THE CALCUTTA KERANI AND THE LONDON CLERK IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

This book examines the location and representation of the colonial clerk, or the kerani, in the cultural and social space of nineteenth-century colonial India. It provides a comparative history of the clerk in Calcutta vis-à-vis the clerk in contemporary London in order to understand the manifestations of modernity in these two disparate but intimately related spaces.

The volume traces the sociohistorical life of the clerk in the newly emerged city-space of Calcutta and reveals how the Bengali kerani became a complex and distinct figure of bureaucratic and colonial modernity. It analyses the techniques of surveillance and ethical training given to the native clerks and offers insights into the role of education in the production and dissemination of knowledge and hegemony in the colonial setting. The author, through a reading of clerk manuals, handbooks, and literary representations, highlights the class and cultural identity of the English-educated colonial clerk in the new city-space. He also focuses on the ambivalence and unreliability of the clerk, or colonial babu, who became complicit and gave legitimacy to the empire while personifying a complex modernity in the networks of the colonial administration.

This book will be of great interest to students and researchers of colonial and imperial history, literature, cultural studies, city studies, British studies, area studies, commonwealth studies, and South Asian studies, particularly those interested in colonial Bengal.

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THE CALCUTTA KERANI AND THE LONDON CLERK IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Life, Labour, Latitude

Sumit Chakrabarti

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FOR SUBIR DATTA
FRIEND, MENTOR, TASKMASTER

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INTRODUCTION

Tracing a genealogy

In this book, I have attempted to write a cultural and social history of the *kerani*, the ministerial office staff of native origin, in nineteenth-century Bengal, first under the rule of the East India Company and subsequently under the direct control of the imperial government. I have used the comparatist mode, trying to read the location and the representation of the *kerani* in Calcutta vis-à-vis the clerical worker in contemporary London, trying, in the process, to understand the manifestations of clerical modernity in these two disparate but intimately related spaces. The debate has been placed in a narrative of history and its various epistemological tropes of modernity, colonial modernity, the premodern, and the early modern, but the argumentative lens has been trained primarily on the social and literary cultures of the time. The narrative has moved through the historiographical mapping of an emergent site of modernity entrenched in a dynamic of colonialism, trying to fine-tune the consequent reading of culture, occasionally taking recourse to new historicist strategies to get a better perspective on the space of analysis. The occasional literary references, and a full chapter dedicated to literary readings, emerge from my training in the literature classroom, although I believe that I have still left much unsaid on this particular subject.

There is a considerable body of work on nineteenth-century Bengal, including the general historical analyses of an interesting period in the history of Bengal, the emergence of the sciences and reassessments of the history of medicine, cultural and social reorganizations, minor histories of class and gender, popular culture, and literary taste. There have been serious engagements with the lives of major political, literary, and cultural figures—those instrumental in engendering important upheavals in the cultural logic of the times. Although many of these narratives have referred to the figure of the *kerani* in passing, none of them has comprehensively engaged with him or tried to write a history of the crucial role that the *kerani* played in a fraught sociocultural space in nineteenth-century Bengal. My initial interest in the subject was incited through this realization of the absence of the *kerani* figure in almost all major discourses of the time, although they clearly played a pivotal role in the administrative apparatus, as is evident in

the proliferation of documents during British rule in India and what I have called its managerial modernity. In a recent book on the subject of documents and scribal culture in nineteenth-century Madras, Bhavani Raman (2012) calls this a government by writing:

The government by writing installed under colonialism stemmed from the East India Company's peculiar 'corporate sovereignty'. From its very inception in the seventeenth century, the British East India Company's political dominance was forged by the sword, built on the spine of the accountant's ledger, and held together by written correspondence.

(pp. 8–9)

The role of the kerani in Calcutta was therefore not one that could be easily overlooked. However, neither in literature nor in the historical-cultural discourse has there been any comprehensive attempt to write about the kerani life of nineteenth-century Calcutta. This book is an attempt both to trace the sociohistorical life of the kerani of that period and to examine the reason for this interestingly conspicuous absence.

The organization of this book

In the first chapter, the presence and the location of the kerani in the newly emerged city-space of Calcutta is examined. The chapter tries to explore and understand how Calcutta as a city, born directly out of administrative and business needs, was essentially different as an urban space compared to such older and more generically evolved urban spaces as Dhaka or Murshidabad. In it, I try to understand the class identity of the kerani in this parvenu commercial space of a new city where the emergence of the middle class was somewhat unlike other, older urban milieus. I determine, in this context, whether the kerani could be called a *bhadralok* and whether his location could be read in the current associations of *bhadraloki*.

Still trying to fit the kerani in the cultural logic of the city, the second chapter focuses on the life of the kerani in the city-space, attempting to read his daily life and everyday existence as markers of identity formation. The chapter discusses the nature of English education and its ramifications on kerani life, his salary, and living conditions, from evidence in government reports and commissions and read through a postcolonial lens.

The second chapter also examines whether the kerani is a better fit to being a *babu* or a *bhadralok*, or neither. It also looks into whether the gradually emergent participatory logic of colonial modernity kept the kerani out of its prescribed fold of the 'educated middle class'.

The third chapter initiates the comparatist mode by trying to read kerani life as offset by the life of the contemporary clerk in London. The chapter

traces the trajectory of the gradual modernization of clerical practice from the Dickensian counting house to the modern office in nineteenth-century London, and it includes important debates on class identity, differences between the *salaried* clerk and the *waged* labourer, and whether the clerk was a gentleman. This chapter is used as a crucial counterpoint to read the life of the Calcutta kerani through a comparative lens and situate the question of his representation in a complex debate on modernity and colonialism.

The fourth chapter complicates both of the preceding questions of modernity and colonialism by examining the presence of the British *writers* (ministerial staff) in nineteenth-century Calcutta. An analysis of their extravagant social lives and irresponsible professional lives unsettles the modernity debate and underscores the fraught nature of clerical modernity, which refuses to be defined by either racial or geographical classificatory modes. Neither the lowly clerk in London nor the indigenous kerani in Calcutta could have anything in common with the curiously anachronistic figure of the writer in colonial Calcutta.

In the fifth chapter, I attempt a close reading of some of the clerk manuals and handbooks, published either in London or in Calcutta, to examine the commonalities of techniques of surveillance and ethical training that was considered to be an intrinsic part of clerical training in Victorian England and its colonies alike. I try to understand whether there were significant differences in the model code of conduct for clerks in the two spaces, where the dynamics of power were significantly different. This chapter discusses the rise and proliferation of organs and journals in England that lent a voice to the clerical workforce in the nineteenth century, clearing a space for counter-discursive possibilities in an otherwise-panoptical space. In the same breath, the chapter discusses the embedded masculinity in such counter-discourse, where the language of the demand for rights is unfailingly that of the man, in spite of the fact that women had already joined the clerical workforce in England. The chapter also talks about how such narratives of dissent were still an impossibility in the colonized space.

The sixth chapter examines the contemporary literature on clerks, both in London and in Calcutta. Literary tracts were written both about and by the clerks. In it, I try to understand whether it is possible to trace a commonality of representation in both the early and the late-Victorian delineation of the character of the clerk in London on the one hand and the possible similarities of the London clerk with the Calcutta kerani of the nineteenth century on the other.

The seventh chapter briefly addresses the question of the female clerk in London, arguing that the comparatist model becomes redundant here, because women in Calcutta was still a few years away from a working life. This book may thus be seen as an attempt of a scholar of literature to write a cultural history of the Calcutta kerani in the nineteenth century as refracted through the lenses of the colonial/postcolonial debate and the debates on modernity.

The genealogy: scribal practices of the immediate past

Throughout the book, I view the figure of the Calcutta kerani of the nineteenth century as a new entrant into the narrative of cultural and professional history. I suggest that the Calcutta kerani belonged nowhere and came from nowhere. The kerani has been read as a figure of lack who was born out of the peculiar necessity of colonial and imperial governance, born in situ, purely for the purpose of lowly clerical work, and dispensable at no peril to his employer. The Calcutta kerani, as I have seen him, did not have a tradition of scribal practice to fall back on, was not trained in specialized disciplines that had a prescribed body of texts, and was not following a trajectory of ancestral continuity that could suitably be used as reference in his work. I claim for the kerani in nineteenth-century Calcutta a unique place in history, bereft of a past, not claiming any agency of tradition, existing like a phoenix, a perpetual marker of ambivalence in the face of identitarianism and historicist traceability. I have consciously called him the kerani throughout the book and never used the word ‘scribe’ for him.

In an important essay written on scribal practice and culture, Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (2010) referred to scribes in the Mughal period as clearly belonging to a middle or a professional class (p. 395). They further argue that the eighteenth century was the century of the scribe in South Asian history:

Scribes had existed long before, and scribes would exist afterward, even with the advent of print; but in this century, they came—more or less everywhere in the sub-continent—to take on a truly protean quality, using their scribal profession as a point of departure to embark on the conquest of a number of new horizons.

(Alam & Subrahmanyam, 2010, p. 395)

The person of this scribe, variously called the secretary, the interlocutor, the spokesperson, or the accountant, was deeply implicated in the politics of the eighteenth-century court. Sometimes the umbrella term *munshi* has been used for them, although, as Alam and Subrahmanyam (2004) claim, the term *munshi* ‘has shifted semantically over the years’ (p. 61) and eventually acquired the meaning of ‘pundit’ or ‘teacher’ in the mid nineteenth century. In the initial years of Company rule, the *munshi* (in the older sense of the term) used to play a crucial role in matters of administration:

The real interlocutor for the Company official . . . was the *munshi*, who was mediator and spokesman (*vakil*), but also a key personage who could both read and draft materials in Persian, and who had a

grasp over the realities of politics that men such as Warren Hastings, Antoine Polier, and Claude Martin found altogether indispensable. (Alam & Subrahmanyam, 2004, p. 61)

The *munshi* was thus not merely a writer but an interlocutor and an interpreter as well. Well versed in the politics of the times, they often acted as agents of the native government and had the agency of states, persons or diplomats in crucial political negotiations. Christopher Bayly (1996) writes,

The most dynamic social formation of the period was not a class defined in a simple economic sense, but the writer's office (*munshikhana*) whose members combined respectable status with access to the charisma of writing. These people, although dependent and humiliated, were to play an important part in the establishment of British rule.

(p. 44)

It is not difficult to trace a genealogy of these *munshis*, most of whom came from Hindu clans of kayasthas and khattris and often brahmins as well. They were all well trained in Persian language and literature and joined the Mughal court as various kinds of ministerial workers: *mutsaddis*, *muharrirs*, *bakshis*, and *munshis*. Most of them either hailed from a family of educated scholars and statespersons or were beginners of a lineage of philologists, poets, grammarians, or commentators. Celebrated among them were Harkaran Das, Chandrabhan 'Brahman', Madho Ram, Sujan Rai, Bhupat Rai, Anand Ram 'Mukhlis', and Bindraban 'Khwushgu':

From the middle of the seventeenth century, the departments of accountancy (*siyaq*), draftsmanship (*insha*), and the office of revenue minister (*divan*) were mostly filled by . . . Kayastha and Khatri *munshis* and *muharrirs*. . . . Selections and specimens of their writings formed part of the syllabi of Persian studies at madrasahs. They produced excellent works in the eighteenth century in the philological sciences: the *Mir'at al-Istilah* of Anand Ram 'Mukhlis', the *Bahar-i 'Ajam* of Tek Chand 'Bahar' and the *Mustalahat al-Shu'ara* of Siyalkoti Mal 'Varasta' are among the most exhaustive lexicons compiled in India.

(Alam & Subrahmanyam, 2004, p. 62)

It is not difficult to imagine that this world of *munshis* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that I am deliberating on here was far removed in every manner of imagination from the quotidian world of the common kerani in nineteenth-century Calcutta. Although, apparently, the kerani was

doing the same kind of work as the *munshi* in the Mughal courts—those of drafting ability and accountancy—the nature of their social or political influence belonged to entirely different worlds and perspectives. In a letter written to his son Khvajah Tej Bhan, the celebrated *munshi* Chandrabhan ‘Brahman’ lays down some of the basic tenets of being a perfect *munshi*. He advises his son to first be acquainted with the Mughal system of norms (*akhlaq*) by studying the *Akhlaq-i Nasiri*, *Akhlaq-i Jalali*, *Gulistan*, and *Bustan*, some of the foundational texts on the subject. He insists on the importance of coherent drafting and good calligraphy. He also urges Tej Bhan to learn accountancy (*siyaq*) and scribal skills (*navisindagi*). He emphasizes the importance of books on norms, ethics, and history, such as *Habib al-Siyar*, *Rawzat al-Salatin*, *Zafar-namah*, and *Akbar-namah*, among others. Chandrabhan also tells his son to read the master poets so that he will acquire the skill of elegant language that will stand him in good stead in the company of the learned (for a detailed content of the letter see, Kinra, 2015, pp. 60–64). Alam and Subrahmanyam (2004) write on the elaborate reading list that Chandrabhan passes on to his son as necessary training for becoming a good secretary:

The extensive list . . . is remarkable both for its diversity and programmatic coherence. The list begins with texts on statecraft and moralia, touches on the question of accountancy and epistolography, then moves quickly to a set of histories and chronicles, before ending with an extensive list of poets both old and new . . . many Hindu scriptures and other Indic texts were rendered into Persian, and these too joined the cultural accessories of the typical Kayastha or Khatri.

(p. 63)

The kayastha or khatri caste, and occasionally the brahmin, were the typical professional accountants and recordkeepers of the Mughal court. Evidently, family lineage and training were matters of utmost importance in the selection and subsequent career graph of these *munshis*. Most of them came from families of *munshis* or *bakshis* who had an elite class of patrons and were respected and wealthy courtiers. They were invested as intellectuals in the administrative system trying to develop a tradition and mode of engagement through received knowledge and the political contingency of the period. By the late seventeenth century, ‘these newly arrived scribes and intellectuals were feeling sufficiently confident of their position to propose changes in received models of history-writing and new framings for old histories’ (Alam & Subrahmanyam, 2010, p. 420). In fact, although many of them were masters of technique, rules, and accounts, some of the more celebrated *munshis* engaged philosophically with questions of governance. One of

them was Nik Rai, about whom Alam and Subrahmanyam write at the end of their 2004 essay:

The philosophical universe within which he conceives of all matters—including issues of social and religious conflict—is impregnated with Persian, and with all the richness of the ‘secular’ tradition that Indo-Persian represented by the seventeenth century. It is in this sense that we must understand what it meant to become, and to be, a *munshi* in the later Mughal world.

(p. 71)

Evidently, with the gradual consolidation of Company rule, and later under the British Empire, the emergence of a discourse of managerial modernity led to the inevitable decline of this tradition of scribal scholarship and culture. British rule naturally followed its own narrative of modernity, based on the model of a corporate understanding of administration that was stratified on the basis of more-clearly defined power structures and more professional relationships. The gradual transformation of the nature of work and the meaning of the word *munshi* is symptomatic of this change in the nature of governance. The transformation from the feudal to the corporate power structure led to the systematic devaluation of the system of patronage that provided necessary security to the tradition of secretarial practice and led them to become scribes and scholars at the same time. In many cases, the *munshi* now became a teacher, mostly of Persian, and his important role in administration gradually became a thing of the past.

The kerani of nineteenth-century Calcutta belonged to a different universe, far removed from the hallowed world of these celebrated *munshis*. The *chha-posha* kerani (the kerani who is only good at breeding children) or the *macchi-mara* kerani (the kerani who swats flies in the office having nothing better to do or someone who kills a fly and sticks it to their copied text as there was a dead fly in the original text—that is to say, a mechanical and unthinking copier) as he was had no claims to such tradition, education, or wealth as the *munshis* of the Mughal courts. Although mostly belonging to the upper castes, the typical caste identity of the kaysatha or khatri or brahmin as the professional kerani with a lineage and tradition was not particular to the Bengali kerani in the nineteenth century. Most of them were keranis by chance, not by choice or family lineage. The selection of keranis was mostly random, and they formed a dispensable part of the administration, with many qualified candidates vying for the job of this lowly functionary of colonial administration. As the book will make clear, there was almost no prestige or social value attached to the job of the kerani in colonial Bengal.

It is crucial to understand why and how this shift in the nature of scribal practice happened in the first place. Bhavani Raman (2012) makes an

important point in her book on administrative practices of the British East India Company in the Madras presidency in the nineteenth century:

From the late eighteenth century, the Company instituted a government of writing under parliamentary pressure to perpetuate the mastery of the Indian subcontinent for the metropole's finance and manufacturing empires. . . . The Company's bureaucratic state coincided with a time when the conceptual term 'bureaucracy' acquired currency as a powerful organizational form of office holding, expertise, corporate management, and rule-based government. Continuous writing in these years became the idealized solution to the problem of managing trust and reliability across distance.

(pp. 2–3)

In this book, I term this process 'managerial modernity'. The bureaucratic temper of the administration led them to import forms of modernity from the metropole, and the act of *writing* was one of them, a process of systematic documentation of every administrative action that would help the colonizer comprehend the newly acquired space on the one hand and act as a form of surveillance technique on the other. This required a regular supply of clerks or keranis with basic training in accounts and language to handle the simplest of bureaucratic chores but apparently with little comprehension of the motives of surveillance and control. Raman calls it *paperreality*, 'the exclusive reliance on official written documents to represent the world' (Raman, 2012, p. 3). The kerani thus occupies a contingent space, marked on the one hand by his dispensability and on the other by his agency as the subject that prepares the document. The iterable qualities of writing and the micro-practices of documenting that gradually developed across the colonized space makes the kerani a crucial figure, ambivalent and unreliable, in many ways unlike the scribe of the past. The kerani, I argue in this book, is therefore distinctly a product of European colonialism. His predecessor was unlike him and, in fact, belonged to a different cultural paradigm. As Raman (2012) writes,

The story of the colonial clerk or babu is intimately braided with the historical problem of how a small group of Europeans established everyday control over a vast colony with the assistance of native subordinates. It is thus that the collaborating babu, the infamously complicit Indian clerk, serves as an iconic metonym for a split modern subjectivity birthed by colonial ledgers, the English language, and European-style schools.

(p. 6)

The kerani figure that I have taken up for analysis in this book is contingently born at a crucial juncture in the history of colonialism, bereft of a

past, and complicit in the papereality of the empire, in a network of an incomprehensible modernity and hanging from the fringe of every possible representation.

It is possible to argue that in spite of certain basic similarities in job description and patterns of service, an attempt to compare the kerani with the upper-class *munshi* of the Mughal courts is tenuous and unnecessary. In terms of class identity, financial status, conditions of employment, training, and lineage, the scale of comparison will be untenable. The *munshi* was never in the kerani's league. While it is imperative to trace a genealogy of native scribal tradition, one cannot totally disagree with such a contention. However, even among his contemporaries in other parts of India, such as the presidencies of Bombay or Madras, the Bengali kerani stands out in certain ways as a uniquely ahistorical subject of history. In nineteenth-century Bombay, for example, most clerical jobs were monopolized by the brahmans and the banias, although lower-caste clerks were also not unknown. However, the best-paid clerical jobs were in the hands of the prabhus, who could claim a certain lineage in the profession:

In the beginning of the seventeenth century, when the English settled as traders in Surat, they found Prabhus established as clerks to the Portuguese, and ever since then Prabhus have from their readiness to learn English, their honesty, and a certain freedom of customs and dignity of manner continued to be liked and trusted by the English.

(*Hindu Clerks*, 1879, p. 5)

Although not as powerful as the prabhus of Bombay, even the lowly scribes of Madras, the *karanam* (or the *kanakkuppillai*) had their own set of skills quite unique to their profession. Writers of Persian, Telugu, or Modi scripts, they would use palm leaves (*olai*), and their origin may be traced to the Palava, Pandya, and Chola dynasties of the past:

The textual tradition that flourished around palm leaf was restricted to a small circle of stylus wielders and prized the ability to recite—particularly to recite from memory. Prosody, poetics, and grammar were taught along established teacher-disciple lineages.

(Raman, 2012, p. 12)

That is to say, many of these lowly indigenous scribes had at least some specialized skill sets that played a role in their choice as clerks of some kind in the empire. Moreover, both Bombay and Madras were older city-spaces than was Calcutta, and thus, it was possible to trace a tradition of training even among the lowly scribes of these places. It is perhaps the fact that Calcutta was a new urban space and that most people who came for professional

reasons, or otherwise, to the city in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries were a category of fortune seekers, intermediaries, businesspeople, or service providers of random disposition that makes it not possible to trace a *tradition* of the keranis of various kinds, even if they had any. Their choice as keranis was as random as their presence in the city, and it may be said that the subject position of the Calcutta kerani was perhaps more individualized than that of clerical workers in other, more ancient urban spaces. In this book, I try to examine this subject position of the kerani in nineteenth-century Calcutta, one that was unable to appeal to a collective set in the past or claim for itself the authenticity of a cultural narrative embedded in a premodern past.

Trying to trace a genealogy in Bengal: a literary exploration

Before I try to trace a genealogy of the kerani in Bengal, I briefly deliberate on the etymology of the word 'kerani'. The idea of clerical labour had various natures in Mughal or Muslim Bengal, or what we may call premodern Bengal. Thus, the English umbrella term 'clerk' would incorporate in its fold different types and levels of clerical workers in a pre-industrialized or a premodern economy belonging to categorically different professional spheres, such as the court, the revenue office, or the collectorate. The *munshi*, the *muharri*, the *vakil*, the *duftaree*, the *tehsildar*, the *mamlutdar*, the *sheristadar*, the *poddar*, the *nazir*, the *gomosta*, the *muttsaddi*, the *nakalnabish*, the *khassnabish*, and so on were all therefore doing clerical work, and in many cases, these nomenclatures were retained by the colonial administration. The list of such workers will seem endless, and their duties and responsibilities often overlap and have minor functional differences. 'Kerani' seems to be a new entrant in the lexicon of Bengali words and does not seem to have been much in use in Mughal Bengal. Into the nineteenth century, William Carey's *Dictionary of the Bengalee Language* (1828) still gives the meaning of the word 'clerk' as a *munshi* or a *muharrir* (p. 62). Ram Comul Sen's *Dictionary in English and Bengalee*, published in 1834, also translates the word 'clerk' as advisor, *muharrir*, writer, *nakalnabish*, or *muttsaddi* (p. 158). It is only in the later dictionaries of the Bengali language that one finds the word 'kerani'. Jnanendramohan Das, in his dictionary *Bangala Bhasar Ovidhan* (1917), traces the route of the word 'kerani' or 'kyarani' to the word 'kanni' in the *Sunyapurana*. However, he also notes that the word was used to describe Eurasians or *firanghees* after the arrival of Europeans in Muslim India. He also incites the possibility of the word being derived from the Portuguese word for clerks: 'escrevente'. Thus, Jnanendramohan Das leaves both the root and the meaning of 'kerani' ambiguous. Haricharan Bandopadhyay, in his *Bangiya Sabdakosh* (1934/1966), also refers to both the words 'kanni' (Sanskrit) and 'escrevente' (Portuguese) as the possible roots of the word

‘kerani’ (p. 677). Interestingly, he clearly asserts that a kerani is a writer in an ‘English office’ (p. 677), thereby indicating towards a postcolonial use of the word in the Bengali language. However, both Jnanendramohan and Haricharan refer to the Sanskrit word ‘karan’ as a *possible* root of the word. The word ‘karan’, though, is multilayered and has multiple meanings, including the writer, the calligrapher, the body, the site, the kayastha caste, and others, which would lead to a complex philosophical deliberation on the many possible meanings of the derivative word ‘kerani’. Most of the writers, editors, and compilers of dictionaries have either maintained an ambiguous root for the word kerani or have simplified it to simply mean ‘clerk’. Some dictionaries, such as the *Samsad Bangla Ovidhan* (1964), have also used the word ‘karanik’ as the meaning of kerani (p. 191). Both the words can possibly be traced back to the Sanskrit root ‘karan’, although neither Jnanendramohan nor Haricharan have referred to ‘karanik’ as a meaning for ‘kerani’. Nor is there any linguistic or grammatical basis of connecting the two words. However, in bureaucratic and popular Bengali parlance, the words ‘kerani’ and ‘karanik’ are sometimes used interchangeably.

On the subject of the milieu of nineteenth-century Calcutta, from which the kerani hailed or emerged, it may be said that there was considerable deliberation on the idea of a job or *chakri*. The word ‘*chakri*’ has inevitable connotations of being a *chakor* or a servant. On the one hand, having a job meant both a steady salary and a sense of security; it also had the accompanying implications of servitude and lack of freedom or agency. Such a pejorative implication was further complicated by the question of subjection to a colonial power. Having a *chakri*, therefore, implied a kind of double subjection: the native subject was already under colonial rule; serving the Company or the government meant another set of compulsory directives. On the other hand, exposure to enlightenment modernity opened up a different universe for the English-educated bhadralok. For him, this meant a continuous refashioning of the self through exposure to a new form of textual culture, and ideas of nationhood, nationality, dissent, and subversion gradually acquired currency and redefined earlier notions of sovereignty, consciousness, and selfhood.

The Bengali bhadralok of the nineteenth century was caught in the web of a veritable *mélange* of influences, each of which qualified the other in a confluence of discourses. His English education opened up for him a range of texts, culturally alien, but invested with enlightenment ideas that influenced him considerably; his idea of the self and selfhood were churned by the narratives of modernity; the idea of nation and nationalism formed another important strand of dissent that was nurtured in a separate but related discourse of colonial modernity; a sense of the past and a revival of traditionalist notions of identity was a narrative stoked, curiously, by his exposure to Western education. While the different formations of modernity incorporated into native discourse by the colonial master redefined notions

of education and culture, it was through this exposure that narratives of dissent were also foregrounded by the Bengali bhadralok.

A typical example of such a blend of influences can be found in the character of Neemchand Datta in Deenabandhu Mitra's farce *Sadhabar Ekadashi* (1866). Neemchand is English educated and is widely exposed to Western literary texts: 'I read English, write English, talk English, speechify in English, think in English, dream in English' (Mitra, 1866/1943, p. 44). However, he refuses any form of *chakri*, is a drunkard, and is sheltered in the house of a relative. The implications of Neemchand's stance in the play create a complex discourse of meanings which might go on to clear some space for exploring the problematic genealogy of keranidom in the context of Bengal. In the first place, Neemchand is deeply disdainful of the native servant of the imperial government, as is apparent from his behaviour towards Kenaram Ghosh, the deputy magistrate, and his brother-in-law. As he quotes from *Othello*, 'You are one of those, that will not serve God, if the devil bid you', he asks 'How many Ghotiram deputies like you are there?' (Mitra, 1866/1943, p. 43). He calls Kenaram a 'kyabla hakim', or an unsmart magistrate, and expresses deep suspicion about both Kenaram's intelligence and command of the English language. This is a complex moment in the play. In the same breath, Neemchand celebrates the liberal humanist aspect of Western education by quoting Shakespeare and critiques the native for succumbing to the snares of a job offered by the colonial master. His liberal education and the subsequent faith in the ideas of freedom and nobility (he refers to both these qualities in the play) contradict the notion of servitude symptomatic of the native keeping a job with the colonial administration. Kenaram becomes, for him, the representative of the servile native who succumbs to the humiliating trope of subservience by accepting the *chakri* doled out to him by the white master. Paradoxically, the Western-educated and English-speaking liberal Neemchand draws on the past glory of the kayastha clan as a counternarrative to the meek submission of the likes of Kenaram. He refers to the story of the five brahmins and five kayasthas visiting the court of King Adisura of Bengal. Both the castes were hierarchically similar. However, as the king asks the kayasthas about their relationships with the brahmins, all of them except one admitted to being the *bhritya* (servant) of the brahmins. Only the representative of the Datta clan (whom Neemchand considers to be his rightful predecessor) refuses servitude to the brahmin and declares, 'Datta karo bhritya noy' [Datta is no one's servant] (Mitra, 1866/1943, p. 52). However, this claim to the historicity of the Datta identity that Neemchand makes is not historically tenable. The brahmins and the kayasthas who came to the court of Adisura hailed from either Kanauj or the south of India and hence were not Bengalis. In an informed study of the *kulajigranthas* (documents on lineage) of the times, Dineshchandra Sarkar (1982) talks about the varying accounts of this event and its historical unreliability (pp. 137–138). However, there is no doubt that neither the brahmins nor the kayasthas were of Bengali

descent. In a succinct discourse on the subject of Neemchand's allusion to the event, Biswajit Ray in his 2002 essay complicates this further by bringing in the predicament of the author of the play into his analysis:

Neemchand doesn't have a job. In Adisura's court Ghosh had admitted to being the brahmin's servant, but Datta did not admit to servitude. Whereas, in the nineteenth century the jobless Datta, Neemchand, stays in his brother-in-law Kenaram's house. . . . By virtue of his Western education Neemchand was able to identify the 'independence' of the Datta in Adisura's court; while, in spite of having to bear insults, the creator of Neemchand, Deenabandhu Mitra, had to keep his job with the very imperialists who had brought Western education to the native.

(p. 19)

Ray (2002/2010) also brings in the case of brahmin Deputy Magistrate Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the character Kamalakanta Chakrabarty (another brahmin) into his analysis (pp. 14–15). While Kamalakanta loses his job as a *kerani*, his maker, Chattopadhyay, has always kept his job. Likewise, although Neemchand does not have a job, his maker, Mitra, is a postmaster-general with the imperial government. Ray writes, 'Bankim was a brahmin, Deenabandhu a *kayastha*. In earlier times they would have led comfortable lives by virtue of their caste identity (*jatikaulinya*). But in times of the supremacy of capital, maintaining a job was the only solution' (p. 14).

This intervention by Ray opens up multiple strands of this complicated debate. In the first place, it is evident that administrative jobs were not traditionally related to caste identity in Bengal, unlike in many other parts of the country. The subservient *kayastha* figure from the past, ready to be employed by the brahmin, is undercut by the Datta figure, who refuses to serve under anyone. Neemchand ahistorically revives that resistant figure of the Datta to justify his refusal to have a job. However, he shows off his pride as a 'Datta' and not as a *kayastha*. His disdain for the deputy magistrate is based not on caste identity but on how he imagines himself to be the descendant of that singular Datta at Adisura's court. He uses this agency merely to undermine the *chakri* of his brother-in-law. If the native deputy magistrate is a figure of ridicule for Neemchand, it is not difficult to imagine his opinion of the *kerani* in a similar context.

If one were to briefly digress and examine the literature of Bengal from the earlier centuries, the genealogical mapping of a consistent scribal practice would not be consolidated either. The *kayasthas* in Bengal, for example, are not depicted as a community of scribes, although it is possible to find an occasional individual. One of the most talked about figures of a possible scribe is Bhnaru Datta, who appears in Mukundaram Chakrabarty's sixteenth-century text *Kabikankan-Chandi* or in the *Chandimangal*, written

in the tradition of the *mangalkavyas*. Bharnu Datta is distinctly different from the other kayasthas who arrive at the court of King Kaalketu seeking patronage. The kayasthas arrive as a clan (or *jati*) and claim to be educated bhadraloks who have come to invest the new-found kingdom with the prestige of education and distinction: ‘Kono jon siddhokul Keho sadhyo dharmanul/Doshheen kayasther sobha/Prosonno sobhare bani Lekhapora sove jaani/Bhovyojon nogorer shova’. [The kayasthas are erudite and well read in the scriptures, faultless, educated and would be a distinguished addition to the new kingdom] (Chakrabarty, 1579/1962, p. 354). Their claims to erudition and distinction are quite similar to that of the brahmins, who have already staked their claim to a livelihood in Kaalketu’s kingdom. Both these castes will invest the kingdom with much-deserved prestige and dignity. Interestingly, although the kayasthas claim education and erudition, there is no reference in the text to prove that they were scribes or that they hailed from any scribal culture.

Bharnu Datta, a kayastha himself, seems to be clearly separated from his clan. He is dismissed by Kaalketu from his court on charges of betrayal and deception. Bharnu decides to take his revenge on Kaalketu by instigating the powerful Kalinga king against him. The poet depicts the lonely figure of Bharnu, separated from his clan but hailing his kayastha ancestors: ‘Ekela cholila pothey keho nahi sathe/Horidatter byata hoi, Joydotter naati’ [Bharnu is alone, without a companion, but hails his father, Hori Datta, and his grandfather Joy Datta] (Chakrabarty, 1579/1962, p. 367). Bharnu Datta dresses up carefully before he arrives at the court of the powerful colonizer, the king of Kalinga: ‘Mostoke bandhilo pag nahi dhake kesh./Mrittikar tilok koilo ronjit koilo besh./Koifyoti pnajikhaan nilo sabdhane./Sreehori boliya Bharnu kolom gnoje kaane.’ [Bharnu dons his *paagri* (traditional headgear popular with keranis), takes his book of rhetoric, and places the pen behind his ear] (Chakrabarty, 1579/1962, p. 368). This is the classic symptom of being a scribe: the headgear, the book of rhetoric and the pen behind the ear. Consequently, the kayastha figure of Bharnu Datta becomes a classic example in Bengali literary history of the figure of deceitfulness, betrayal, and insincerity. The Bengali kerani could be associated with all these qualities, but that is only incidental. However, when Neemchand has to search for an ancestry of the kayastha-Datta clan, he does not mention the sixteenth-century figure of Bharnu Datta but instead goes back to the earlier figure of the kayastha who refuses subordination. For the Western-educated and enlightened Bengali male, Bharnu is perhaps the figure of the native succumbing to a colonial master, while the Datta in Adisura’s court is a rebel who refuses subordination. Ironically, though, this Datta was not of Bengali descent.

It is possible to draw a few important inferences from the foregoing discussion. In the first place, it is difficult to establish a direct link between caste identity and scribal culture in Bengal. Also, as evident at least from the *Chandimangal*, the kayasthas as a clan did not claim scribal practice as a

major profession, although they belonged to an educated class of gentlemen. Also, even if Bhnaru Datta is admittedly a scribe and a kayastha, he is clearly separated from the rest of his clan and stands as a singular figure of cunning and disruption. Also, other than his attire, there is no other reference in the text to prove his scribal identity. Nor do the kayasthas arriving at King Adisura's court lay any claim to scribal practice. Thus, the link between a caste identity and scribal practice that could easily be established during the Mughal period in north or western India, or later on in the south of India, is generally absent in the case of Bengal. Moreover, nineteenth-century Calcutta was a conglomerate of people from myriad social and caste orders, and the emergence of the kerani figure had a randomness that belies any caste-based classification. The creation of characters such as Neemchand Datta or Kamalakanta Chakraborty was symptomatic of a confused reaction to the novelty of a professional life that could be censured by a reference to the past, though accepted by the contingency of the present. My contention here is to suggest that the figure of the kerani in nineteenth-century Calcutta was an arbitrary but necessary presence, whose lineage could not be traced to traditional scribal practice, and that there was considerable ambiguity in the bhadralok profession. Both Neemchand and Kamalakanta, educated and upper-caste elites, render expression to this ambiguity.

Is the kerani a subaltern? A necessary question

In the larger scheme of postcolonial historiography and the representation of the marginal figure in history, the question of subalternity and its complex relationship with forms of modernity has been an important discussion. Much humanities scholarship across disciplines in postcolonial India has engaged with the analysis of the subject position of this marginal figure and tried to grapple with forms of representation or the lack of it in the larger contexts of class, gender, and caste. Across the chapters in this book, the nineteenth-century kerani in Calcutta is presented as a marginal figure, caught in interstitial spaces, straddling different identitarian discourses, trying to locate a place of his own in the deterministic structures of history. Therefore, I examine whether it is possible to lay a claim of subalternity for the nineteenth-century Calcutta kerani as a subject of history.

Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) argues in his essay 'Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts' that in the discipline of history the act of choosing a subject depends on a certain kind of rationality and a consequent understanding of the 'real' and thereby the 'exclusions are ultimately epistemological' (p. 98). I argue in this book that the many histories and narratives on nineteenth-century Bengal have either mentioned the kerani in the passing, used him as a humorous aside, or summarily neglected his presence for other matters of greater or more-immediate relevance. The 'real' in the colonial or postcolonial historiography of nineteenth-century Bengal has always excluded the

figure of the kerani. This exclusion, Chakrabarty argues, is not arbitrary but epistemological, and hence, it will follow that the presence of the kerani as a subject of history will not 'give us rationally defensible principles for narration' (p. 98). No wonder, then, why I see the Bengali kerani in nineteenth-century Calcutta as an absent presence. Later in the essay, Chakrabarty formulates the reason for the minoritization of certain pasts in the larger rational narrative of history:

Some constructions and experiences of the past stay 'minor' in the sense that their very incorporation into historical narratives converts them into pasts 'of lesser importance' vis-à-vis dominant understandings of what constitutes fact and evidence (and hence vis-à-vis the underlying principle of rationality) in the practices of professional history. Such 'minor' pasts are those experiences of the past that always have to be assigned to an 'inferior' or 'marginal' position as they are translated into the academic historian's language.

(pp. 100–101)

Perhaps my training in literature led me to see beyond the principle of rationality, and its consequent epistemic manifestations; to underscore this absence; and to try to tell the story (if not the history) of the Calcutta kerani. Beyond the supposed inferiority or marginality of the position of the kerani in historical narratives on nineteenth-century Bengal, the near absence of this figure in most cultural critiques on the subject stoked my curiosity. Is it that the understated homogeneity of postcolonial critique, in the choice of its many marginalities, refuses to chart the implicit ambiguities of certain experiences that are epistemologically challenging or suspect?

The fundamental query, then, on the matter of the kerani and the categorization of the subaltern will be as follows: is there a 'denial of consciousness' involved in the question of the subject position of the kerani in the ideological formation of subaltern studies? There have been protracted debates in the subaltern school for the past few decades on whether the subaltern has been invested with enough agency so that they may see themselves as the subject of their own history. The dependence of subaltern studies scholars on the derivative and elite narratives of colonialism, nationalism, or Marxism and their subsequent collusion with the grand narrative of modernity has been a point of discussion in humanities classrooms for decades. The corrective historiography that takes into account the religious and the mythic, or all that is considered premodern or non-modern, has also garnered epistemological sanction over the years. It would seem that the project of provincializing Europe has served as a perfect antidote to all the essentialisms of modernity, and the representation of the subaltern has achieved a political victory of some kind:

The turn towards the critique of Europe or the West marks the explicit convergence between subaltern studies and ‘postcolonial critique’. The subaltern is now presented as embodying differences that frustrate the universal project of modernity. . . . Subaltern studies, in its postcolonial avatar, insists not on the autonomy of the subaltern domain from that of the elite/dominant, but the subalterns’ radical difference vis-à-vis the dominant discourse.

(Nixon, 2019, p. 28)

Postcolonial critique thus foregrounds a kind of radical alterity for the subaltern subject that reorients, in a way, the epistemological rationality at the heart of the disciplinary structure of historiography. It collates ‘the rule of historicism and lifeworld/practices of the subaltern which are imbued with the agency of the supernatural and gods’ (Nixon, 2019, p. 29), thereby opening up the discipline towards a self-reflexive model and investing it with a notion of arbitrariness. Thus, the peasant, the labourer, the woman, or the dalit, for example, made their way into the dominant discourses of writing in the twentieth century. However, the absence or the expunction of the kerani from most colonial and postcolonial discourses led me to think, in this book, of the possible problem of his placement in a historical-cultural narrative.

The figure of the kerani was a significant, if not dominant, presence in the sociocultural and professional milieu of nineteenth-century Calcutta. Is it possible that this particular professional group was conceived by all forms of community as the ‘outside’, which led to various degrees of exclusion of the kerani from any form of historical writing? I have engaged with the idea of community and spoken about the assimilationist tendencies of a pre-modern society in what I have termed a *wholesome community*. Historians of the subaltern have also engaged with the idea of community and shown how modern regimes of power have foregrounded capital over community as the authentic narrative of progress (Chatterjee, 1994; Nixon, 2019). It was, therefore, an attempt of the subaltern historian to revisit the notion of community and reinscribe it in the practices of history writing: ‘Community exists not as a remnant, but as a living entity among the subaltern classes that has been marginalized by the universal narrative of modernity’ (Nixon, 2019, p. 29). I agree with this as an important critique of modernity. However, my contention is to disagree with the easy homogeneity of the classification of the marginal, almost leading the debate towards a closure, where the possibility of other possible representations is quietly forgotten. I am not trying to lead this question of representation towards a postmodern obfuscation, by suggesting innumerable possible subject positions in a particular class formation. However, as I discuss in this book, particularly in the first two chapters, it is not easy to find a fit for the kerani in any set class identity. He is neither the bhadralok, the babu, nor the working-class proletariat.

But the absence of a situated and epistemologically discernible class identity does not preclude representation. It seems that the project of subaltern studies, even in its latest avatar, has submitted to the easy binaries of religiosity versus political consciousness, or the archaic versus the modern. The kerani is not the classic subaltern figure, but he has all the possibilities of subalternity. The formulation of the subaltern, in all its radical alterity, it seems to me, has submitted to a carefully designed epistemological trap, which fails to represent the kerani. Therefore, the kerani in nineteenth-century Calcutta will not be a subaltern.

Before the beginning

In this brief introduction, I tried to enumerate who the nineteenth-century Calcutta kerani is not. Although certain overlaps are inevitable, and similarities germane, none of the foregoing three disparate categories will contain the historical and cultural complexity of the figure of central concern of this book. In the choice of these three categories lies my attempt to try to trace a lineage or historicity for the kerani, to find, if not an origin, a significant presence in these discursive formations. All these categories were suggested to me either by my peers or by established academics of the discipline. I am grateful to them for asking me to explore these formations. However, from what I have culled out of these analyses, our kerani remains an aberration, an uneasy presence in all possible sociocultural narratives that could possibly accommodate him. What follows in the next few chapters is an attempt to explore this ambiguity of his location. With trepidation, I will call it a cultural history of sorts, of the nineteenth-century kerani in Calcutta. I have trespassed beyond my disciplinary training, and I shall accept critiques of my attempt with humility.

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