
Vernacular Languages and Oral Culture in Medieval North Bengal (1300–1700): Social Communication and Marginalized Voices

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the role of vernacular language and oral culture in determining social communication structures in Medieval North Bengal during the 1300s to 1700 CE. The medieval history of India has tended to prioritize political tales and elite literary legacies, which have been written predominantly in Sanskrit and Persian, and tends to ignore the daily experiences and communication of common people. This research seeks to reclaim the stories and cultural practices of marginalized communities in the region through the use of vernacular languages and oral cultural practices. It is evident that cultural exchange also happened in medieval North Bengal under the rule of the Kamata and Koch kingdoms. Communal vernacular languages and oral traditions were important in sharing social values, religious beliefs, and communal memory in such a situation. Folk tales, rite performance, and early vernacular literature were major forms of community communication. The study will also seek to address a few major research questions:

- 1) How did vernacular languages and oral traditions provide a vehicle for social communication in medieval North Bengal?
- 2) How did legends and ceremonial customs reflect the social life of local communities and identity in terms of their rituals or folk narratives?
- 3) How did people living on the edge, those like the Rajbanshis in particular, use vernacular expressions to preserve and transmit community knowledge?

Methodologically, this study has an interdisciplinary and historical character. It integrates textual study and cultural interpretation. Sources to be examined are folk tales, local chronicles, and oral tradition as well as secondary historical research. Analyzes these sources through social and cultural history and aims to reconstruct communication patterns of cultural exchange and collective memory in medieval North Bengal. Therefore, the present project aims to explore aspects of oral history, especially focusing on the oral and colloquial languages to contribute to a better understanding of history in medieval eastern India. It does so through an emphasis on the significance of non-elite cultural traditions in defining regional social history.

Keywords: vernacular language, oral tradition, medieval North Bengal, subaltern history, Rajbanshi.

INTRODUCTION:

1300 to 1700 CE Medieval North Bengal was rich in the diversity of cultures through exchanges of different communities, religions, and languages. The traditional historical record tends to focus on kings, leaders, and articles written in Sanskrit or Persian, and so often the opinions and experiences of the ordinary people fall into the gaps (Chatterjee 2009). The idioms and stories of these forgotten populations shed light on exchanges between people, memories, and the core of community life. The oral culture, which consists of folk songs, proverbs, stories, and ritual performances, reveals how ordinary individuals responded to social hierarchies, transmitted knowledge, and maintained a communal memory (Ghosh 2005). This research plan endeavors to revive these "voices from the margins," focusing on Rajbanshi, regional Bengali languages, and local tribal languages. It looks at how they form social communication, local rule, and culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Oral traditions are critical in studying Northeast Indian communities and the surrounding Highland Asia, particularly for understanding the rich cultures and histories, as well as the histories in the region of Central Asia. They hold, rather, history is being kept alive through oral tradition, traditional customs, local culture, historical memory, as well as practices and rituals in highland societies that are generally transmitted through oral tradition rather than written records. In the first chapter of *Oral Traditions, Continuities, and Transformations in Northeast India and beyond*, Surajit Sarkar and Nerupama Y. Modwel notes that oral traditions including myths, folk stories, ritual chants, and oral histories are central channels for transmitting cultural knowledge and shared memories from generation to generation (Sarkar & Modwel, 2021). My last research (Roy Dakua 2025) was about linguistic inequality in education in the modern era. It follows an extension of earlier work, yet this research explores the history of medieval vernacular language and oral culture and social communication in North Bengal. But anthropologist Stuart Blackburn demonstrates that oral history from the tradition of Himalayan communities retains migration narratives, cosmological beliefs, and social hierarchies. They are "living archives" of indigenous societies" (Blackburn 2008). Jan Vansina notes that oral traditions are, likewise, worthy historical sources, and if appraised critically, may work within the cultural structure of societies without written history to reconstruct their past (Vansina 1985). Studies by David Shulman further highlight how oral narratives and locally created storytelling traditions are central to the construction of regional cultural identities across South Asia (Shulman 1993).

Among South Asian historical scholars, scholars such as Ranajit Guha underscored the importance of reclaiming the voices of communities who have sometimes not been represented in elite literary histories (Guha 1982). This kind of perspective emphasizes the importance of oral traditions and vernacular languages in social practices. The role of vernacular language and oral tradition was, however, under-researched in the history of social communication in medieval North Bengal. The aim of this research is to do this by investigating to what extent oral traditions functioned as communication mediums and cultural expression in this area.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

Below are the stated goals in this report:

- 1) To study the occurrence and application of vernacular language in Medieval North Bengal (1300-1700), and to investigate the significance of the vernacular for everyday communication practices by non-elite inhabitants.
- 2) To look at the patterns and functions of oral culture which incorporate folk (or storytelling) culture and language as a means of cultural expression and collective memory in the region.
- 3) To understand how dispossessed groups - peasants, artisans, women, indigenous communities - articulately voiced their ways of life and social identity through vernacular and oral language.
- 4) To improve the study of the medieval social history of Northern Bengal by including vernacular ways of speaking and oral culture as part of the area's history.

RESEARCH PROBLEM:

The periodic historiography of medieval India still relies largely on royal studies, administrative writing, and literary productions in elite languages like Sanskrit and Persian. Whereas those sources tell a valuable story, showing just how power dynamics were politically organized or how elite peoples culturally experienced and lived, they leave out important facets of the experience of ordinary people and means of intercommunication, leaving the narrative of the marginalized groups of peasants, craftsmen/artisans, pastoralists, and local religion practitioners with a far greater degree of inexperience. It is thus research which addresses this knowledge gap by investigating the significance of vernacular language and oral culture in documenting the history of this epoch.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

The researcher will answer the following research questions:

- 1) How did local languages make the day-to-day involvement of people who lived in the boundaries of North Bengal over 1300 to 1700 CE?
- 2) How did oral customs (folk songs, storytelling, etc.) serve as mechanisms for transmitting cultural knowledge, values, and history?
- 3) How did those who did not belong to an elite system use their native language and oral culture to create their identity, share beliefs, and experiences?
- 4) In what ways did local culture (in art, music, dance, etc.) affect elite literature (Sanskrit and Persian literature) or differ in form from elite literature?

METHODOLOGY:

To address vernacular language, social communication, and oral culture in medieval North Bengal (c. 1300 to 1700), this method takes an interdisciplinary and qualitative approach. It combines theories and approaches from social and cultural history, historical linguistics, and anthropology in order to recover marginalized voices that so far have largely been omitted from elite textual traditions. The study is based on primary and secondary sources. Oral traditions like folktales, ballads, ritual songs, proverbs, and myths passed down within Rajbanshi and the surrounding communities form the basis of the

primary sources. In addition, there are written vernacular narratives, including Mangalkavya literature and Vaishnavite texts, that offer further insight into linguistic and cultural representations of non-elite communities. Archival data (land grants and local administrative documents, as well as other sources) are also accessed to bring socio-economic and communicative structures into focus. Secondary sources include historical works on medieval Bengal, studies within subaltern oral traditions, and sociolinguistics.

The study uses the oral history approach to understand narratives as "chains of testimony," which are subject to scrutiny with respect to their internal reliability, social context, and transmission patterns (Vansina 1985). Ethnographic techniques, such as minimal fieldwork and participant observation (where feasible), are employed to examine the persistence of oral traditions and vernacular communication within contemporary North Bengal. These ways of working serve to fill the connection between past and current cultural practices. A sociolinguistic perspective can be used to understand the variation and/or use of speech (from different social groups), which also shows how it mirrors identity, hierarchy, and communitarianism (Labov 1972). Textual and discourse analysis are used to scrutinize vernacular texts to see representations of marginality, power relations, and cultural symbols. Ethnopoetic assessment preserves the performative aesthetic aspects of oral stories, which is crucial in transcription (Hymes 1981). Moreover, the comparative method of the study examines the extent to which oral and written traditions differ or overlap and elite and non-elite narratives. The use of microhistorical strategies is key to a microhistorical approach that is used to reconstruct the personal lifeworld of communication and communal life and modes of everyday living in particular societies to allow a more complex interpretation of localized historical experiences. The method takes account of subaltern historiography by privileging those underrepresented voices excluded from the official narratives of history; the focus of the analysis is subaltern historiography (Guha 1982). Moreover, the term vernacularization has been employed in the context of the trajectory of vernacularization to reflect on the transition from elite forms of language like Sanskrit and Persian to regional languages and their use to illustrate their role in power politics and identity (Pollock 2006) in relation to language-based power relations. Communication theory also provides a perspective for studying informal networks of information transfer and social interaction. Data analysis incorporates an array of coding techniques such as thematic coding, narrative analysis, and linguistic analysis, and refers to a cross-checking of both oral and textual sources to establish methodological rigor.

Methodological constraints, such as the lack of written sources and the possibility of oral tradition being flexible, will be overcome by triangulation and contextual analysis. Ethical issues are upheld throughout the research, especially in the use of oral texts in order to guarantee informed consent, respect for cultural knowledge, and the accuracy of knowledge in sharing. I am going to use this study to restore the voices and experiences of disadvantaged people and to demonstrate that the vernacular language and oral vernacular culture of medieval North Bengal are central to the social communication of medieval North Bengal.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES:

A complete record of oral traditions and the use of vernacular languages in medieval North Bengal. Social networks for information and communication will be rebuilt, and knowledge exchanged. An identity development perspective, resistance, and marginalized voices in historical tales. An approach for the integration of oral and written

sources in regional history research (Chatterjee 2009). A reference of vernacular and oral cultures in South Asia. As such, the research contributes to a more democratic and inclusive understanding of medieval history, largely due to an accentuation of vernacular voices, oral knowledge traditions, and everyday forms of communication which are frequently ignored in dominant historical narratives.

INNOVATION AND CONTRIBUTION:

This is a work with a number of significant innovations and contributions that make it much bigger:

- 1) Rebuilding of voices of the marginalized in North Bengal, not ignoring communities from the previous days.
- 2) An interdisciplinary approach linking oral history, linguistics, and social anthropology.
- 3) Examining local vernacular identity and resistance, demonstrating the significance of language in negotiating social positions.
- 4) Advancement of study into regional history that offers a better understanding of medieval North Bengal society (Sengupta, 2012; Das, 2017).

TIMELINE:

PHASE	ACTIVITY	DURATION
1)	Review and source searching of literature	3 month
2)	Archival research and empirical framework	6 month
3)	Data and linguistic analysis writing down	4 month
4)	Combining information and historical interpretation	4 month
5)	Writing and revising	5 month

LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS:

The study is limited in certain respects since I am writing this article due to the absence of vernacular written sources and the widespread occurrence of oral traditions, which carry memory, variation, as well as verification problems. Interpreting non-standardized regional dialects might also prove difficult. To maintain a clear, well-defined focus, for example, the scope of this particular piece of research has been defined as North Bengal, 1300-1700 CE, and particularly the vernacular language, oral traditions, and social communication of marginalized communities.

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