilized the entire population against the oppressive actions of the State.

The testimonies of those who witnessed the violence broaden this understanding. In Burning Memories (dir. S. Someetharan), Iyya Sachithanatham, a journalist at Eelanadu, recounts:

> More than 50 people with arms rushed into Eelanadu press and damaged bicycles, bikes, broke into the Printing room and set it on fire. [...] They set fire to the office using petrol bombs. We saw the entire office burning. Wooden beams of the roof burnt to ashes. This pushed the Tamils to tears the next day.

In a moving account of resilience amidst targeted violence, Mrs Rupavathy Nataraja, former librarian, describes the community's refusal to accept the erasure:

> We wanted the library to be reopened immediately so that the arsonists' intention is not fulfilled. Education shouldn't get disturbed. We reopened the Newspaper section at the Municipal Office. We took steps to reconstruct the library from the ashes.

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[28] Rudhramoorthy Cheran, "Poetry After Libricide and Genocide," *Indialogs: Spanish Journal of India Studies* 3, 2016: 212. https://ddd.uab.cat/pub/indialogs/indialogs_a2016v3/indialogs_a2016v3p211.pdf.

These testimonies collectively reveal three intertwined realities: the calculated and targeted nature of the destruction, the depth of communal grief that followed, and the community's immediate commitment to rebuilding and remembering. Oral testimony thus becomes both documentation and defiance, sustaining cultural memory where the archive was set aflame.

Collectively, these accounts indicate that the burning was not just cultural destruction, but also an act of performative sovereign power. The presence of soldiers making fun of mourners, the use of music and laughter, and the public nature of the humiliation indicate that the act of violence was intended to convey power relations. It was an effort to rewrite the power relations between those who had power over memory and those who had the power to mourn. In that regard, the attack was an act that occurred at the material, symbolic, and psychological levels simultaneously.

Yet, with so much spectacle, unintended consequences arose. The mockery meant to bring about submission actually led to political awareness. The testimonies reveal how humiliation is turned into a historical narrative. By relating not just the fire but the mockery too, the testimonies reclaim agency for those who were perceived to be passive victims. Oral memory is not merely an adjunct to written history; it is an unveiling of the emotional underpinnings of power that written history rarely achieves. What is remembered is not just the destruction, but the texture of dominance and how grief is turned into determination.

Conclusion

The burning of the Jaffna Public Library was more than the obliteration of books; it was the orchestration of amnesia, the attempted unmaking of a people's intellectual inheritance. Yet what the flames sought to destroy persists, albeit in various forms, as poems of testimony, as memories spoken from exile, and as fragments that continue to speak even when the pages are lost. This paper demonstrates that the destruction of the tradition did not bring it to a close but transformed it, giving rise to a dispersed but persistent tradition of remembrance. The transition from material to mnemonic knowledge, from palm-leaf to poem, from library to voice, marks the survival of Tamil consciousness within and beyond loss. To revisit Jaffna's fire, therefore, is to encounter the paradox at the heart of history: that the attempt to annihilate knowledge often becomes the condition of its

renewal. In recognising this, remembrance ceases to be passive mourning and becomes an act of reimagination – the assertion that culture, though burnt, is never entirely consumed.

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About the Cover

Front Cover:
The cover page is conceived as a homage to the institutional memory of Lady Shri Ram College for Women. In an effort to engage with the college's archival past, the Editors-in-Chief visited the library archives in search of visual material from earlier college publications. This search did not yield usable images.

Instead, they encountered a stack of old, valuable books resting on the floor near a mantelpiece within the archive space. This moment became the starting point for the cover. Rather than reproducing archival material, the scene was reimagined through illustration.

The stack of books comes to represent a quieter form of archive, one that exists in fragments and in overlooked spaces. It reflects the idea that history is not always preserved in complete or accessible ways, but is often pieced together through what remains. In this way, the cover brings together memory, absence, and interpretation, presenting history as something that is both discovered and reconstructed.

Image Description:
A stylised interior painting depicts numerous stacks of books arranged across the floor before a simple, light-toned fireplace. The volumes, varying in size and colour, are organised into uneven piles that convey both abundance and mild disorder. Atop the mantel rests a small framed picture, introducing a subtle decorative element. The background consists of muted vertical tones, and the composition is rendered in a loose, painterly style with warm hues and soft brushstrokes, creating a calm and contemplative atmosphere.

Back Cover:
The back cover remains minimal, maintaining the reflective tone of the front.

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