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PREMODERN FEMALE PERFORMERS OF BENGAL: REPRESENTATIONS IN COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Introduction:

This theoretical undertaking begins with three premises. Firstly, because the *Nāyṭaśāstra,* the most revered of all traditional theorizations on the art of theatrical performance in South Asia, acknowledges that "drama, dance and music" are constituent components of a theatrical performance (*nāṭya*),[1] this undertaking employs the term 'female performer' to denote all the female artistes who engage in theatrical performances including drama, dance, and/or music, where 'female' denotes a category within the over-arching biological sign of 'sex'. Secondly, recognizing that modernity in South Asia "is defined overwhelmingly by/as that initial moment of rupture from indigenous tradition brought about by colonialism, one that contains all subsequent disjunctions as extensions of the original breach",[2] it employs the notion of 'pre-modern' to denote the condition before that original breach from the indigenous tradition in general and indigenous performance in particular. Thirdly, it employs Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's explication of 'representation' as a simultaneous working of the dual concepts of darstellung ("to stand for") as aesthetic representation, and vertretung ("to act for") as political representation,[3] where 'politics' is conceptualized as "struggle for power".[4] Hence, any aesthetic representation of a subject is always-already engaged in politics by acting for an ideology or a set of interests.

Informed thus, I arrive at the argument presented in this paper by examining the representations of five female performers in the following key sources: two 'historical' chronicles, a ballad, and a narrative generated out of popular tradition. One of the historical chronicles is *Rājataraṅgiṇī* by Kalhaṇa, wherein is represented the King of Kashmir, Jayāpīḍa, rejecting amorous advances by a female performer named Kamalā, in the city of Paundravardhana.[5] The second historical chronicle is a *kāvya* titled *Sekaśubhodayā*, ascribed to Halāyudha Miśra, wherein are represented two female performers named Vidyutprabhā and Padmāvatī in Laksmaṇavatī, the capital Gauḍa: the first (Vidyutprabha) outwits a Muslim saint, King Laksmaṇasena and all his courtiers by her erotic appeal, and the second (Padmāvatī) defeats a male scholar-musician in a musical contest solely by her skill.[6] The third is a ballad (*gītikā*) titled "Candrāvatī" by Nayan Cand Ghoṣ, wherein is represented a performer-poetess named Candrāvatī, and her love for and subsequent rejection by her lover Jayānanda.[7] The fourth is a narrative based on a popular tradition and recounted in *Prācīn Pūrbabaṅga Gītikā* (volume 6) edited by Kshitish Chanda Moulik, and

Pūrbabaṅga Gītikā(volume 3, no. 2) compiled by Dinesh Chandra Sen, wherein a poetess-performer named Sulocanā (Sulā) is represented as a *satī nārī* (chaste woman) even after her husband abandoned her.[8] In *Rajatarangini* and *Sekasubhodaya*, both Kamala and Vidyutprabha have been represented as the embodiment of perilous temptation that can cause ruin to masculinity; their sexuality is deemed potent to erase all traces of virility. On the other hand, in *Sekasubhodaya,* "Candravati" *gitika*, *Pracin Purbabanga Gitika* (volume 6) and *Purbabanga Gitika* (volume 3, no. 2), Padmavati, Candravati and Sulocana have been represented as three virtuous, gifted, erudite and devout women.

Evaluated by rigorous parameters of historical research, none of the three texts are reliable documents. *Rajatarangini,* composed in Sanskrit verse by Kalhana Pandita, records events that transpired in the mid-8th century, four centuries later, in the mid-12th century. Although Kalhana's work is recognized as an authentic source of comprehensive history of Kashmir and its kings, nevertheless, as David Shulman acknowledges, "if you read the romantic narrative of Jayāpīḍa'sexpedition [...], you feel you are solidly in the dashing *kathā* world of Daṇḍin and Bāṇa".[9] The *kavya Sekasubhodaya* is composed in corrupt Sanskrit prose and verse. Although the colophon at the end of each of its twenty-five chapters claims that its author is Halayudha Misra, Sukumar Sen asserts that the actual author is not the minister of Laksmanasena.[10] He also informs that the present from of the text is believed to be dated at the second half of the sixteenth century, and is based on a collection of popular tales originally "made sometime in the fourteenth or the fifteenth century".[11] In other words, the *kavya* was composed about four centuries after the incidents described therein transpired.[12] Furthermore, Sukumar Sen dismisses its "claims to historicity", and asserts that all incidents related to Vidyutprabha "are probably baseless pleasantry".[13] Under these circumstances, Nayan Cand's ballad, composed in Bengali at "the last parts of the eighteenth century or the beginning of the nineteenth",[14] on a woman living in the 17th century,[15] can hardly hope to escape frowns and knitted eyebrows of a historian engaged in truthful historiography. Both the life-histories of Candravati and Sulocana (who lived between late 18th and early 19th century) are attested only by the temple of Shiva that still stands at Pātuāri village in Kishoragañj administrative district,[16] and popular tradition current in Patuari village in Kishoreganj district, and Ṭhākurakoṇā village in Netrakoṇā district.[17]

While acknowledging these 'shortcomings,' this theoretical undertaking also remembers Edward Hallett Carr's rejection of the notion of 'hard-core of historical facts' in history. In Carr'sown words:

> The historian is necessarily selective. The belief in a hard core of historical facts, existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which is very hard to eradicate.[18]

Informed thus by Carr, this theoretical undertaking rejects investigation based on a 'hard-core of historical facts,' and instead takes on board theorizing proposed by Memory Studies.

"Generally speaking", argue Sebald Gerd and Wagle Jatin, "memory can be described as the recollection and reproduction of what has ceased to be".[19] Maurice Halbwachs makes a distinction between 'personal memory' as "understood to be something that we know from within", and 'collective memory' "known from without".[20] Distinct from formal history, Halbwachs defines collective memory as:

> A current of continuous thought whose continuity is not at all artificial, for it retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive. By definition, it does not exceed the boundaries of this group.[21]

In articulating the boundary of a group, "the real function of memory lies not in preserving the past but in regulating the relationship between remembering and forgetting".[22] Hence, it is important not to miss the observation that collective memory "often privileges the interests of the contemporary".[23] "A socio-political construct" that in effect is "a continuous, multidirectional process", collective memory is a key factor that heavily impacts how social groups define and chart their boundaries.[24] Given such a process manifested as a collective phenomenon, politics—"understood as the politics of culture, of everyday life, of sexuality, of ethnicity, of the self, and so on"[25]—plays a key role because collective memory is deployed as politics.

Thus informed by Memory Studies, this theoretical undertaking engages in re-reading the representations of the fore-mentioned five female performers of premodern Bengal. In this endeavour, it examines the four key sources discussed earlier, not as historical documents but as receptacles of collective memory. It asks the following questions: How are the five female performers of pre-modern Bengal represented in the four key sources? How does the historiography of Bengal represent the pre-modern female performers? How has the political representation been deployed in the historiography, and whose interest does it serve? In seeking to answer these questions, this theoretical undertaking proceeds in three parts. The first examines the representation of two female performers, Kamala and Vidyutprabha, in *Rajatarangini* and *Sekasubhodaya*, respectively, as the embodiment of perilous temptation for masculinity. The second part examines evidences deployed by the historians as 'hard-core of historical facts,' to argue that the representation of pre-modern female performers in the historiography of Bengal acts for patriarchy. The third discusses the representations of the three virtuous, proficient, erudite and devout performers, Padmavati, Candravati and Sulocana, as recorded in the receptacles of collective memory of the people of Bengal, i.e., *Sekasubhodaya*, the ballad of "Candravati", *Pracin Purbabanga Gitika* (volume 6) and *Purbabanga Gitika* (volume 3, no. 2). It concludes by arguing that the historiography of pre-modern female performers is problematic because, (i) it upholds a staunchly patriarchal narrative composed of half-truths and outright falsity, and (ii) the hard-core of historical evidences deployed in the historiography are the creations of male poets-artistes under the patronization of the elite classes. It also suggests an alternate way for recovering the history of the pre-modern female performers.

1. Kamala and Vidyutprabha: Collective Memory of Two 'Unchaste' Female Performers:

The artistic representation of Kamala in Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* begins with the arrival of the Kashmiri sovereign Jayapida in the city of Paundravardhana ruled by Jayanta. He arrived in disguise, and his objective was to emulate the glory of his grand-father Muktāpīḍa. Because he knew dancing, he wished to see a dance performance, and so he entered the temple of Kārttikeya, and sat on a stone on the door of the temple. His air of majesty unfailingly attracted the attention of Kamala, described in the text as a dancing girl, and she suspected that he must be a king travelling in disguise. She bid a bosom friend of hers to offer the royal guest a betel, and when the dance was over, Kamala's friend accompanied the king to Kamala's house. There, the king was struck with Kamala's courteous behaviour, tenderness and beauty. Now when the moon had risen, she took her guest by the hand, and led him to her bed room. There lying on a golden couch, the girl, drunk with Maireya wine, practiced her art on the king, but he did not touch her. And when she became ashamed of her forwardness, the king clasped her to his bosom, and gently said: 'It is not, O beauteous-eyed, that you have not touched my heart but owing to my present misfortunes [...]. I have vowed not to enjoy pleasures till I have done my task'.

Then he sighed and asked if a man could even think of women if his lust for glory remained unsatisfied. By now, Kamala became certain that her guest was indeed a great man. In the morning, when the king was about to depart, Kamala requested him to stay at her house, and the king complied.

A few days later, the identity of the disguised king was revealed when he singlehandedly killed a lion that was causing havoc to the residents of Paundravardhana. In gratitude, King Jayanta arrived in person to Kamala's residence, and accompanied him to the royal palace. Thereon, he had his daughter, Princess Kalyān Devī, married to Jayapida. Because Jayanta had no son, the marriage to Kalyan Devi instituted Jayapida as the next in line to the throne of Paundravardhana. In his new capacity as the son-in-law, Jayapida subdued the five kings of Gauda, and made his father-in-law the paramount over them. Thereafter, he returned to Kashmir with Kalyan Devi and Kamala, on the way winning the kingdom of Kānyakubja as well. Kalhana ends his representation of Kamala by briefly mentioning that in Kashmir, Kamala raised a city named after her.[26]

The artistic representation of Kamala in Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* depicts her as a hindrance to masculine glory, and hence such hindrances must be steadfastly renounced. As a corollary to the above virtue of masculinity articulated in the *Rajatarangini*, it also suggests that a virile male must make most of the opportunities presented in enjoying dancing girls such as Kamala, when glory has been attained. Hence, Jayapida did not forget to include Kamala in his entourage bound for home, and even made enough means available to her as a recognition of her price as a pleasurable object. Nevertheless, Kamala is an 'unchaste' dancing girl, who cannot be married, but is available as an object of pleasure in extra-marital liaison. The representation of another dancing girl (*nartakī*), Vidyutprabha, also described an 'unchaste' woman, is to be found in *Sekasubhodaya*.

The first and the last (twenty-fifth) chapters of *Sekasubhodaya* depict two notable artistic representations of Vidyutprabha, a dancing girl (*nartaki*) in the city of Laksmanavati, the capital of Gauḍa in the twelfth century. In the first chapter, King Laksmanasena is described following a Muslim saint (the sheikh) humbly, after the latter magically appeared walking over the water of the Ganges. On the way, when the king paused briefly to discuss the arrival of the mysterious sheikh with his minister whom met on the way, the saint walked along till he met Vidyutprabha wearing a bodice and holding in her arms a golden pitcher. The sheikh accosted her and commanded, “Turn back sinful woman with an empty pitcher in arms”. Vidyutprabha realized that the sheikh had arrived from a foreign land did not know her, and hence she stepped forward and asked him politely why she was called a sinful woman carrying an empty pitcher. The sheikh responded thus:

Listen. Man has been created by the Lord (endowed) with all merit, and all evil belongs to women. For you a Brahman became a mendicant and took to the forest and even a sheikh, being a dervish, stays in a temple at the heart of a village. To one you bestow glances and to other you reveal the breast.

On hearing this, Vidyutprabha smilingly drew near the sheikh, and actually revealed her breast by opening her bodice. Then she asked why she was needlessly called as carrying an empty pitcher when her breasts are filled with the spring of nectar. She reminded him that everywhere, to people in three ages—the child, the young man, and the old man—the breasts are the spring of nectar. Then she showed her breasts again and complained.

You have accused me, in (so many) words, as sinful. [...] A lion is born of a lion and a deer originates from a deer; evil comes out of evil. (From what have) your honour (been born)? In the three worlds, a learned woman is triumphant. And you call (me) sinful. You also are sinful. You are born of sin; therefore, you are an agent of evil. Why do you then call me evil?

“She is a coquette”, thought the sheikh and remained silent. But Vidyutprabha remained persistent and asked again, “Why do you not say anything? Perhaps you are afraid of me”. Provoked thus, the sheikh was forced to respond. “Listen”, he said. “If one throws a burnt brick on night soil its bits (are scattered and) set onto one’s body”. Vidyutprabha counter-attacked by pointing out that the wayfarer avoids both the night soil and the burnt brick, and asked which of these two is he. At this point Vidyutprabha saw the king approaching with his ministers. She bowed low to the king and slipped away.[27]

In another aesthetic representation of Vidyutprabha in Chapter 25, it is described that one day, while seated under the *peepul* tree and enjoying the breeze, she saw a weaver, carrying money and wearing a garland of *campak* flowers, on his way to the palace of the king. She approached the weaver, and repeatedly asked for the garland. When the weaver adamantly refused to part with it, she caught him in her arms and snatched away the garland. Ridiculed thus in public, the weaver did not protest and continued on his way. Vidyutprabha followed him, and

when the two reached the palace door, she caught the weaver by the waist and took an oath of justice. Thereupon, a commotion ensued. When they were brought to the court, everybody laughed when they saw Vidyutprabha holding the weaver by the waist. When asked by the king for an explanation of her behaviour, Vidyutprabha complained that the weaver had enjoyed her, and now he refuses to pay up. When the weaver vehemently protested against this accusation, she challenged his refusal by claiming that because the weaver enjoyed her intimately, her assertion would be established if one were to investigate if his body effuses the perfume of her body. The king ordered an attendant to investigate as Vidyutprabha suggested. Thereupon, Vidyutprabha's claim was established, and the weaver was forced to pay her a hefty sum.[28]

A few days later, Vidyutprabha's husband, a play-actor named Jaya, was killed in an altercation that erupted at a meeting of the weavers. Overcome with grief, Vidyutprabha sought justice from the king. In response, the king ordered the weavers to pay a sum of money equivalent to Jaya's body in weight. However, in spite of the weavers carrying out the king's order, the widow remained unsatisfied, and complained, "O king, I cannot remain at night without a husband. My husband is dead; who is going to be my husband now?" When none present at the court could agree to become her husband, despite Vidyutprabha's repeated pleas, a certain weaver came forward and said, "You sinful dancing girl, whom do you want among us? Take him". Vidyutprabha responded by choosing a young weaver. She held him by his waist, and taking him to a secluded corner and drawing a curtain for privacy, said to him, "O weaver, enjoy me freely". To this challenge, the young weaver replied in shame that he did not know how. She set him free, then took possession of another young weaver, and commanded him as before. This time too the second young weaver was put to shame. To the merriment of all present Vidyutprabha remarked, "Listen, you courtiers, this weaver does not know how to enjoy a girl and how a son is born". This remark was considered by all present as intolerable. Hence, the king ordered "the sinful woman" to be boxed in the ear. However, fearful of Vidyutprabha's response, no one dared to carry out the royal command. She approached a minister, and then a Brahman, but both shied away. Then she stepped up to the king and asked him to carry out his own command, since no one else would. This time the king smiled and said, "This is a naughty girl; (she has) put the courtiers to shame, all except the sheikh". To this remark, Vidyutprabha responded politely: "I have met the great one (on the way). But I did not speak a word". Smiling, the sheikh asked what pleasure she obtained on the way. She touched the ground and replied that she was delighted that he did not make a mistake. Everyone in the court understood what she meant.[29]

Both the chronicles, *Rajatarangini* and *Sekasubhodaya,* are receptacles that contain, inter alia, collective memory of two female performers who lived four hundred years before these were composed. In both the texts, the two performers have been represented as dancers and 'unchastely' public women. The normative standard that defines such public women is available in the book of "moral instruction" titled *Puruṣaparīkṣa* (The Test of Man), composed by the renowned Maithilī poet and Sanskrit scholar Vidyāpati Ṭhākur, who "flourished [...] during at least the first half of the fifteenth century".[30] In the 39th chapter titled "The Tale of a Discerning

Amoroso", Vidyapati ascertains that there are three types of women who are beloved by the discerning amoroso: "women that are one's own, women that belong to others, and women that are common property".[31] Then he goes on to define the first and the third thus:

She who is one's own is a wedded wife, a companion and helper in both worlds. In this world happiness doth she impart, and in the next world, Paradise. [...] The woman who is a common property is a harlot, and her main desire is for money. To a rich man, though he be worthless, showeth she no hatred, and to a poor man, though he be of worth, showeth she no affection.[32]

In modern times, historiographers affected by patriarchal norms, have employed Vidyapati's tripartite scheme of the chaste wedded wife of one's own who is confined to the female quarter (*puranārī*), the woman who belongs to another as a wedded wife (*paranārī*), and the harlot who is 'common property' (*bāranārī*), to determine the gender of the pre-modern female performers.

2. Historical Facts and the Political Representation of Premodern Female Performers:

In discussing theatre in early medieval Bengal, one of the authentic sources Niharranjan Ray draws on is the Sanskrit historical *kavya* titled *Rāmacaritam* by Sandhyākar Nandī (c. 1084-1155 AC).[33] Although "it is considered to be an authentic source for the history of the late Pala period", it is also important not to forget that "the verses [of the text] were composed in a rare Sanskrit figure of speech called *śleṣa* (double en tendre) providing two different meanings simultaneously by play of words", and that, "the second [historical] meaning could only be understood from the prose commentary (*ṭīkā*) in one of the two manuscripts found so far, which, however, ends with the 35th verse of the second canto".[34] Consequently, historians acknowledge that "it is difficult to reconstruct the second meaning of the last 14 verses of the second and the 48 verses each of the third and fourth canto".[35] And it is precisely in the incomprehensible third canto that Sandhyakar Nandi describes that Pāla emperor Rāmapāla (c. 1082-1124 AC) reclaimed Varendra from the rebellious Kaivartas, and established there his new capital Rāmābatī. In the 37th verse, the poet depicts a brief aesthetic representation of the *deva-varavanitā* (deva = god; vara = public; vanita = women; in conjunctive form, the term denotes 'heavenly public women' or 'the public women of the gods'). English translation of the text describes the *deva-varavanita*s thus: "the youthful heavenly courtezans who had great passion of love (surging in their breast), [...] were dancing passionately while they were wearing their (suitable) apparels and while their jewelled anklet-bells were twinkling sweetly on".[36] It is not unimportant to note at this point that Radhagobinda Basak, in his Bengali translation of the same verse, renders the Sanskrit term *varavanita*as *beshyā,* which, in English denotes 'prostitute'.[37] On the other hand, Shastri, in the translation quoted above, has rendered *varavanita* as 'courtezan'.

The second 'authentic' text that Ray draws on is a *kavya* titled *Pavanadūta* by Dhoyī (c. 1119-1205), one of the five 'jewels' of the court of Laksmanasena. In the 28th and 29th verses of this *kavya*, it is possible to identify two brief aesthetic representations of *vārarāmā* (vāra =

public; ramā = sexual intercourse; in conjunctive form, the word denotes ‘public women available for sexual intercourse’). The first verse illustrates the *vararama*s of the temple of Murari (Viṣṇu) in Suhma country, dallying “around the temple, with their natural beauty” playing with “lotuses they constantly carry in their hands”.[38] Their dalliance is said to have cause anxiety in none other than Lakṣmī, the consort of Viṣṇu. The second verse describes the *vararama*s in “the flawlessly beautiful city of Shiva”, “wear[ing] on their bodies”, “the form of marks from the nails of their many lovers”.[39]

Other than these texts, historians also cite archaeological artefacts from the Pala and Sena eras as authentic historical evidences. These include numerous terracotta plaques, and statues crafted in stone and metal, showing women in various dance postures.[40] From these visual evidences, the five terracotta plaques and sculptures that Shahanara Hossain has reproduced as line drawings,[41] all go to re-inscribe the erotic representation of early-medieval female performers as *devadāsī*s (lit., ‘servant of the god’), when read from the 20th-century historians’ perspective of moral norms. In conjunction with these, two stone and a copperplate inscriptions from period when the Sena and the Verman dynasties reigned, are also cited as authentic historical evidences. In one of these, the Bhuvaneśvar stone inscription of Bhaṭṭa-Bhavadeva (minister of peace and war to Harivarmmadeva), originally fixed on the temple of Ananta-Vāsudeva, declares: “*śataṃ sa hi dadau śāraṅgaśāvīdṛśaḥ*”,[42] i.e., “certainly [he] provided a hundred fawn-eyed”.[43] These ‘fawn-eyed’ are described in the inscription as “those who created the delusion that they were celestial nymphs taking rest on earth. They [...] were the prison houses of the passionate and the meeting-hall of Music, Dalliance and Beauty”.[44] Another stone inscription, that of Deopara, which records the erection of the temple of Pradymneśvara by Vijay Sena (c.1097-1160), declares: “*ratnālaṃkṛtibhirvviśeṣtitavapuḥ śobhā śataṃ subhruvaḥ*”,[45] i.e., “a hundred beautiful-browed, the charms of whose body are enhanced by (wearing of) jewellery”.[46] Nani Gopal Majumdar has translated “śataṃ subhruvaḥ” as “beautiful females”, and explains in the footnote that they were the “female attendants in the temple”.[47] Further, the Edilpur copperplate issued by Keśava Sena (first half of the 13th century), declares as a token of respect to Laksmanasena, that during the latter suzerain’s reign, “he used to make the sky filled with three different kinds of sound on three different occasions (during the day)”, which were the jingle of chains of imprisoned kings early in the morning, the bells of elephants during the noon, “an in the evening, the dulcet music arising from the anklets worn by” the *veśavilāsinī*s (*veśa* = dressing in fineries; *vilāsinī*= lustful woman; in conjunctive form the word denotes’ lustful women dressed in fineries’). Majumdar translates the “*veśavilāsinī*s” as the “courtezans”.[48] Presenting these literary and archaeological evidences, at the same time deploying a historical collective memory of Kamala and Jayapida, and also offering his assumption that all *vararama*s and *devadasi*s were expected to be accomplished in music and dance, Niharranjan Ray indicates that all the female performers in the early medieval period were all *vararama*s and *devadasi*s.[49] By this sweeping generalization, he forgets to remember that the Bhuvaneśvar stone inscription of Bhaṭṭa-Bhavadeva speaks of “a hundred fawn-eyed”,

the Deopara stone inscription of Vijay Sena of "a hundred beautiful-browed", and the Edilpur copperplate of Keśava Sena, of the "*vesavilasini*s", and not of *vararama*s and *devadasi*s as he claims. Aware of the difficulty in reconstructing the second meaning of the last 14 verses of the second and the 48 verses each of the third and fourth canto of the *Ramacharitam*, he mobilizes this text to substantiate his claim. Similarly, R. C. Majumdar draws on the *Rajatarangini, Pavanaduta, Ramacaritam* and the three inscriptions discussed above to argue that these sources refer to courtesans and *devadasi*s "well versed in dance and music", and by implication indicates that the female performers in early medieval Bengal were all courtesans and the *devadasi*s.[50]

If Niharranjan Ray generalizes, Dineshchandra Sen goes even further by adding colours to his conclusions. In order to render Jayapida blemish-free, he observes that women are naturally adept in the art of deceptions, and hence, it was not difficult for the most-beautiful dancer to lead Jayapida to her home by the stratagem of charming enticement.[51] It is noteworthy that in *Rajatarangini*, it was not Kamala but her bosom friend that leads Jayapida to Kamala's home. Whereas Sukumar Sen dismisses all events related to Vidyutprabha as described in *Sekasubhodaya,* as "baseless pleasantries", Dineshchandra Sen refers to her as the ultimate example of moral aberration.[52]

By arguing that the institution of *devadasi*s was the reason for sexual depravity in early medieval Bengal, Niharranjan Ray mobilizes a campaign of moral discipline against all the performers of early Medieval Bengal. He argues that this institution turned into the signifier of excessive erotic indulgences, so much so that he believes there is no reason to doubt that men from the royalty to the upper classes and castes of the affluent found in it the fruition of their lust and depraved desire.[53] He forgets to remember that the term '*devadasi*' is nowhere mentioned in the evidences he cites. In the same vein, R. C. Majumdar argues that "the system of dedicating girls (popularly known as *deva-dasi*) for the service of the temple" was degraded "in Bengal towards the close of the Hindu period". Acknowledging that "these girls were well versed in dance and music", he passes a strict moral judgement that they "were often no better than common courtesans". He refers to the account of Kamala in *Rajatarangini* to comment on "the moral standard of society in those days".[54] By these firm indictments, Ray and Majumdar reduce all the female performers described as *deva-varavanita*s as well as the *vararama*s, the 'fawn-eyed,' the 'beautiful-browed,' and the *vesavilasini*s, as erotic objects, forgetting that the collective memory of Vidyutprabha remembers her as an intelligent performer, who was able to impose her own agency over her body, whom no man could 'enjoy' without her acquiescence. Rather, she was the only person who was able to resist the overwhelming influence of a foreign Muslim saint in the Sena court.

Niharranjan Ray remembers Govardhana Acharya's *Āryāsaptaśatī* as an example of *śṛṃgār* (erotic) *kavya*,[55] but forgets to remember the text also presents important evidences on performance of early medieval Bengal. It is here, in verse 538, that the performance of a *naṭī* (actress) is described: when the *jabanī* (*yavanikā*, hand-held curtain) reveals the face of the

actress, she is initially struck with diffidence, but later, when her *abhinaya* is imbued with *rasa* and *bhāva,* she gratifies the hearts of the spectators. In verse 548, a dance *acārya* is described teaching his young female disciple the various postures of the erotic art by making her dance on the bed. Importantly, none of the verses refer to a female performer as *vararama*s and *devadasi*s. Where *varavanita*s are mentioned, as in verse 155, it is the context of teasing by man, and not of a performance.[56]

By raising this issue, my polemic is not directed at a hair-splitting fine detail between terms, but, informed by Sausseure's formulations that "the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary", and that "in language there are only differences",[57] I argue that meanings of words always-already exist in differencing networks. After Jacques Lacan, I maintain that "the system of language, at whatever point you take hold of it, never results in an index finger directly indicating a point of reality; it's the whole of reality that is covered by the entire network of language".[58] Because, in the network of languages, 'meanings' are never fixed, and because "the signified inevitably 'slips beneath' the signifier, resisting our attempts to delimit it",[59] incessant slippages render 'reality' itself as unfixed, more so when we are making meaning of representations of humans across eight centuries of time. Simply put, let us not jump into conclusion that the signs "a hundred fawn-eyed", "a hundred beautiful-browed", and the "*vesavilasini*s", necessarily denote 'prostitutes' in the current usage of the latter term, and that all the female performers in early medieval period were courtesans and *devadasi*s. In the next section, I will go on to argue further that Niharranjan Ray's doubtless inference can be questionable, and that history is merely a collection of selected facts, and that an objective historical truth is indeed a fallacy.

Turning away from the elite classes to the subalterns of the early medieval period, it is possible to ascertain that rural women acted and sang self-composed songs in performances presented during the reign of the Sena dynasty. This is vouchsafed by *Saduktikarṇāmṛta*, a collection of Sanskrit poetry by a *mahā-māṇdalika* (governor of a province) of the Sena kingdom, Śrīdharadāsa.[60] Importantly, these women have not been identified as *deva-varavanita*s, *vararama*s, *vesavilasini*s or prostitutes, and no historian cares to mention it as such. Another source for the world of the subalterns during the reign of the Pala dynasty, acknowledged by the historians as reliable for ascertaining "the everyday life of the teeming millions"[61] of the era, is the anthology of Buddhist Tantric songs titled the *Caryagītikā.* The imageries of the songs have been described as having been encrypted in *sandhābhāṣā,* which, in effect is a "destruction of language" seeking "to project the yogin into the 'paradoxical situation' indispensable to his training [...] toward 'breaking' the profane universe and replacing it by a universe of convertible and integrable plane".[62] The anthology, dated to the 11th century or perhaps a little earlier,[63] is particularly important for the history of performance studies, for it refers "to both vocal and instrumental, dancing and theatrical performances".[64] As song no. 17 ascribed to Vīṇā-pāda describes: "*nācanti bājila, gānti debī/buddha nāṭaka bisamā hoi*", and in translation, "the holder of the Vajra (Vīṇā-pāda) dances, the Goddess (the Yoginī, i.e., Nairātmā)

sings—difficult (i.e., the Nirvana of living beings) is the dance of the Buddha".[65] In the anthology, one comes across frequent references to the Śabarī (song 28, verses 1 and 3), Dombī (10, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7; 18, 2, 3, 5; 19, 2, 3, 5; 47, 2) and Caṇḍālī (18, 5; 47, 1).[66] The Sabari, Dombi and Candali mentioned in the songs refer to yoginīs, as images, may signify any of the following: "the physical woman, the *bodhicitta*, the vital-breath, the *nāḍī* in 'non-purified' or 'purified' form, the personified or the non-personified Absolute".[67] Hence "it would be a mistake to conclude that the songs [...] belong to the kind of milieu [of depraved sexuality] suggested by these images".[68] By describing the most sublime concept of the songs "in the most despicable terms simply serves to underline its paradoxical, and ultimately indescribable nature".[69] However, Niharranjan Ray does not take into consideration of the s*andhabhasa* and the implied paradoxical situation, and simply makes a generalized statement underpinned by uninformed reading to state that because the Dombis and the other 'low-class' women were adept in performance, they were loose in morals, and hence were also able to captivate the hearts the men belonging to the upper classes.[70] If history is constructed by guesswork and uninformed reading, then surely there is a methodological problem in the entire historiography resulting there from.

In contrast of the early medieval period, the late medieval period is marked by paucity of evidence so far as the history of female performers in concerned. It is known from Ziā al-Dīn Baranī's *Tārīkh-i-Firūz Shāhī* (1357 AC) that "convivial parties were the occasion for amusements and the songstresses and dancing-girls in splendid attire used to entertain the assembly with their melodies and performances".[71] Sultan Giyasuddin Azam Shah (1389-1410 AC) was also known to have maintained court dancers brought from Iran at this court in Sonargaon. These dancers, "wearing wide, pleated skirts, red blouses, veils and gold ornaments", welcomed guests at the sultan's court with *rāks-e-gul* or the flower dance, in which the dancers "scattered flowers [as they] danced to music".[72] The Chinese voyager Ma Huan who visited Bengal in 1431 AC, appears to corroborate Barani by reporting in his *Ying yai sheng lan* about"people [who are] good singers and dancers to enliven drinking and feasting".[73] In all possibility, Ma Huan may have observed this during his visit to So-na-eul-kiang (Sonargaon). He also makes a curious observation regarding the dress of these 'people' in his description by observing that they "wear a shirt with black and white patterns and held by a scarf with a fringe around their waists of coral and amber, coloured beads and with bracelets of beads fastened on their wrists".[74]

As for the female performers of the Mughal era, three Persian histories are available: *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi* by Mirza Nathan, *Siyar al-Mutakhkherin* by Ghulam Husain Tabatabai, and *Ma'athir al-Umara* by Shams ud Daula Shah Nawaz Khan and his son Abdul Hai Khan. According to *Ma'athir al-Umara,* "it was the practice of subahdars and nawabs [of Bengal] to maintain many songstresses and dancing-girls. Islam Khan had a big establishment of them in Bengal consisting of *luti, hurkani, kanci* and *domni* (gypsies). He paid them Rs. 80,000 a month [...]".[75] So highly skilled were these performers that, as *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi* asserts, "Emperor

Jahangir sent his musician Prem Ranga to take the best of them to his imperial court".[76] Shahamat Jang and Nawab Siraj al-Daula, informs *Siyar al-Mutakhkherin,* both maintained a large number of songstresses and dancing girls. Citing local tradition, the same text remembers two of dancing girls: one of them, patronized by Shahamat Jang, was Bhag Bai; the other, patronized by Siraj al-Daula, was Aleya. It is also said Siraj ud-Daula brought a *kanceni* dancing girl named Faizu Bai from Delhi at a cost of one lakh rupees. "She was a perfect Indian beauty of that right golden hue so much coveted all over the country, and of such delicacy of person to weigh 22 seers".[77]

In his historical study of court life of Bengal based on Persian chronicles and factory records of the English East India Company, *Begums of Bengal,* Brajendra Nath Banerjee narrates the account of a dancing girl named Munni. During the marriage ceremony of Ikram ud-Daula, the younger brother of Siraj ud-Daula, the troupe to which Munni belonged was summoned from Delhi to Murshidabad, to entertain at the festivity for a fee of Rs. 10,000. After the event, the troupe continued to practice its profession in Murshidabad, and soon, her beauty and musical skill conquered the heart of Mir Jafar. He took her into his harem, and by her "attainments, cleverness and sincere love for her master", she raised herself "to the position of the principal Begam of Mir Jafar's harem".[78] Later, after the death of Mir Jafar, she won high favour of both Clive and Hastings, entirely by her good sense, vigorous spirit, steadfastness of purpose, and remarkable ability to execute any scheme to successful execution. The company held her in high esteem, so much so that she was known as the Mother of the Company. When Munni Begam, once a dancing girl and later a woman of tremendous influence, died on 11 January 1813, the British flag flew at half-mast at the command of the Governor-general.[79] A visual representation of these female performers of the 18th century may be observed on a terracotta plaque adorning the Kantajee Temple, located near the town of Dinajpur. Showing a zamindar enjoying a river cruise on a crescent-shaped boat, the plaque has two female dancers performing to the accompaniment of three musicians, of whom two are females and one is a male.[80]

Although none of these accounts from the late medieval period discussed so far make any moral judgement regarding the female performers, it is Sebastien Manrique, a Portuguese-Catholic missionary and traveller, who raises such concern for the first time. During his sojourn at Dhaka in 1628, he attended a feast in the town, and was treated with a performance by 'bands of dancing girls':

[The] bands of dancing girls [were composed of] women and girls noted for their beauty, who gain their livelihood at this evil occupation. They are dressed in transparent garments, or rather undressed, and are covered with gold and silver ornaments. They dance with such voluptuousness and disregard foe decency that anyone with a sense of modesty is obliged to close his eyes in order to avoid viewing such licentiousness.[81]

However, the translator of Manrique's *Travels,* Eckford Luard, adds a footnote to the matter of dress. "Ordinarily", he points out, "the dancing girls' garb exceed (if we can say so) on

the side of modesty. Perhaps Manrique desires to impress us, though no doubt such displays were not wholly unknown".[82] Luard's comment does indeed raise a few questions regarding the accuracy of Manrique's observation.

Apart from these historical accounts, aesthetic representations of female performers have also been depicted in late medieval literature. These literary works not only support Manrique's moral judgement, but go beyond by representing them as prostitutes. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from Shah Muhammad Sagir's *Yusuf-Zolekhā* (1391-1410), where the "beauteous dancing prostitutes" are described singing and dancing with charm and wantonness.

Yato nṛtya beśyā acḥe surūp suthạ̄n

Sulalita nṛtyagīta kare sābdhān.[83]

Again, in Abdul Hakim's *Lālamati Saiful Muluk* (17th century), "female royal prostitutes" have been represented as entertaining the soldiers by accompanying them during their military campaign.

Colileka sāri sāri

Yata rājabeśyā narī

Nṛtyagīta ati manohara,

Nānā bādya bāje ghana

Nāca'e nartakīgaṇa

Soinya cole horiṣa antar.[84]

In the same text, Abdul Hakim also represents female performers performing at festivals as "hundreds of hot women [*tāfānārī*] as beautiful as heavenly nymphs.

Yateke nāṭuāgoṇe raṁ kare jane jane

Nānān koutuka manohara

Śate śate tāfānārī yeno svarga vidyādhorī

Nṛyagīta prati sthāne sthāne.[85]

As reported in Donāgājī's *Saiful-Muluk-Badiuzzāmān* (17th century), the people hosted performances and literary gatherings at their residences during festivities. However, the "royal prostitutes" performed want only at performances hosted by the royalty.

Beśyā sabe ṇtya kare ati sulalita

Rājabeśyā ṇtya kare aparā barjita.[86]

"In fact, the prostitutes [*beśyā*s] were the dance and music artistes", asserts Ahmed Sharif, and goes on to observe that "the sign of aristocracy and affluence was in maintaining prostitutes".[87] It is for this reason, he explains, not only did the scholars but also the "royal prostitutes" accompanied princes during their voyages, as seen in Donāgājī's *Saiful-Muluk-Badiuzzāmān.*

Ālim paṇdita ār jyotiṣa gaṇak
Nānā yantra rājabeśyā gāhan nartak.[88]

By collecting evidences from the poetic works composed by Muslim poets in the late medieval period, Ahmed Sharif demonstrates that low-class professionals making a living out of singing, dancing, acting and play music served in social festivities. Of these professionals, he maintains, the women were prostitute-*bāijīs* ('dancing-girls'), and adds, "dancer-singer-instrumentalist prostitutes were brought during the festivities hosted at the residences of the affluent".[89]

Ahmed Sharif's essentialist comment is problematic because none of the historical accounts of the late medieval period represent the female performers as prostitutes. By this sweeping observation that disregards all forms of difference, he actually employs Vidyapati's tripartite scheme of *puranari, paranari* and *baranari* to unilaterally determine that *all* the female performers of the late medieval period were adulteresses, unchastely public women, and prostitutes. In this process, he forgets to remember the historical evidence of Munni Begam. We may consider her a betrayer of the nationalist cause by siding with the colonizers, may even condemn her as an ambitious and selfish parasite, but at the same time, we must also acknowledge that she was not merely a prostitute-*baiji* but also a stateswoman of high calibre. At the same time, we may also provide a little space for Aleya, who still lives in collective memory of the people in Bangladesh, not as an ambitious and selfish parasite-prostitute, but a friend, who, even if slightly, tried to augment the nationalist cause by standing beside Siraj ud-Daula at a calamitous time.

In different degrees and settings, any human, both male as well as female, can be affected by the libidinous drive. The enigmatic neuroscience of sex may have a lot to learn, but so much is clear that the brain, more particularly the temporal lobe, the hippocampus and the "regions that are associated with some of our most sophisticated thoughts" are hard-wired to generate sexual response for the humans to procreate.[90] At the same time, it is indispensable to recognize that any human is marked by'multi-axial locationality' that takes into account simultaneous situatedness of multiple categories such as class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, language and age, and the manner in which "these signifiers slide into one another in the articulation of power".[91] If both of these arguments are logical, then why should the pre-modern female performers be identified only with the sign of sexuality? It was because all the males were subjugated by Vidyutprabha by her intelligence, and because the men were vulnerable to her sexuality, patriarchy mobilizes its deft tool of Vidyapati's *puranari, paranari* and *baranari* tripartite scheme of women. The female performers represented by the tripartite scheme craftily act for patriarchy. Hence, when Ahmed Sharif identifies all the late-medieval female performers as prostitute-*bāijīs*, political representation is at work for the patriarchy. He fails to realize that it was to discipline and control the women that patriarchy has mobilized the stigma of 'prostitute' for centuries. It is precisely with this intent that Gñānendra Mohan Das edited dictionary defines a *naṭī* as (1) *abhinetrī/nartakī* (actor/dancer) and (2) *kulaṭā* (unchaste woman who has forsaken

family life for harlotry) and *bārāṁgnā* (woman whose body is public, prostitute). Ghulam Murshid edited *Bibartanmūlak Bāṅlā Abhidhān* ("A Diachronic Dictionary of Bangla Language"), traces the first use of *nati* as *abhinetri/nartaki* to Bijay Gupta (1650 AC), and that of the second meaning to Manuel da Assumpção (1743). It is no wonder that Assumpção, a Portuguese missionary, would consider all acts derived from non-Christian culture as sinful. Be that as it may, suffice it to end this section by observing that a long-drawn campaign mobilized by the patriarchy has generated the deep-seated myth current in the historiography of Bengal that all pre-modern performers were prostitutes.

3. Padmavati, Candravati and Sulocana: Collective Memory of Three 'Chaste' Female Performers:

Although it is possible to access numerous aesthetic representations on Jayadeva Miśra, one of the five jewels of the court of Laksmanasena, that of his wife, Padmavati, is relatively infrequent. Rāmasarasvatī, the court poet of Mahārāja Naranārāyaṇa in the sixteenth century,[92] represents Padmavati and Jayadveva in his kavya *Jayadeva.* In the following excerpt, the poet describes Jayadeva singing of Kṛṣṇa, and Padmavati dancing to the rhythm of the song:

Jayadeva mādhabar stutika borṇābe,

Padmavati āgata nācanta bhaṅgibhābe.

Kṛṣṇar gītaka Jayadeva nidagati,

Rūpaka tālara cebe nāce Padmavati.[93]

Perhaps the most detailed representation of Padmavati is to be found in *Sekasubhodaya,* where she is described as a singer. In Chapter Thirteen of the text, it is narrated that one day when she was returning after a bath in the Ganges, she heard a din at the royal court and hastened there to investigate. When she had reached, she found that a foreigner named Buḍhana Miśra, claiming to have won a writ of victory from the King of Orissa as a great singer and scholar, had arrived at the court of Laksmanasena to challenge anyone to a contest in musical performance or scholarship. Before her arrival, he had already won acclaim from the court by rendering a song in raga Paṭamañjarī, with the effect that a nearby *peepul* tree shed all its leaves. Because of this extraordinary feat, King Laksmanasena was about to confer on him a writ of victory. At this point, Padmavati declared that when she and her husband were present, no one could dare to demand a writ of victory. She asked that her husband be fetched, and a contest be held with him or her to determine the victor. The sheikh acknowledged Padmavati's argument, and asked her to sing before her husband is put to test. She rendered a song in raga Gāndhāra, and in consequence; all the boats on the Ganges were drawn near. At this, all the courtiers acknowledged her skill and determined that of the two contestants, Padmavati was superior because she was able to draw inanimate boats compared to Budhana Misra's mastery over an animate tree. When the sheikh asked Budhana Misra's view as to who is the winner of the contest, the foreign contestant refused to "wrangle with a woman", and paid an underhand

compliment by observing that Gauda is a country where “a woman has manifold qualifications and a man has none”. At this time Jayadeva, having received information from Padmavati, arrived at the court. After hearing of the skill of the two contestants, he observed that his wife was the obvious winner. When the sheikh asked Jayadeva to prove his skill, he counter-challenged Budhana Misra to turn the leafless tree into a tree full of leaves. When the foreign contestant declared his inability, Jayadeva rendered a song in raga Vasanta, and indeed, the tree turned leafy again. At this instance, Budhana Misra acknowledged defeat.[94]

Niharranjan Ray, while discussing the ‘low caste of the *naṭa*s (performers)’ observes that some from the upper classes may also have adopted this profession. Then he adds, without demonstrating any evidence, that Padmavati, the wife of Jayadeva was also a skilled dancer and singer before her marriage. Again, without producing any evidence, Dineshchandra Sen moves a step further by making a moral judgement on Padmavati for attending performances at the court. He asks, why should a *gṛthastha paribār* (a householder family) provide a dancer for the royal court? Instead of operating by assumptions and guesswork, why not cite *Sekasubhodaya,* which, as observed earlier, Dineshchandra Sen does indeed cite, only to determine that Vidyutprabha is the ultimate example of moral aberration. Such is the research method employed by these eminent historians.

Let us not forget that in *Sekasubhodaya,* Padmavati has been represented as an accomplished, respectable, and ‘chaste’ performer. Similar appellations may be added to Candravati. Gopal Halder acknowledges her as the greatest woman of early-medieval Bengali literature.[95] Daughter of the famous late-medieval poet Dvija Baṃśidāsa, Candravati was the first Bengali poetess in Bengali literature who composed “Rāmayaṇa”, “Dasyu Kenārāma”, and “Maluyā”.[96] That Candravati was also a performer is amply proved by the *bhaṇitā*s (signature verses) of all three of her compositions mentioned above: “Candravati kay śuna” (Listen, Candravati says; “Dasyu Kenarama”), “Sarasvatī bandi gāi” (I sing in praise of Sarasvati; “Maluya”), and “Candravati kaindyā kay” (Candravati speaks in tears, “Ramayana”). Because most of the pre-modern populations were non-literate, Candravati calls on the spectators of all her compositions to ‘listen’. For the same reason, she has ‘sung’ and ‘spoken’ to the spectators. If these compositions were only written to be read, these verbs would have been unnecessary appendages. In this regard, Sukumar Sen’s observation is extremely relevant: all the *pancalī-tarjā-kabi* narrative compositions were rendered standing in a performance space; these were never intended to be read lying down.[97]

Koyela Chakravarti concedes that although Candravati is recognized as a historic figure placed in the 17th century, and although her extensive life cycle has earned a place in the history of Bengali literature, that historicity and life cycle has actually been reconstructed on the basis of Nayan Chand Ghos’s ballad “Candravati”, and local tradition.[98] As depicted in a detailed representation in Ghos’s ballad, Candravati’s attraction towards her childhood friend Jayananda began when he helped her collect flowers for her father’s morning worship of Śiva. One morning,

after collecting *mālatī* flowers she strung a garland and put it around Jayananda's neck. In return, Jayananda wrote a brief letter offering his love for her, promising to be her slave at her feet forever if she responded favourably. On receiving the letter and reading it over and again, Candravati could only shed her tears, for she was entirely dependent on the decision of her father. Instead of openly declaring her love in return, she only wrote back that it would be inappropriate for her to resolve the matter by herself, for the decision rests entirely on her father. At the same time, she asks the sun and the moon to stand witness, silently prays for Jayananda as her husband, and secretly sheds tears. In the meanwhile, Candravati's father, Bamsidasa, has been praying to Shiva for a suitable bride-groom from a respectable family for her daughter. Soon match-makers arrive at his house. They all intimate him regarding a prospective bridegroom of glowing beauty exceling the sun, and also of exceptional repute as a scholar, who is a resident of Sundhyā village, and was born in a Cakrabartī family. He is none other than Jayananda. They request Bamsidasa to fix a date of marriage immediately. Overjoyed, Bamsidasa accepts the proposal, and the family sets on to perform pre-marital rituals with congratulatory songs and celebratory drumming. On the day before the marriage ceremony, when Candravati's mother along with her female relatives and other women were visiting each homestead of the village singing ritual songs and seeking blessing for the bride, news arrived that Jayananda has married a Muslim maiden, with whom he had fallen in love. Consequently, not only did he lose his caste status, but also put to shame his entire family. When the news reaches Candravati, she conceals her aching heart maddened by grief over the betrayal of her childhood sweetheart, and gives up eating and drinking. Her father realizes the intensity of her grief. So, when he receives further marriage proposals from distant places, he consults her and, and learning that she sought to shun marriage in her life, he grants her wish, and asks her to devote herself in worshipping Siva and composing a *Ramayana*. Thereafter, he has a temple of Siva constructed for her, and Candravati fulfils her father's command and composes her *Ramayana* in leisure time. One day, in the month of Baisākh when she was deep in meditation on Siva, she received a letter from Jayananda replete with grief of disillusionment. Acknowledging that he drank poison for what he thought was ambrosia, and adorned himself with venomous snake for what he took to be a garland of flower, he begged forgiveness, and sought to see her for the last time. Thereafter he would, he said, depart from this life by choosing death. In tears, Candravati read the letter again and again. Unable to decide by herself, she sought her father's advice. Bamsidasa's advice was simple: not to be overcome with emotion and to devote wholeheartedly in the worship of Siva. Accepting her father's decision, she sent a letter of refusal, locked herself in the temple, and engaged herself in undivided meditation on Siva. When Jayananda returned, as though an insane person running berserk after breaking free from shackles, he failed to attract Candravati's attention submerged in deep meditation, even after pounding on the door. In grief, he bid her farewell by writing a letter on the door of the temple with the juice of *malati* flowers. Later, when Candravati emerged from her meditation and read the letter, she decided that the temple had been polluted. With the intent of sanctifying her temple, she set off for the river with a pitcher to collect water from the adjoining river. There she discovered Jayananda's dead body floating on the water. At this, Candravati turned into an insane woman.[99]

Both Padmavati as represented in *Sekasubhodaya* and Candravati in "Candravati" ballad are unquestionably accomplished, respectable, and 'chaste' performers. Similar adjectives qualify poetess-performer Sulocana (Sula). Both the representations of her in *Pracin Purbabanga Gitika* (volume 6) edited by Kshitish Chanda Moulik, and *Purbabanga Gitika* (volume 3, no. 2) compiled by Dinesh Chandra Sen are totally based on collective memory. Sulocana, of *namaśūdra* lineage, was born in 1776 AC, at Thakurakona village in Netrakona district. Her father was Rāmadeva, and her mother, Jayatārā. Ramadeva was the chief helmsman of cargo-carrying country boats, and was also an adept singer and composer of *bhāṭiyālī* songs. In her childhood, Sulocana was not considered beautiful as her complexion was dark, but was well-known for performing as the lead-narrator (*gāyen*) of amateur performance groups she would create with children. Her melodious voice would attract rapt attention of the villagers. Because her father had to spend a lot of time away from home, he had her married to a handsome but orphan teenager named Jayahari. He lived as a *ghar-jāmāi,* i.e., a person who lives with his father-in-law's family. When Sulocana was fifteen or sixteen, Jayahari renounced family life and left home. Thereafter, Sulocana spent her entire life waiting for his return, never marrying again. In the long life she lived, Sulocana never for once dispense with two signs of a married woman: vermillion mark (*sindur*) and *śaṅkha* bangles. After her parents passed away, she moved to the home of her nephew at Chatraśāl village, and was taught the basic skills of literacy by Channu Nātha, a kind-hearted teacher of the local village school. Her literacy skill led her on to read Bengali translations of the *Bhāgavada* and other *purāṇa*s with interest. Thereafter, she began to compose rhymed-metrical narratives based on the *līlā*s of Kṛṣṇa, and soon earned substantial wealth as she was established as a renowned performer whose fame was extended all over greater Mymansingh district. Till her death in c. 1866, she remained steadfast in her orthodox faith. According to a popular tradition, immediately before her death an ascetic (*sannyasī*) of divine beauty appeared beside her bed. Sulocana paid her obeisance to him*,* and is reported to have said, "I knew that I would meet you one more time in this life".[100] A chaste and virtuous woman, Sulocana pays her homage to her husband in her ballad titled "Śrīśrīgopinī Kīrttana" with utmost devotion.

I sing at the feet of my husband with devotion,

He who went abroad and never returned.

Wherever you may dwell my beloved husband,

May my heart's propensity remain steadfast at your feet.

Whatever that has happened was fated to be,

Grant a meeting with this servant on the day of her death.[101]

Sekasubhodaya, "Candravati" ballad, *Pracin Purbabanga Gitika* (volume 6) and *Purbabanga Gitika* (volume 3, no. 2) have unequivocally represented Padmavati, Candravati and Sulocana as chaste, adept, upright, and respectable performers. However, the historians of pre-modern Bengal chose to remember the 'baseless pleasantries' of *Sekasubhodaya,* and the

romantic narrative of *Rajatarangini* in representing the pre-modern female performers, but forget to remember the collective memory of Padmavati, Sulocana and Candravati. By thus "regulating the relationship between remembering and forgetting", as already observed in the introduction, the collective memory recalled by the eminent historians of Bengal privileges the patriarchal interests of the contemporary. It is thus that collective memory is deployed *as* politics, and the political representations of the female performers in the historiography of Bengal operates insidiously and efficiently for patriarchy.

Conclusion:

The historiography of pre-modern female performers is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, as argued in this theoretical endeavour, authentic evidences deployed by the historians as 'hard-core of historical facts,' and the historiography of pre-modern female performers resulting from un-interrogated interpretations of those evidences, in the last instance, merely upholds a staunchly patriarchal narrative composed of half-truths and outright falsity. I acknowledge, I too am culpable in strengthening the patriarchal narrative in some of my researches, since I built my argument on the fore-mentioned authorities.[102] In this historiography deploying political representation working for patriarchy, 'hard-core historical facts' have been employed with collective memory, only to re-inscribe the pre-modern female performers as *devadasi-barabanita*-prostitutes. At the same time, this historiography overlooks the collective memory that represents the performers as chaste, adept, upright, and respectable. By this, I do not argue that all the pre-modern female performers were chaste and respectable. I argue that representation as 'chaste' and 'respectable' woman is another insidious tool employed by the patriarchy to normalize and discipline women. So long as the five performers discussed in this undertaking are not represented by their femininity, they will remain fragmented by the *puranari-paranari-baranari* tripartite scheme. Secondly, the hard-core of historical evidences deployed in the historiography are the creations of male poets-artistes under the patronization of the elite classes. Consequently, the history constructed by these evidences can never uncover feminine experiences. At this point I invoke Gopal Halder's argument that post Sur dynasty, Bengali literature was nourished, at small and large-scale, by the rural-heads operating at the grassroots level, and not the kings and princes. It was these rural-heads whose patronizations are mentioned in the poetic literature of the 16th-17th century. It was because of these 'rural-heads' that Candravati and Sulocana could flourish. Hence, till we recover the history at the grass-roots level, the entire history of theatre in Bengal will remain 'partial'—both as partly understood and hence incomplete, and as prejudiced and discriminatory, and hence incorrect.

This 'partial' history will inevitably remain incomplete if Carr's argument is acknowledged. Hence his indictment cited at the beginning: "the belief in a hard core of historical facts, existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy". It is problematic to recover 'a hard core of historical facts' also because we will perhaps never be able to recover the history of the subalterns, more so of the doubly-subaltern pre-modern performers of Bengal. However, instead of attempting to recover the

problematic ‘hard core of historical facts,’ if we accept Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s invitation to “moral love”, and driven as “indefatigable activists”[103] engage in the study of collective memory, and at the same time, remain alert to the pitfalls of insidious tools and political representations employed by the patriarchy, then perhaps by repeated trials and failures, we may be able to determine a way to recovering the past.

To this end, two cues that could possibly serve to initiate the project are *rayānī gān* and *dhap kīrtan*. The performance of *rayānī gān* is popular in Barisal-Khulna region, and is based on Bijay Gupta’s *Padmā Purāṇ* composed in 1494 AC.The *gayen*s (lead narrators) of the performance, three or four in number, are always female performers. They are prompted by the *sarkār*, a male performer, who literally holds the book and stands immediately behind the female *gayen*s. The performers assert that the role of the *gayen*s have always been performed by women.[104] As Sukumar Sen believes, among all the *purāṇa*-based long narrative poems of the Middle Bengali, those based on Manasā were the most popular among the people.[105] He further adds, “these poems were meant for the masses, and enjoyed, not in the seclusion by an exclusive audience but by the whole community assembled to take part in a common worship or festivity of the village deity”.[106] Based on these indications, I would hypothesize that this heritage of performance of *rayani gan* presented by female performers is a receptacle of collective memory of the pre-modern female performers in Bengal.

The second cue for investigation that I propose is *dhap kirtan*. Sukumar Sen informs us that towards the end of the 18th century, in the urban areas along the bank of the Ganges, there evolved a new form of narrative performance, in which the *gayen* was a female performer, donned no ankle-bells in the feet, and carried no whisk and *mandirā* (cymbals) in the hands. This new form came to be known as *dhap kirtan*, and was dominated entirely by female performers (*kīrtanīyā*s).[107] Sen’s postulation is based on contemporary literature, and the form bears traces of influence of colonial modernity since it evolved in the urban areas. Nevertheless, the appearance of female *kirtaniya*s at the end of the 18th century cannot be a unique event that has no precedence. For example, Jānhabā Debī (the wife of Caitanya’s friend and disciple Nityānanda), and Svarṇalālī (the wife of Vaiṣṇava poet Yadava Dās) composed Vaiṣṇava *padavalī*s in the 16th century and later, and possibly, going by the argument regarding medieval poets presented earlier, also rendered these in public or private performance. Based on these indications, my second hypothesis is that collective memory of pre-modern female performers may also be traced in the collective memory that may have gathered around *dhap kirtan*.

Before engaging in a project on recovering collective memory of female performers of pre-modern Bengal, I end the current theoretical endeavour by retrieving an insight produced by “The Tale of a Discerning Amoroso” in the Vidyapati’s *Purusapariksa.* After distinguishing the three types of women, i.e., women that are one’s own, women that belong to others, and women that are common property, the text goes on to advise the discerning lover by narrating a tale to exemplify as to how he may distinguish between the women that are common property. It is said, so goes the

tale, that in the capital city of Dhārā in the domain of the fabled King Bhōja, there lived two courtesans named Kētakī and Jātakī, who quarrelled over their respective merits. Failing to resolve their dispute, they appealed to King Bhoja, who, in turn was also unable to decide. So, he sent them to King Vikramāditya of Ujjayinī. After cross-examining them both, Vikramaditya sent them back, promising to communicate his decision to King Bhoja. After they had left, Vikramaditya mounted his two attendant genii, Agni and Kōkila, and in disguise, visited the two courtesans in their own houses. He observed their conduct and found that Ketaki was tender and compassionate, while Jataki was only greedy for money. Therefore, he decided in favour of Ketaki.[108] Apparently, this narrative devised to impart advice on masculinity, clearly works for patriarchy. However, a closer examination of the narrative reveals a fissure. As observed earlier, 'the woman who is a common property' is described as a harlot, who is desirous only of money. She is characterized as showing no hatred for the worthless rich man, and no affection for a worthy but poor man. However, to the same lover (Vikramaditya), Ketaki is described as having been tender and Jataki is described to have acted as a true harlot, i.e., greedy for money. Hence, if desiring money is the indicator of a courtesan, then Ketaki is not a courtesan.

It is thus that patriarchy fails to determine gender: even though Ketaki is a 'woman who is a common property,' she renders void the determining characteristic of a 'woman who is a common property'. At the same time, Kamala, Vidyutprabha, Padmavati, Candravati and Sulocana raise questions about femininity. The dancing girl Kamala is described as a person whose courteous behaviour struck Jayapida, and she even gave him lodging in her house not in exchange of money but out of kind hospitality. Vidyutprabha Laksmanasena over rides the strictures of feminine modesty and decorum, to out manoeuvre a foreigner, the sheikh, and subjugates all the members of Laksmanasena's court to shame. In contrast to Vidyutprabha, Padmavati defeats Budhana Misra in a musical contest in spite of maintaining all the patriarchal strictures of feminine modesty and decorum. Both Candravati and Sulocana prove that *satī nārī* (chaste women) can rise above patriarchal strictures of serving the husband and the domestic life to devote themselves entirely to literature and performance. Each of them demonstrates that there is no substantial core of gender identity, which exists a priori as the correlate of biological sex. They demonstrate that gender identity is not a seamless substance, but is constructed identity constituted by *social temporality*. As Judith Butler argues, the perception of gender "as a substantial core which might well be understood as the spiritual or psychological correlate of biological sex", as "something prior to the various acts, postures, and gestures", is only an appearance; that gender is not a seamless substance, but "a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment" constituted by *social temporality*.[109]

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