

Caste and Postcolonial Historiography: Constructions of Past in Bangla Dalit Writings

(Kalyan Kumar Das, Department of English, Jadavpur University)

My dissertation explores conceptions of past in Bangla Dalit cultural and literary narratives. In this study in Dalit historiography, I explore how these cultural narratives offer perceptions of history that do not conform to the historicist assumptions in western rationalist, 'objective' or statist philosophies of history. It also engages with the Subaltern Studies and how it has discussed the caste question. While the introductory chapter offers an overview of how the caste question is configured in colonial and postcolonial modernity and it also traces the genealogies of caste in Bengal, the first chapter explores how Namasudra and/or Matua narratives offer us various aspects of Dalit historical imagination. In the second chapter, I explore the various constructions of past that Bauri author Sunil Das offers in his writings on the community's origin, his idea of a 'Bauriland' or in his historical play on the 'Chuar Rebellion'. The next chapter engages with various autochthonous constructions of historical imagination in the cultural political texts of the Mulnibasi movement in the South Western parts of West Bengal and also explores the mythical as well as non-mythical constructions of past in the non-fictional prose pieces and poems by the Dalit writers, activists and poets from the Dom community of Jhargram. While these three chapters explore different ideas of history in the Bangla Dalit narratives, the fourth chapter and the conclusion link their Ambedkarite ideological thrusts with Ambedkar's imagination of past and how he deploys past in his anti-caste politics. By exploring his intellectual inheritances like Pragmatism and Buddhism I argue that his intellectual inclinations never entirely surrendered to the philosophies of history that emerged out of the modern Western intellectual traditions of the Enlightenment. Exemplified in many of his texts, Ambedkar's idea of history is deeply committed to his complex negotiations with modernity. Echoing the conceptions of past in Bangla Dalit narratives, these chapters on Ambedkar tries to review some of the postcolonial readings of his views on history as well as our reductions of Dalit historical imagination to some essentialized perceptions.